

All The Love In The World

By Dave Keight

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Written by Dave Keight

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Dailey Swan Publishing, Inc
2644 Appian Way #101
Pinole Ca 94564
www.daileyswanpublishing.com

Warmth, comfort, security – what more could there be? Four corners to a bed, four walls around all else. Around Sophie. The flat-screen was washing the dim room in a bubble-bath of colors, bright people and bright sets smiling at her. She smiled back. It had been lonely since mum had gone away, but now she was happy again; she had learned to trust the warmth of the television. Four corners to her bed. She stretched, her young nimble frame arching against the bedclothes. Her body was slim, soft, kept in shape by the diet pills and electro-stimulation she put herself through three times a week. Not hard, just a little uncomfortable. Nothing too hard. Twenty one years today – she couldn't believe it. It made her uncomfortable to think about it; a fifth of her life was gone. She looked fondly at the birthday cards – one from her mum, another from granddad and grandma, one from her Welfare Monitor. She read the one from her mum. "To a very special daughter," it said. "With all the love in the world." She smiled. It was good to feel wanted, even if mum had to move out. To give her space, she said; to help her. She didn't really know what she meant by that but then mothers sometimes have funny ideas. The flat was only small after all – one room about fifteen paces by twenty paces, big enough to fit in a small food prep area, with one corner cut off for a bathroom cubicle, shower and toilet. It had been cramped when mum was there, cramped but cozy.

Halfway through her smile the clock on her bedside table beeped. She sighed. Her afternoon nap was over, she shouldn't stay in bed all day otherwise she would feel bad about it later. Slowly, stealing herself, she flopped one foot out from under the covers and onto the floor. Eventually she was sitting up with both legs on the floor, covers pulled back. She reached onto the bedside table and took one protein pill, one caffeine tablet and a couple of Libras. The Libras were her favorite, hand picked for her by Dr. Sian. She liked the doctor, he was young and he understood.

Sophie arranged her bed clothes and her teddy bears on her bed until they sat in a line resting against the pillow. She liked it like that, it was neat and tidy and clean. She walked over to the cooking area and started cooking some oatmeal. One bowl at lunch, one at dinner time. With the pills that was all she needed. Her mum had told her that she shouldn't use the pills like that, but she was just being old-fashioned. Food was food, she got all her vitamins from the supplements. Why bother cooking anything else? She brought the steaming bowl of oatmeal back with her and sat on the bed as she ate. She liked oatmeal anyway.

When Sophie had finished her oatmeal she walked back over to the sink and rinsed out her bowl, putting it neatly on the draining rack to dry. She washed the spoon as well and put it back in the drawer. Now everything was in its right place again she could watch the television for a while. She sat in her swivel chair to watch the television – apparently it was better for her back than lying on the bed to watch it. Dr. Sian had told her that. It was one of her favorites on the box – a health program where a brightly colored gym instructor made brightly colored people do various exercises to music. She thought it was beautiful.

The program was on for an hour. After it finished her alarm clock went again. She wondered about it for a second before she remembered. Once every week, yes of course – vacuum the room. She got the vacuum from its place next to the sink and plugged it in. Then she ran it over the floor. She liked the way the bits of fluff and dust vanished as she ran the nozzle over it, like magic. She liked vacuuming. When the floor was done she switched off the vacuum cleaner and put it back in its place by the sink. Now everything was as it should be once again.

At four o'clock the buzzer went for her door. It was the food delivery. More oatmeal, a little milk for tea and a few apples that she sometimes ate for breakfast. She pressed the flashing light of the door buzzer.

"Hello, Sophie Introva. Here is your delivery dated 12.10.2099. Please acknowledge receipt."

"Yes, thank you, I acknowledge. Please, send it up to my door please."

"Certainly," the droid acknowledged. There was the familiar creaking of floor boards as the heavy metal frame of the delivery droid made its way out of the service lift and across the floor on its uniball roller. It left the delivery outside Sophie's door. When the robot was gone she carefully opened the door. The corridor. She shivered. It was so big, stretching down the whole row of apartments on this floor. It must have been at least a hundred paces. It made her head spin,

vertigo clutching at her heart as she scooped up the food parcels and carried them inside, quickly shutting the door behind her and letting the auto-lock engage once more. Now she was inside again. Four corners to her bed, four walls around all else. She lay back on the bed clothes, snuggling up against them for comfort. She didn't like the deliveries, she wished they would come less often. Some people didn't mind them so much. She had talked quite a range of people through her computer, and some of them even ordered books, computer hardware, exercise equipment off the internet just so they could have the droid come round and deliver it. She didn't see the point. If they wanted a thrill all they had to do was open their door and walk down the corridor. The thought of it made her shudder.

She took a Tranqex to calm her down and lay on the bed trying to compose herself. It was warm and soft as usual. Slowly her eyes began to droop. As the tranquillizer kicked in she felt a tide of warmth creep over her. She drifted into a light doze, warm and safe. Peaceful, happy sounds coming from her television set. Peaceful, happy sounds... but then deafening wailing. Horrible, just horrible. Deafening, wailing sound, a wall of it that hit her with an almost physical force. She jumped bolt upright. It couldn't be. Her face twisted in horror. She remembered being told about it as a child and even then recoiling in horror at the thought of it. Surely not... but then the siren was still there, a wailing cacophony that could not be ignored. It must be... the fire alarm.

Sophie had dreaded this moment all of her adult life. She tried to think. It was probably a false alarm, probably nothing. They would turn it off soon, turn it off if it was a false alarm. But it kept on wailing. She was sweating now, cold beads of it that made their way over her soft cheeks and down the back of her neck. She was starting to panic. Remember what the doctor said. Breathe slowly, try and clear your mind. But how could she. She knew what she had to do, her mind was screaming it at her but she couldn't bring herself to respond. She had to go... outside!

And then, from the back of her mind a fragile and distant, under-used voice started talking to her. It was the voice of her survival instinct, her fight-or-flight hind-brain kicking in. It spoke to her slowly, calmly, deliberately. There was no arguing with it, just as there was no arguing with the siren.

"Sophie," it said. "Sophie, you've been in here a long time. Now you need to get out otherwise you will die. You smell that? That's the smell of smoke. Smoke, Sophie. The fire is real. If you don't go the smoke will kill you before the fires does. It won't be a nice, warm way to go like old people go through in hospitals full of morphine. It will be torture. Sophie, you have to go. Just like getting out of bed, Sophie. One foot at a time. Now open the door."

Sophie moved over to the door. She pressed the unlock button and it swung open, swung open to reveal the corridor. Already there was a haze of smoke in the air, an acrid smelling cloud that stung her eyes. She blinked tears of fear and smoke and looked down the corridor towards the lift. Those same creaking floorboards that the delivery droid had crossed.

"Sophie, if a robot can do it then you can. You were bred in the wilderness, on the savannah. There were big things there to be afraid of, lions, jackals. You killed them once, Sophie. Now you must kill your fear. Walk across those boards Sophie, prove to yourself that you can still survive."

She put her bare foot out onto the landing. It didn't have underfloor heating like the rooms did and it was uncarpeted; cold and hard to the touch. She recoiled as if in disgust. But she had to brave its cold expanse, walk all the way down to the stairwell at the end. It was a horrible thought.

"Yes, horrible, but you must. To live you must. Now break the cycle of sleep, Sophie. Break the bonds that hold you to this place."

She let out an unsolicited shriek as she threw herself forward and ran down the corridor. She could feel the hard, dirty linoleum of the corridor under her feet. This was a space for robots, not for people. The sense of danger she felt was as if she was standing in the middle of the motorway. It was out of bounds, unthinkable. How could she be doing this? But she was.

"That's good, Sophie. Now down the stairs."

She stood at the top of them. How long? Since she was a child it must have been. Since she was about four, when her mother had taken her out to go to the clinic to have her immunizations. She had resented her mum for it even then, taking her out into the vast, terrifying openness like that. Why couldn't they have come to her? Everything else did. But

still, that was in the past. This was now. Here she stood, in no-man's land at the top of the stairs, trying to remember what to do. She put one foot down and then grabbed onto the hand-rail, terrified that she might fall. She put another foot down, and then another, gradually edging her way down. She had gone a few steps when she heard something behind her. She looked over her shoulder to see a boy, about her age, poking his head out of his door.

"What's going on?" he said. "The siren, the smoke..."

"It's a fire. We have to get out," said Sophie. The boy shrunk back.

"Droids will come. Droids will come and get us. I'm staying here," he said. Doors were opening all along the corridor, scared, pale faces poking out of them.

"What if the droids are late? What if the fire is too big? I'm out of my room now. Come on, you must come too." she couldn't believe those were her words. She was terrified at the prospect herself, but now she was persuading others to leave. "Come on!" she almost shouted. The boy made his way nervously down the corridor, eyes streaming in the smoke. It was getting worse, they could only barely make out the other side of the corridor now in the haze.

"Sophie, forget about the others. They can leave if they need to. Now go!" The voice in her head was louder, urgent. She could do nothing but obey. With a quick shout of "hurry!" to the boy, she continued her descent down the stairs. She went slowly at first, making sure each foot was properly aligned on the steps, holding the handrail afraid at any moment she might fall. What if she did? She would hurt herself, break that pale skin. She shuddered, but by some inhuman effort managed control the panic that was welling inside her. She made her way down the stairs and found the door. She opened it and stepped outside. She ran out, crying uncontrollably to herself, flecks of spittle frothing from the corners of her mouth in unparalleled fear. The sky! Oh God, the sky!

Warmth, comfort, security – what more could there be? Four corners to a bed, four walls around all else. Around Sophie. She was safe again now, safe in her apartment. The fire droids had been quick and efficient as they would have been expected to be. She need not have left her room – lots of people didn't. The fire had been caused by someone carelessly leaving the gas on, assuming the auto cut-off would kick in. It didn't. The man was burnt badly in the explosion, but was doing well in hospital now. Sophie was glad it had all happened on the floor above. Apparently most of the people in the block had to be lifted out of their rooms by the droids, which had to axe their doors to get in. But she had been different. She hadn't waited to be carried off by the robots. She had made it out her self. She had gone outside.

She struggled coming to terms with it even now, even wrapped up in her bed clothes, surrounded by her teddy-bears, aglow with the warmth of two Libras and a cup of tea. She shivered despite the warmth. She had sometimes thought about outside, tried to rationalize what it meant, but had never really managed. It had been dusk when she had ran out, half stumbling with fear, head thrashing two and fro, jaw locked in trismus. It had been dusk and she had looked up, looked up to that unfamiliar line, the *horizon*. Yes, horizon. It had never been a word that meant anything to her before. Now it had all kind of strange connotations. Especially seeing as it had been dusk. The sun – the *sun* – had been setting. It was a sort of globe like an electric light, but this time it was low and heavy on the horizon, looking for all the world as if it were a giant fat egg-yolk. And round that sun there were the most spectacular colors – completely normal she had learned from one of the droids – pinks and reds and oranges, washed golden with the last few dying rays. And she had thought the gymnastics hour was beautiful. This was something different, though she sensed. She had seen TV beauty plenty of times – beauty in different colors, beauty at the flick of a switch. This was more than different colors though. She had been able to feel the colors, feel the last few dying embers of warmth as the sun sank below the ground. Suddenly she had not been so scared; the terror that shot through her was sort of put to one side.

And then there was the voice. It had surprised her at first, back in the corridor. But it had helped her get out of the building. She had to thank it for that, and in her head she did. As the droids scurried to put out the fire, she had stood there looking at the sun through tear blinkered eyes. It was the only thing she could look at, everything else gave her the most stomach wrenching sense of vertigo. So she had just stood there and the voice had talked to her.

"Sophie, don't you see. You are alive. Alive, Sophie, do you know what that means? You can feel the sun on your face. You can feel the breeze on your cheek. Wipe the tears away from your eyes, Sophie and feel it. Really feel it." Over and over again it spoke. So she had wiped her eyes with the back of her sleeve and stood there in the terrible, paralyzing light

of dusk and absorbed it all, absorbed the energy from the sun, the noise of the droids, the rustle of the wind, the new shapes – branching trees, hard square arches of concrete, the long, lingering trail of the road as it headed off into the half-light. There was a new feeling between her bare feet and she looked down. It was like carpet, only cold and damp under her feet – not in an unpleasant way though. It was green. *Grass*. She had stood there and laughed, laughed out loud. She shuddered at it now. What was she thinking? She pulled the covers back round her and snuggled up in the warmth.

Only she couldn't get that feeling back. That warm settled feeling in her belly had gone. Even the Libras didn't seem to put it back. She would have to vidscreen Dr. Sian as soon as it was morning, ask about getting a stronger prescription. The trouble was, whenever she was getting settled, there came the voice.

"Sophie. You can't go back, Sophie. This cocoon, this nest, its so fragile, Sophie. Sophie..." and over and over again it kept speaking her name, right at the edge of hearing. It was not a frightening voice, soothing even, but incessant. She struggled to get comfortable on the bed, took another two Libras but it was still there, incessant, nagging. At last she couldn't stand it any more. She stood up a little too quickly, the Libras rushing to her head as she did so. Stars shot across her vision, her ears popped. She sank back down on the bed. As she lay there she spoke through gritted teeth.

"Go away. I'm not listening to you. Go away."

"Why aren't you listening. Sophie? Why aren't you listening?"

"You're not real."

"Just because I'm in your head it doesn't mean I'm not real. I'm part of you Sophie, part of your brain that's talking too you. You ignored me for too long, Sophie, shut me off, locked me up. You let me out when you needed me, now you can't put me back. Sophie..." There was something serpentine about the voice, it came in soft waves, back and forth like waves lapping at a shore.

"What do you want?"

"I want to show you Sophie. Show you the horizon again. When its dawn I want you to come outside." Sophie couldn't think of anything she wanted to do less. She remembered the way her head had spun, the way the sky seemed to go on and on forever, the clouds so small yet so huge, so near and yet so far away. It was unnatural. Totally unnatural. But then... then there had been the sunset. It had saturated her being, made every last neuron fire. There had been something about it that she couldn't explain, that she wouldn't even want to try explaining. Some things don't beg description, they beg only recognition. Sophie had to recognize that something had been stirred inside her, something difficult to settle. She had eaten strange fruit, and she had a taste for more.

"I'm scared," she said, simply. "It's so big out there. There are no walls."

"Yes, Sophie. Big. It's calling you and it's big. Don't try and ask for control because you will not find it out there. Out there things do not happen for reasons. There is chaos, such beautiful chaos."

"Will you be there?"

"I will never leave you now, Sophie."

"Promise?"

"You have my word, and my word is your word."

"Then I will go," her voice trembled as she spoke. "What is the dawn like?"

"I don't know, Sophie. I have never seen it before. We can watch it together."

"I must sleep first," she said.

"Then I will let you sleep. I will wake you when the time comes." So Sophie went to sleep without even taking her Tranqex.