

## 90 Days of Constant Companion

“It looks as if this account’s been open for 27.65 years.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I suppose.” Madelaine could feel her palm sweating inside the glove-like contraption. “Well, yes, it would be, before Larry died.”

“And it looks like there’s quite a large amount of data.”

“There is?”

“Yes, and that’s excellent for quality and reliability. Not many of our clients have so many bytes in storage.” The woman’s voice sounded as if she were reading to kindergarteners.

“You got in early.”

“Well, Larry got in early. He did work for the guy.” Madelaine could feel the familiar drift. “What’s his name?”

“You mean Andersen Jenkins?”

“Oh, right, it was a woman. I’d forgotten.”

“Your husband was a smart man to trust Ms. Jenkins’ vision.”

“I suppose.” Madelaine gazed at the wallpaper behind the woman’s desk. The room was clearly a modern office, but had enough greens and blues and grainy wood to feel... different.

“Can I take my hand out now?”

“We’re almost done, just a few more questions. Were you thinking about a Travel Companion?”

“I wasn’t thinking about it, no.”

“Would you like to try one? Thirty days free service that can be cancelled anytime.

Otherwise, the charge will be automatically deducted from the bank account we have on record.”

“I never remember to cancel those things. No.”

“Sure?”

“No. Yes! No! I don’t want it.”

“Then look at the red section on the screen in front of you and you’ll feel a slight tug on your pinkie-finger.”

Madelaine stared and felt the tug.

“Okay, good. Almost there! Now, were you interested in the Community Companion?”

“Was I?”

“Are you. Are you interested?”

“In what?”

“The Community Companion. Ygritte gave you a tour of our facilities, correct?”

“You mean the woman in the caftan?”

“That’s who I mean.” Her voice lowered a few octaves this time.

“Well, yes, I was driven around in one of those scooters or golf carts or wheelchairs—I couldn’t tell what it was. I told her I could walk, but she wouldn’t listen.”

“It’s a large campus.”

“Yes. It is.”

“Then you’ve seen all our amenities; tennis courts, miniature golf, game room, the pool...”

“I did enjoy swimming in my day.”

“Excellent! Our Splash Pod contains areas for wading or floating and three Olympic-sized pools.”

“Who were those people sitting in wheelchairs along the walls?”

“We call our transportation vehicles CompPods, ma’am. Our clients retain sole access to one when they choose the Community Companion option.”

“But they weren’t swimming. Well, there were swimmers but...”

“Most of our clients prefer to watch their Companions in the pool. It gives them pleasure.”

“It does?”

“Just wait, you’ll find out how much you enjoy your Constant Companion.”

“I just need somebody to help me find my keys.”

“Oh, she’ll be able to do that, I’m sure. Is that a yes, or no?”

“About the keys?”

“The Community Companion. Interested?”

“No. And I know what to do. I’m not that feeble-minded.” Madelaine stared at the red portion of the screen in front of her and felt a tug on her pinkie-finger.

“Thank you. She looks really dynamic, I’ll have you know.”

“Can I see her?”

“We prefer to have our clients meet their Companions at their residence. It’s much more powerful that way. We have a team at your home right now, setting up the equipment.”

“So I can go?”

“Last task! We need to choose a name. If you’ll look at the screen in front of you, you’ll see a list of names that you’ve answered to in your lifetime.”

“Lordy.”

“They’re all available for your Companion, except for Madelaine.”

“But I thought she was me.”

“She is you, but must be considered another version. It would be illegal to use your exact name. Politicians and their laws.”

“Yes.” Madelaine didn’t hear the rest of the explanation because she was staring at the names on the screen. Seeing them caused all kinds of emotions to roil around inside her.

“I know this takes some time. It’s an important step. Most clients don’t have so many to choose from. You did a lot of infiltrating on the internet. Billions of data points.”

“Huh? Oh, I suppose I have, especially after Larry died.”

“Mm hmm.”

Madelaine scanned the names, eliminating a few obvious ones, like Schmookums and Pansy-face. “I suppose I need to know how old she’ll be.”

“She’s a compendium, actually. Andersen considered calling the company Constant Companion Compendium—3C instead of Double C—but I digress. Your Companion will be a compendium of all data points through the years. It’s a complicated algorithm but most often she’ll look like you did when you signed up for our services. Plus or minus a few wrinkles.”

Madelaine didn’t appreciate the woman’s smile. “You mean 27.65 years younger than me?”

“Why, no! She’s you, in just about every measure available. We’re proud of our 98.89% accuracy rates. And of course, 5-star customer satisfaction.”

“I’ve heard they get paid for those stars.”

“There’s litigation, but it’s based on hearsay. You have a 90-day trial period, and if not completely satisfied, the deductions being made from your bank account will stop, within sixty days.”

“I thought it was an insurance policy.”

“Say again?”

“I thought Larry had purchased an insurance policy that was getting deducted from our account. But then there was news about the lawsuit...”

“Litigation.”

“...and I remembered him telling me about that woman’s crazy idea and he wanted in on the ground floor. Weird the things you remember and the things you don’t.”

“A name?”

Madelaine went through the list, eliminating. It was between Maddy and Skipper. Larry used to call her Skipper. “Mad... Skipper.”

“Skipper?”

“She’s 27.65 years younger than me, right? More or less?”

The woman sighed. “She’s you, ma’am, but yes.”

“Skipper.”

The columns of names faded, until only Skipper was left.

“Perfect. Now look at the name ‘Skipper’ on the screen in front of you, and then gaze at the green portion of your screen. You’ll feel a significant tug on your entire hand, palm through the tips of your fingers. It will take approximately one minute, and then you’re ready to go.”

The glove apparatus seemed to be sucking the life out of Madelaine. It was like experiencing a solemn point in time, like birth or death, so she closed her eyes, held onto her

internal organs, and tried to stay afloat in an ocean of doubt. When she opened her eyes, the smooth-haired woman was flipping through screens as if Madelaine didn't exist. She couldn't be much more than twenty-one, despite the cardigan and string of pearls.

"She'll help me, right?"

"Excuse me?"

"My keys. Skipper's going to help me find my keys, isn't she?"

#

Madelaine had to park along the road because a green van clogged up the driveway. It was the same color as the iridescent square attached to the house between the window and front door. There seemed to be smoke rings puffing from the top of the thing, and Madelaine wondered if they'd overloaded a circuit.

Turned out the smoke rings were coming from a man lying on her porch. He looked like Jerry Garcia without the style. He wore aviator sunglasses and popped rings into the air from his pursed lips.

"May I help you?"

The man blew out a stream of smoke and sat upright. The name 'Adrian' shone in holographic colors from a tag attached to his khaki shirt.

"Hi there. I'm Adrian, your Installation Tech."

"Okay."

"I'll be here to make sure your transition to a Constant Companion is a smooth one."

"Smooth?"

Adrian outed his cigarette on the sidewalk and placed the butt in a little metal tin on his belt. “Different people react to a new companion differently.”

“Differently? As in, not good?”

“It’s more challenging for some people than others.”

Madelaine stared at her front door like it belonged in a horror movie. The mirror-like gadget attached to her house didn’t make her feel any warmer. The nesting ‘CC’s swimming inside the colors were the same as on the van and wallpaper and floor tiles in the Community Center.

“What’s that thing?”

“That’s the command center. Controls everything your Companion says and does.”

“That little thing?”

“The actual chip containing your data points is really small. They house it in metallic microlattice for protection and durability. And flair. I analyzed your property and determined this location has the purest feed.”

“Okay. I suppose you can go now.”

“No, ma’am. I’m required by company policy—and law—to introduce you to your companion. Make sure she’s running right, if you know what I mean. I used to work for Comcast. We try not to get callbacks at Double C.”

Madelaine wondered why she’d ever agreed to this crazy idea. More people were using the service, though, so she’d figured most of the glitches had been worked out.

“Let’s get this over with.”

“After you, ma’am.”

The first thing Madelaine noticed were the pinpoint green lights posted at various places in each room.

“Continuum eyes. I should’ve told you about them outside. After a few days you won’t even notice they’re there.”

“Eyes?”

“They can’t really see. It’s a play on words. As in ‘Continuum I’s, with a capital I. As in you. Your I.”

“I see,” Madelaine said, even though she didn’t.

“Along with a few modifications to your power systems, they keep your Companion solid. It’s all in the manual. Although I don’t think your Companion has much chance of failure. You must’ve provided quite a large set of data points. She’s solid as a hologram can be.”

“Where is she?”

“Sitting at the kitchen table. It’s been determined to be the most optimal location to meet with yourself for the first time.”

Madelaine thought lying in bed might be a truer test, but perhaps that wasn’t an option. Adrian waved his arm and practically did a bow in his khaki suit.

“Oh.” Madelaine could feel her face getting hot when she saw herself.

“I thought I’d let you sit in your regular chair, and I’d sit where Larry used to sit.”

Skipper fiddled with the barrette in her hair like Madelaine used to do when she was nervous.

“You remember Larry?”

“Of course I remember Larry! No matter how many times I’d tell him, he always had to lean back in this chair.” The hologram tilted her body back but the chair didn’t move. She sat upright again. “I’m going to have to get used to that.”

“‘Two extra legs is plenty,’ he’d say. I forgot about that.” Madelaine stared at herself, but not herself. Not like in a mirror and fewer crow’s feet, but it was her. She looked great. Better than she ever had, really.

“Good start, ladies. Introductions are rarely needed.” Adrien did a quick check of the eyes in the room; one above the sink and one beside the cabinet that contained cooking supplies. “Obviously you can’t shake hands or give each other a hug.” He looked at a plastic card he held, like a credit card. “Skipper?”

“It was brilliant to give me that name. I’d have gone with Maddy, but...”

“No you wouldn’t.”

The two looked at each other, followed by a hearty laugh. Tears rolled down Skipper’s cheeks before they even came out of Madelaine’s eyes.

“Ah, yes, a good one here. You’re a strong feed, Skipper. No missing pixels or wavy edges.”

“Remember when we went to that lake with him?”

More laughter. As Madelaine spoke, she felt as if she’d always had Skipper with her. There’d always been two. Even when she was alone. Or alone with somebody.

“If you could put your hand into this verifier, I can close out this installation and be on my way. Just look at the little screen...”

“And stare at the green!” They both said it, still laughing.

Adrien’s smile came down a bit, but Madelaine didn’t notice. After the suction released her hand, he returned the verifier to his bag.

“Here’s my card. I’m your case worker if anything goes wrong with the equipment. You call me directly; I’m a private contractor.”

Madelaine acted like he wasn't there.

"You'll be able to pull your car in the drive."

"Yes, but..." Madelaine looked at Skipper.

"Your keys will be in your sweater pocket. When you're distracted, they always end up there."

#

Madelaine didn't leave her house for days. She loved the way Skipper knew what meat to take out of the freezer and how she remembered to turn off the stove after heating water for tea and what TV shows made Madelaine laugh. Skipper didn't sleep exactly, and Madelaine decided having her on the other side of the bed would be too weird anyway. So, each evening as Madelaine made her way into the bedroom, Skipper wrapped herself in the soft cotton robe Madelaine had been looking at on one of those internet shopping sites and settled on the love seat and closed her eyes. Madelaine wasn't sure she stayed there through the night, because every morning Skipper would be sitting at the kitchen table in a colorful sweatsuit, looking fresh.

Skipper was Madelaine, and Madelaine Skipper; that was the hardest part for Madelaine to keep in her head. She recognized herself, but it was different seeing yourself through an observer's eyes; how she walked and fiddled with her hair. Some days she wouldn't even glance at her own butt. But most days Skipper looked thirty years younger than Madelaine, practically in her prime. She had energy Madelaine had forgotten about. She was hopeful. But more than anything, she knew what Madelaine wanted, what she'd do. Skipper was a like a personal psychic. Sometimes Madelaine had no inkling until Skipper revealed her desires. But once

Madelaine heard the craving she'd want it feverishly, even if it was just a peanut butter and grape-jelly sandwich.

"You know me so well."

Skipper smiled. "It's not a trick."

The afternoon Adrienne returned for the thirty-day checkup, he knocked on the screen door. Madelaine was lying on the couch.

"Something's wrong with Skipper."

Adrienne nodded and allowed Madelaine to talk it out.

"She doesn't always remind me to lock the doors and I've left towels in the washer for three days."

"May I come in?"

"How else are you going to fix her?"

"So, you're not happy with," Adrienne checked the keycard in his hand, "Skipper?"

"No, I love her! As a matter of fact, I ordered a Community Companion weeks ago!

Skipper reminded me how much I enjoy swimming."

"How's that working out for you?"

"Oh, I haven't been to the facility yet. Skipper and I are so comfortable here in the house."

"I see."

"I like to imagine her doing laps in the pool, even if I'm not watching."

"It doesn't work that way, ma'am."

"It's fine. These days, Skipper and I prefer not to get our hair wet."

That seemed apparent to Adrienne by the state of Madelaine's scalp. "Yes, ma'am. Where is... Skipper?"

"I'm not sure. I haven't seen her for a while."

Adrienne adjusted his aviators on top of his head. "I'll reboot the system for you. It'll take almost two hours, but usually fixes any problems."

"Two hours?" Madelaine stood up and looked around the room. "If that's what it takes."

"Yes ma'am."

"Would you like a slice of cherry pie while you wait? Skipper reminded me..."

#

A few weeks later, there was a knock on the door.

"It's unlocked, just come in and put it on the counter!"

The door opened, but the man wasn't carrying the pizza box Madelaine expected.

"Sorry, ma'am, it's me, Adrienne."

Madelaine blinked a few times before she noticed the tag hanging from his shirt pocket.

"The guy who installed..." He flipped over a paper on his clipboard. "...Skipper."

"But I didn't call anyone."

"No, ma'am. Your unit seems to be generating error codes."

"My unit?"

"Skipper."

"What does it mean?"

"I've been receiving error codes from some of the Continuum eyes."

“Continuum eyes?”

“The green pinpoints.”

“Oh, yes. But Skipper seems to be doing fine.” Madelaine held out her hand from her prone position on the flowered couch. She pointed to the hologram, unmoving at the side of the TV.

“She’s not animated, ma’am.”

Madelaine blushed. “Oh, we’re watching one of Peter Pec’s exercise videos. See him on TV?”

“Panama’s Pectoral Prince.”

“That’s him. Charming fellow. Skipper does most of the exercising and I mostly watch.”

“Skipper’s not moving, ma’am.”

“This is the best part, when he lays back and lifts those heavy-looking weights in and out and in and out.”

Adrienne was tempted to swipe his arm through the hologram to prove his point, but instead gently dusted the shoulder of its purple track suit.

“Skipper’s unanimated, I’m afraid.”

“But you said she was strong. That she wouldn’t fail.”

Adrienne scanned the premises; the rooms were more congested than when he was last on site. Mounds of books and magazines threatened to topple an unstable stack of unopened mail. Paints, canvases, and a full-sized organ that wasn’t an issue during installation. Colorful flower pots dotted almost every surface, with a wilted or completely-dead plant struggling in each one. And pizza boxes. Adrienne waved the laser detector through the air a couple of times but it was more as a show for the client.

"Some of your possessions are blocking the connections, I'm afraid."

"Connections?"

Adrienne picked up a green pot with a few floppy brown leaves hanging off the sides.

"I always wanted to grow orchids," Madelaine said before Adrienne could comment.

"Skipper reminded me. They're so lovely and delicate."

Adrienne picked up a creamy-white pot with the same wilted leaves.

"I was having a hard time keeping up with them. But Skipper reminded me that they're difficult to grow, and that I'd tried growing them twice before."

"Uh-huh."

"And we talked about how much I've always wanted to play the organ, ever since I was young."

"Do you play?"

"I haven't practiced for a few weeks. I began to focus on my painting."

Adrienne studied the canvases leaning against the wall and piled up here and there. Colorful, hideous blobs.

"Larry never encouraged me to pursue my interests. Not like Skipper does. I have all sorts of interests I've never pursued."

Adrienne shifted a stack of canvases to the side and conducted a couple of reset procedures. Madelaine sat up so she could watch. Skipper spurted and zapped, then disappeared and returned in full measure.

"You're back!"

"Should we exercise? Or how about we just gaze at Peter?"

"Yes."

A knock at the door.

“Would you mind getting that?”

The woman’s legs were swollen or Adrienne would’ve said no.

“Meat-lover’s special.” The man maneuvered around Adrienne and placed the pizza box on top of the organ. He caught a dead orchid before it hit the ground.

Skipper clapped her hands. “Oh, goodie!” The hologram headed for the kitchen, but then stopped mid-track. Adrienne’s detector emitted a few buzzy sounds.

“Now that I think of it, Skipper does disappear from the kitchen sometimes. I thought maybe she needed to use the powder room.”

“Skipper doesn’t use the powder room, ma’am.”

“Yes.” The woman’s eyes drooped at the corners.

“I’ll get it up and running.” Adrienne caught himself, but Madelaine hadn’t noticed anything un-human about what he’d said. “Skipper will be back in no time.”

“Oh, thank you. She’s made such a difference in my life.”

Adrienne spent almost three hours rearranging bold red appliances and stacks of Tupperware; he even washed up a few dishes for the lady and took out three bags of garbage. It wasn’t so bad, since Madelaine had recently purchased a jazz collection and new Bose speakers.

“I don’t really like jazz, but Skipper reminded me I always wanted to.”

“Skipper will be good as new. You just have to remember to keep the lanes clear. Between the eyes.” Adrienne pointed to the bridge of his nose.

“Green eyes, like yours.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

#

“Hurry, come in, come in!”

Adrienne had to push hard to open the door. Once inside the house, he saw the obstacle was a mound of garbage bags that led from the door to the middle of the floor.

“Nothing.” The woman held out open arms as if proving they were empty. “She’s been missing all day.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I’ve been trying to clear the lanes, but there are no eyes.”

“Yes, ma’am. There’s a TIF code on the Command Center outside.”

“TIF code?”

“Termination due to insufficient funds, ma’am.”

Madelaine stood silent and still for a moment, taking it in. A form of grief, perhaps.

“Oh.”

“If the bank account comes up short two months in a row, it generates a permanent cessation.”

“Skipper’s dead?”

“The data points are out there, but it’ll cost twice as much to regenerate.”

Adrienne watched as Madelaine crumpled onto the couch.

“It’s a business, ma’am.”

“But you must know someone who could disregard policy. A young woman you might sweet-talk? Ygritte maybe?”

“I quit Constant Companion, ma’am. I’m back with Comcast. Less stressful.”

“But you made a service call...”

“I was an independent contractor. You called my cell.”

“Even better. You know how that thingamajig by the mailbox works. You’re a whizz.

Larry used to be able to cross the cable wires to get us extra channels.”

“To be honest, I could probably generate a companion...” The woman’s eyes looked so lonely. “...but Skipper would be spotty. Unreliable. It’d only be a matter of time.”

“Do it.”

“It’d be like... like Skipper was sick. Cancer or lupus or something. Something painful.”

“Oh.” There was trembling in Madelaine’s slack face.

“Give me your hand. I want to show you something.” Adrienne held out his hand and Madelaine followed along without thinking. They walked together to the door.

“Play that organ lately?”

“No.”

“Christmas is coming around soon. That’s a great time for organ music.”

“I suppose.”

Adrienne ran his hand along the top of the keys. “Dust her off and give it a whirl. That’d bring some life into the room.”

“For who?”

Adrienne considered telling the woman the effort would be for her, that it’d all been for her. Instead, he focused on getting her down the front steps.

“It’s cold out here.”

“Yes ma’am. Us smokers get used to all kinds of weather. We have our priorities.”

Adrienne pulled a cigarette from the pack stashed in the pocket of his Comcast polo shirt.

Madelaine shivered. “After a while, the cold air feels good on your skin. Puts color on your cheeks. You start to feel alive.”

“Color emphasizes the wrinkles.”

“Sometimes it’s good to get away from yourself. Look at that sky, good and blue.”

“Those clouds are moving fast.”

“Yes! Exactly. Not everyone notices the speed of a cloud.”

Madelaine squinted while she gazed at the sky.

“Skipper was the most robust companion I’d ever worked with.”

“She really was, wasn’t she?”

“Sure. But only because you made her that way. She wasn’t half the woman you are.”

Madelaine watched the racing clouds, felt her cheeks bloom with color. She was feeling warmer.

“I used to play ‘Angels We Have Heard on High.’”

“There you go.”

“Larry liked ‘Away in a Manger’ better, but I liked ‘Angels.’”

“Yes ma’am.” Adrienne popped a line of smoke rings.

“I was wondering...”

“Yes ma’am?”

“Would you teach me to do that?”

Adrienne pulled a cigarette from his pocket and handed it to Madelaine, lighting it for her. It didn’t take long before Madelaine was able to pop a few wobbly ‘O’s.

“I should take a drive to the lake.”

“There you go.”

Madelaine took a deep drag, watched the disappearing smoke. “Any idea where I put my car keys?”

“Try your sweater pocket, ma’am.”

END

