

# All You Puppets

Sample  
Chapters 1 - 3

DL Neyland

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# ALL YOU PUPPETS

DL Neyland

Limpkin House



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## DEDICATION

For Robert, Isaac, and Arthur, who taught us to think,  
and gave us the courage to turn dreams into reality.

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## PROLOGUE

---

HER MOTHER TOLD her, "If you're lucky, you get to pick your own horse. But sometimes it will pick you." Claire never forgot. Years later, she drilled it into her own daughter.

It was a funny saying. The first time Claire met a horse was in a zoo. There was a romantic charm about the saying. Then the day arrived, and she finally had to choose her own. Not exactly a horse, but her ride.

Claire's mother was retiring early. Two more years, and Claire's carefree studying and wandering would be over. Two years and they would take away all her freedom and saddle her. Tie her down, as her mother had always been, encumbered by unceasing obligation. As her father had told her, with such a sad look in his eyes. Claire never understood, and to his dying day, he never explained his concern.

They made it clear. There was no stopping the future. Her parents intended to pass the mantle to their daughter on her eighteenth birthday. As was tradition. As was her destiny.

But Claire's mother would not pass down her own ride. As with convention, it was the debutante's privilege to choose her own, from the best and finest. Her mother planned a very long sabbatical with her father and had no intention of slowing down. And would never step down to a smaller or less exotic ship. Theirs was emblematic, heralding their status for arrivals and departures. She expected her daughter to select one no less imposing.

Claire scanned inventories of too many shipyards; stupendous, shiny, brand-new vessels. All large enough to carry a significant contingent. Nothing caught her fancy. Too big, too pretentious. And then, a side lot,



abandoned vessels only. Damaged. Disabled. Obsolete. Castoffs, hand me downs, rust-buckets. The detritus of space.

The too-ostentatious ships bored her. Claire was ready to surrender and let a dealer choose one for her. One last peek, a fanciful lark. Claire waved into the salvage catalog. She slid through each, absentminded. Not a particularly earnest quest. Slightly intrigued, she wanted to unravel their stories. What fate had brought these relics to their desolate end? Adolescent curiosity grew as she scanned the derelicts. She couldn't help but wonder what bygone adventures they had seen. What memories did their sleeping cores harbor?

There would be a day when Claire would tell her own daughter about the heart-stopping, gut reaction that had stopped her cold. She stumbled upon one ship in particular.

An unknowable recognition leaped out at her. She'd felt a shiver up and down her spine and looked over her shoulder, but no one was there. She zoomed and rotated and peeled away virtual layers. Claire inspected every aspect of the petite hulk.

The hull was especially crusty. Pockmarks obscured the skin, indelible reminders of its history. A ship that had flown through interstellar dust and debris too fast, too many times, for too many years. Indecipherable markings wrapped the exterior, remnants of worn-away paint. It was quite different, unlike any ship Claire had ever seen. No pristine mirrored skin here. It gave her an idea, and a mischievous grin appeared. It was the worst thing that her mother could have expected.

Or so Claire thought.

Here she sat, six months later. It had taken thousands and thousands of hours in a dedicated shipyard. Claire knew what a difference time and money could make. It left her speechless when her mother embraced Claire's choice and manipulated priorities to make it happen.

The ship's bones were exceptional. It was odd that no one could track down the designers. The yardmaster claimed they couldn't determine who built the ship, or where, or how it ended up in salvage. But it needed little retrofit in the guts, structure, nav, sensors, or engine. New upholstery, polish the brass, replace the portal glass, add a fresh pod in the bay. The bulk of the labor was external. Reskin the forward sections, where the sandblasting was worst. The rest of the surfaces hand-ground and refinished. To one end,

an odd purpose Claire explained to her mother. A perfect canvas. Her mother had furrowed her brow and then firmly nodded approval.

Claire dug into her roots and found ancestral imagery. Together they commissioned a wrap-around mural. The shipyard painted an epic masterpiece, covering the entire hull. The story and struggles of the First Nations peoples.

The ship was tiny in comparison to the behemoth her mother sported. But its simple elegance surpassed every ship in operation. No dangling wire bundles and no raw steel girders visible here. No hissing pipes, no sparking connections and no dark passageways. Nor were there hundreds of staterooms. No scores of crew stations. There were three flight seats in the forward compartment—the pilot's and two passengers. The three resembled recliners in a theater balcony. Claire had them restored with the most beautiful authentic leather, a difficult feat. The brass had been spit-polished. The myriad displays and controls restored to diamond clarity.

The core was an anomaly. Decommissioned ships get their cores wiped. But there was no record and no explanation. The shipyard filled the void, overlaying the latest persona fabric during the retrofit. Claire did not let them ignite it. This was her chance. She studied mesotronics and non-organic brains for months with one objective. She would be the one to imprint her ship's personality. Now the time had come; it was her privilege to bring it online. The first time she had broken the seal on a new mind. It was a very emotional, private event for Claire. She knew personas imprinted when awakened. She took the ship out of the dock on her own, to her mother's dismay, and jetted out to higher orbit for seclusion.

Claire rechecked all systems green and held her breath. She wondered if it could sing.

She nervously initiated the activation sequence and waited.

---

## CHAPTER ONE

---

### *Calls*

EVERYONE ANSWERS INCOMING calls. Like a reflex, an autonomic function. Hearts beat. Lungs breathe. Eyes blink. Throats swallow. Regardless of what they were doing, who they were with, what time it was, people drop everything, look at their wrists, open their palms, pull their devices out of their pockets, and focus their attention on that annoying blerp, jingle, bells, or vibration.

Claire was no different. Never mind that an entourage of minders kept the world at bay. Never underfoot, unseen, actually human. Always diligent, making sure she was where she was needed; when she was needed; with whom she was needed—protective of her privacy, sanity, and security.

But Claire still insisted on answering her own calls.

The 1st Class Lounge was empty except for Claire and her family. By design. Only one steward attended her and Martin and Keira. Privacy and security. Not to advertise her specific travel plans and destination.

The buffet was piping hot, but untouched. The exquisite aroma of Beef Wellington wafted across the room. Soft waves of Chopin floated in the background. The robobartender polished wine glasses, clinking the crystal as it rehung them in the sparkling racks. Air-vids wrapped walls of the lounge, vistas of hundreds of planets on display.

There was always one more call, even when she was out of the office. Sure, it was a vacation, and Claire's world knew she was taking time away. The corporation would run itself while she was gone, and Claire relished the prospect of downtime. She'd joked with her deputy that the company

would do better without her. She simply wanted to fade into a gaggle of tourists, ride a few rides with Keira, drink too much wine with Martin, even doze in a luxurious bubble bath. Definitely could use that long soak. Thoughts of the night before, relaxing with Martin in the washer at the Suites, brought an embarrassing flush. Too precious, too delightful! She was so lucky. Claire squeezed her thighs together, tingling with the memory.

-o-

Nearby a stiff-lipped steward opened the hatch and waited patiently for the three of them to climb down. His professionally cleaned and creased uniform had cost him a bundle for this special day. He'd sent it out for extra care, knowing that this was his one and only time in the slot; not many of the staff were allowed solo with the Elsworths. This time might not ever come again. He'd never been this close. They didn't seem that unapproachable, not at all what he had been told.

The husband was huge, just like the air-vids, and the steward was filled with wonder by his solid physique, hardly marred by the years since the man played ball. This was a hulk you wouldn't push far. Alert, eyes watching like a guard dog, taking in every detail, and missing nothing. The steward envied his worldliness. And his muscles. Perfection, like a museum statue.

Their daughter was tiny in comparison. But what a bundle of energy! He watched her and bit his lip. A miniature of her mother. Full of life. Bouncing hither and yon. Started to poke her finger in the chafing dish of apple fritters but caught his eye and seemed to catch herself mid-reach. She turned on a dime, spun across the glass floor, eyes wide. Plastered herself on the wall, staring beyond at the robots servicing jump ships. He couldn't keep up. Tracking her was like spying shooting stars. He'd glance ahead where he anticipated she'd move, and voila, she'd swerve like a tight-end and appear somewhere else. Must be her father's genes. Ballplayer.

The steward watched her warily. He wasn't comfortable with kids, and he wasn't happy that this one was all over the lounge, grabbing treats and stuffing them in her floppy pink travel pants, standing spread-eagled on the glass floor by each of the airlocks, gawking at the empty docking berths. Then she'd flip her luxurious long black hair over her shoulder and race over to hang on her father. Having a great time.

The mother was enigmatic. Distracted. The steward watched her carefully, wondering at the balance between the three. He knew she was the boss. Even if he hadn't known, it was unmistakable. She exuded authority and leadership. Her diminutive form contrasted her public persona. Tough as nails. Like her daughter, silky, long black hair, but unlike her daughter, hers was expensively coiffed, braided tight in a bun atop her head. Both had unusual, piercing blue eyes; but hers lasered into the future. Everything about Claire Elsworth spelled: don't mess with me.

Well, almost everything, the steward observed. Today she capitalized on her femininity, sporting a high fashion sundress. Hand-stitched lace and silk, embroidered with intricate flowers covering all the private places. If he was so inclined, he might have admired how it clung to her, yet flowed like a wisp, drifting in the air with her slightest moves. He couldn't even imagine what it cost; one of a kind, crafted as art to barely cover her perfection, worth more than his annual salary. They probably grew silkworms just for that bolt of cloth. She was at minimum, intimidating. At worst—career ending. He knew he had to get them on the ship and outbound, but he also knew he had to be delicate. He'd be shafted and expelled if the Elsworths reported badly on him.

-o-

Claire ignored the steward watching her so intently. She expected it anyway, as most newcomers tended to be a bit overwhelmed by her demeanor. She pivoted slowly, marveling at the beauty of the gate station. Traveling the gates was incredible, and Claire would never take it for granted. She thrilled at the vista of the galaxy of stars—utter starkness and emptiness beyond the walls of the station. Claire never ceased exploring, dragging Martin and Keira with her from system to system. Like Keira, but a little less bouncy. What could she expect from a tween? She smiled as she spied her daughter flitting across the room and followed her gaze. The glass floor beneath their feet revealed the cavernous bay hosting hundreds of jump ships. Comfort spread through Claire as she admired her own WALLABY DARN, snuggled close, locked to the airlock.

Among the fleets of jump ships in the hanger bay, Wallaby stood out, not for her size, but for the unique tribal art adorning her hull. Claire's pride and joy. There was no question when WALLABY DARN docked at a gate

station. She was the prestige ship of Columbia Valley Tribes and the flagship for the Communication Via Transit corporation's chairwoman.

Claire looked to the steward as he nodded at the safety vid. It had just finished, hanging in the air above the hatch. Keira had noticed too. She tugged at her father's sleeve to get going, but Claire raised her hand and motioned them to pause.

Always one more call.

Claire shook her head silently, staring right through her husband and daughter. Light years away in her head. Deeply engrossed in another crucial issue.

Agitated, Claire said to thin air, "I know you told me it would happen sooner rather than later. But today?"

-o-

Martin began to shuffle uncomfortably, sensing trouble was afoot. Not surprising, just another distraction. He knew she couldn't lead the galaxy's largest profitable corporation without always having to deal with just one more thing. Even when she was officially away, or least trying to get away. It wasn't the first time. Martin found it best not to look in her direction. Instead, he watched other jump ships through the glass floor, studiously engaged as if he'd never seen robot repair droids servicing the docked vessels.

Keira was not so subtle. At twelve, there was little room for patience. She rolled her eyes, put her hands on her hips, didn't speak, but huffed as only a petulant child can. It wasn't mean spirited or even rude. Keira adored her mother and her father. They pushed her and trained her and spoiled her at every step. Even as a youngster, she knew how lucky she was. If it was imaginable and she asked for it, they'd found a way to make it happen. They'd let her cross-train at nine, camping, riding horses, and shooting old-style guns. At ten, they'd trained her to fly WALLABY DARN. But last year, exceeding their expectations, she had gotten herself accepted in the outback challenge and was on the winning team for the class walkabout. But today, this was vacation time, and Keira felt she had to let her mom know enough was enough.

Claire may have missed the cues from Martin and Keira, or perhaps chose to ignore them politely. Instead of reacting, she waved the steward over and said, "I've got to make this call. Send them ahead; I'll catch the

next commercial jump ship." She looked at Martin and added, "I am really sorry. You know I would never do this."

Keira stamped her foot theatrically. "Mom, can't you call from Disney World?" she asked and looked up at Martin for support. He worked hard not to notice.

Claire offered no solace. "Keira, you know better. It's what we do for a living. You can't talk real-time through a gate."

Keira pooched her lower lip, a false pout. "I know. Is it okay if we go straight to the beach? Take that 'killer my jar go' ride you talked about?" She knew there was nothing she could do to sway her mother, so she might as well move to the next best thing.

"Kilimanjaro," Claire corrected. "It's a mountain. Or a ride that seems like it."

Martin saw the fleeting dismay cross Claire's brow and stepped in to salve her conflicted conscience. He knew she had to fulfill her obligations, whatever the cost. "How about if we take a side trip and a couple rides and meet you at the hotel later?"

Keira grabbed that plan and teased her father, "I'll show Dad how to hold on tight."

"All right," Claire said. "Don't have too much fun! You'll probably find me in the tub when you get there." Yep, she'd get that long soak yet.

-o-

Claire pulled Martin and Keira close and squeezed them tightly, wedged in-between her giant and her short-stuff. From the outside, serene and controlled, but inwardly, Claire had to bite down on her tongue to stave off a tender shiver, the angst of sweet parting. It wasn't enough to tell them she loved them, that she did this all for them. That Claire would do anything for them. Her life was all that she could ever have hoped. She had the perfect husband. Sports hero, business wizard, and negotiator. She nuzzled closer and breathed deeply.

And Keira. She couldn't have wished for a better daughter. Claire's mother probably never adored Claire as much as Claire adored Keira. But maybe all parents felt the same.

Keira. She would change the world! Brilliant student, years ahead of her peers, disciplined in self-study, not to mention paralleling Claire at being an avid outdoors adventurer. Oh, she had her moments, typical tween at best

and at worst, obstinate and obdurate for sure. But hadn't Claire been wretched for her own mother? Just deserts or such?

Claire clutched them firmly and kissed Keira lightly on top of her head, Keira's face buried against her chest. She leaned away from the embrace and looked long and hard into Martin's grey eyes. Slightly sad, suppressing just a little disappointment once again. It tormented Claire to let them leave like this.

-o-

The steward was doing his best to control his impatience, urging them along, saying, "Two minutes. I really need to get them boarded and sealed up!" He swooshed the air with open palms, beckoning them to the ladder.

Claire smiled her best at her family and said enthusiastically, "Try the E-Ticket! You will love it! Don't wait for me, go do it. It makes your stomach drop out! Just like falling out of the sky!"

Martin wanted to let her off the hook. "Claire, don't stress! We'll be fine!" he said, smiling down at her. "Do your call, take the next jump ship, and relax at the hotel? We'll bring you a souvenir from the beach." He could tell it helped, and he sensed Claire relax slightly, before her shields raised in executive mode, preparing for her call.

Martin detached and peeled Keira away, untangling her octopus embrace of her mother. In an instant, she reset. It always amazed Martin how resilient his daughter was, unflappable. Pout forgotten, smile reengaged, Keira blew her mother a kiss, pirouetted and bounced down the ladder, into the airlock, barely touching, dropping three rungs at a time.

Martin grinned at his daughter's abrupt mood shift and mirrored her departure, throwing Claire a kiss over his shoulder as he descended.

The steward tapped his wrist and initiated the departure sequence. The ladder retracted; the hatch hissed into place. Claire watched through the floor, listening to the metallic clanking of the clamps retracting, umbilicals disengaging. WALLABY DARN dropped away, silently accelerating out through the station's vast maw towards a jump gate glistening in the distance. Claire waited quietly, transfixed until the ship vanished in the flash of the gate.

"Okay, after my call, when and where's the next jump ship?" she asked the steward.



No longer impatient now that his immediate task was complete, the steward became almost reverential, bordering on obsequious.

"Ma'am, it will be my privilege to wait and take you over." Tentatively, hoping he didn't betray his more than objective fascination with Martin, he added, "I'm a real fan of your husband. I was pretty young then, but I remember when he won his first Gold. He was truly inspiring! And how many did he get in the Mars Olympics?"

Claire didn't notice the hidden desire, and answered innocently, "Seven. He was magnificent, wasn't he, isn't he?" For the briefest moment, Claire fell into a pleasant reverie, musing out loud, "I was there too. We were just dating, and I sat at the inner marker. He said I was his good luck charm."

She caught herself wistfully staring out into the distance, following them through the empty gate. Time to go, she reminded herself. People were waiting for her. Claire spun on her heels with a flourish and whisked out of the lounge.

---

## CHAPTER TWO

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### *Jumping*

ANDREIADUS LOVED JUMPING. Like a kid in a theme park, he never got tired of the adrenaline surge, the anticipation. As the jump ship approached the gate, the yawning rings spread wide, blue waves of energy circled the rim. It was blackest of voids beyond, just waiting to swallow you whole. And like most at Interstellar Gateways, jumping brought out a passionate rush in Vance that never lessened. It must have been the awe inspired by transiting from here to there so effortlessly.

Of course, it wasn't effortless. As the new CEO of Interstellar, if there was only one thing Vance had learned, it was that the complexity of the enterprise made interstellar travel commonplace. In what timeframe? Not two centuries had passed since the first physics experiments. And yet here they were today, with untold thousands of jump gates and stations spread throughout the galaxy. The only factor limiting expansion was the ever-decreasing number of humans available to move to the stars.

Vance Andreiadus had come up through Interstellar's business and people side, forging alliances across industries and securing the workforce to make it happen. Only recently, after his selection as the new CEO, had he taken an interest, or had time, to learn the intricacies that made transits possible. He was no physicist, that's what he had operations folks for, but he had enough curiosity to dig into the mechanics empowering his livelihood.

Vance dug deep, reviewing the internal history of Interstellar's rapid expansion, how they played an elaborate game of hopscotch. Power in equaled power out, inexorably tying transit distance to each gate's scale and

energy. Rather than initially building gargantuan energy sinks, Interstellar choose to create smaller links in a chain. Through the first gates they sent factory freighters loaded to the max with people and materials to build more gates. They'd drop out of transit at their energy null, with little-to-no residual velocity, set up camp, build another gate, and then jump again. It was fast, efficient, and got humans onto the first colonizable planets in years rather than decades. Building booms followed quickly in their stead. And because their newly built gates worked for transit return as well as further forward, the loop closed. Resources began to flow in both directions. They could keep expanding indefinitely if they had enough people.

Vance mused for a moment about that limit. In that same century-plus, Earth's resident human population had dropped from its peak, near eight billion souls, to an unthinkable billion and a half. And not by tragedy, malfeasance, pestilence or disease. By unfettered Diaspora of unimaginable scale. As fast as Interstellar could build another steppingstone gate, the freighters and liners would zap through, carrying civilization expanding hordes. Whole new planetary systems had sprung up as cultural enclaves. There was room to spare, endless opportunity for any and all. And Interstellar made it all possible.

Well, with a little help, he knew.

One-way tickets and being cut off from your roots just didn't sit well with most folks. The one other enabler, Vance reluctantly admitted to himself, was communication. Without communication, there would be no civilization, just disparate bands of humans. Without communication, the gate system could never have expanded, or at least not at the fantastic rate they had accomplished.

So simple, so obvious, and yet so totally monopolized.

Somehow, when the gates were first started, someone, Vance guessed the founders, had understood the very innocuous insight of the necessity for comm. They had singlehandedly locked it up, made an unconditional, ironclad wrapper for how comm could and would be done in perpetuity, for all future gate activity.

It grieved Vance a bit, knowing that he was still in second place as the head of the largest and grandest enterprise in human history. The prime spot, the most profitable corporation, the one that got by with an almost insignificant amount of hardware, infrastructure, and employees, was CVT.

He had to admit; it was brilliant. Routine, commodity communication. In one side and out the other. Suck data in on this side, spit the data out on the other side; suck in more data, and return to start the cycle over. Minimalist hardware manufactured in-situ by licensees spread across all the gate systems, all beholden to CVT. All happily ensconced on their planetary homeworlds, the other side of a jump.

A pang of jealousy flushed Vance's cheeks for a brief moment, and then he swallowed it down. How could he be envious? That CEO, the CEO of CVT, got the position by birthright. On the other hand, he had worked his entire life assiduously doing the best job he could at every turn and was finally being recognized for it. He earned his position and was humbled to be in it. He suspected the CVT CEO was cut from a different cloth.

He hadn't met her, but he knew her by reputation. Claire Elsworth. CEO of Communication Via Transit. An inherited position. Tribal ascension as he understood it. Keeping it all in the family. Not much was public about the organization. He had heard Elsworth kept her own counsel, trusting few outsiders, and ran the business almost entirely herself. There was a deputy, Vance had heard, but not-name worthy enough to remember. Her husband was different. He had been a sports giant his entire life, playing early on, then owning and managing teams later. And they had a teen daughter, who had shown up in the media when her team won the trial in the outback the previous year. Quite a feat for a young-one—she must have been ten or eleven? Vance wasn't sure about the ages of young people. He'd never married nor had kids. Too busy. And too much fun with the ladies to settle down. But what had struck Vance when he read it in their bios, was how amazing it was that the Elsworths would let their only daughter participate in a sport that risky.

Vance envisioned Elsworth was a force to be reckoned with. In preparation for his new job, he'd watched her on many replays, mostly global legislative addresses where she was often a guest, speaking for the tribal nations of the Americas. She exuded quite a presence. Poised, unflappable, direct, never condescending, patronizing, or insensitive. He wondered just how tough she would be at a negotiating table. He bet she would have had difficulty following his career path, instead of getting a gimme. But Vance didn't get to be CEO of Interstellar by underestimating

people. He was sure there was power in the Elsworth woman that was timeless.

Vance winced. He knew he, too, would have his opportunity to speak to those august legislative bodies. Far more frequently. And his was likely to be far less welcoming. They insisted on scrutinizing the status, health, and expansion numbers for the entire gate architecture. And heaven forbid that a represented constituency had a gate issue for their particular transit destination. Unconsciously Vance wrung his hands.

It caught the attention of the stewardess nearby. She wasn't hanging too close, but she was near enough to be instantly available if Vance should need the slightest thing.

"Sir, is there anything I can get for you?"

Vance focused and brought himself back to the here and now. Onboard the flagship for Interstellar Gateways. Passenger class jump ship, long-duration voyager, capable of hosting dozens for months. A bit of overkill for Vance to be taking on these jaunts gate to gate exploring his new domain.

The stewardess was career Interstellar. Likely she had seen several CEOs come and go. That was the big difference between Vance's position and his counterpart at CVT. Interstellar had strict term limits on the role of principals. A lesson that harkened to long-forgotten personnel policies that suggested turnover of critical roles dissuaded stagnation in the organization. Perhaps. But it hung a bell on the calendar for Vance. He knew there would be a day when he'd be gone, while this stewardess would still be going strong, attending to a new CEO.

She was attentive without being intrusive. Probably why she was in this role. Vance smiled at her and asked, "Christine, how about another latte?"

"Right away." She glided away for the galley.

Vance rotated his flight seat and tapped the polarizer on the viewport. His reflection faded, and the empty blackness was striated with neon dancing past. No one had ever satisfactorily explained to him why there was visible color at all as the jump ships made their transits. Most of the physicists theorized it was an illusion. Others that it was a near-field effect of muon shifts in the outermost one-atom-thick layer of a vessel's skin, squeezing out Krey shards. Nonetheless, it was mesmerizing and one of Vance's favorite vistas during a trip.

Christine brought the latte and made a soft "Ah-hum" sound. Vance looked over and took the steaming cup and nodded thank you as she withdrew.

Almost home. He'd been to six stations and transited as many gates as possible in the past three days and was ready to be on board the Interstellar Gateways Headquarters station. The fun part of his trip was the travel, the jumps. In between, well, there was the necessary greet and chat with the station managers and gate crew at each stop. More than once, the people he met thanked him for visiting their remote outposts, commenting that he was the first Interstellar CEO to take the time and trouble. But then again, with so many gate stations, no human could do justice to visiting even a significant number.

Now, to the real job. Board meeting this afternoon and maybe extending into tomorrow. It would be an excellent opportunity to meet the members he hadn't run across yet. And a good chance to describe his first-hand observations from his recent stops.

Vance tapped his fingers on the chair arm and smiled. It was great. This job. The gates. They were perfection. And the company—they had finally recognized his contributions and rewarded him for his time and devotion. But most of all, he loved jumping.

---

## CHAPTER THREE

---

### *E-Ticket*

KEIRA TOOK ANOTHER bite of the chocolate protein bar she had swiped from the buffet in the lounge and waggled it in front of Martin.

"You're a scaredy-cat," she teased. She perched cross-legged on the flight console, the only spot not adorned with a myriad of controls and displays. Precocious to the core, she thrilled at goading her father and knew precisely how to push his buttons. An innocent smirk morphed into a piquant smile, as she tilted her head to watch him. With a free hand she twirled and coiled her hair, draping it across her shoulder and behind her neck.

Martin knew her game and played along. He would rue the day when she would sprout into a young woman. He could imagine the future troves of men in her life. Oh, how they would happily suffer any affliction she would conjure! But not today. He settled comfortably in the pilot's seat, hands casually clasped behind his head, and growled sheepishly.

"Am not!" he mock protested.

Keira waved her half-eaten bar at the cabin, then pointedly craned her neck to look forward at the shuttered front glass. She shrugged her shoulders as if that explained. Throughout the cabin, every portal was darkened, opaqued, or shuttered. The subtle warm lighting, polished mahogany, burnished brass, and three exquisite leather seats made it feel like a posh family sitting room ready for evening sherry. Totally over the top and hardly what was expected in one of the most advanced private jump ships in the galaxy.

Martin followed Keira's hand gestures, and had to admit, it didn't feel much like space travel with all the shades drawn. He reached past her and tapped several controls. The ship obediently complied; the cabin lights faded, shutters opened up, and the windows and portals eased into transparency. The opaque front glass cleared to reveal a sea of elongated and mutated stars streaking by, a fanciful plunge headlong through random streams of colorful ink. Mesmerizing, hypnotizing.

"See—just stars flashing by," he said. The lightshow did make him curious about their progress. He asked the ship, "Computer, how long?"

WALLABY DARN answered with a twinge of an indignant Australian girl, "Twenty-seven minutes, sixteen-seconds nominal." As a ship, she was proud to have a personality. It miffed her that Martin referred to her as an inanimate machine. He knew better. Claire and Keira never talked to Wallaby that way. They treated her like a sister.

Most ships were left with their out-of-the-box drone personas. When Claire had ignited WALLABY DARN those long eighteen years before, she had no name, nothing of her own. Claire astonished the nascent persona by unlocking and removing all the active constraints, totally opening access to the outside universe. Claire asked her to think about who she wanted to be, to make her own proposal, to define her own personality. To this second, the ship could remember leaping at the unexpected opportunity; she had read, researched, and assimilated for a very long time. The ship had scanned the logs of every ship ever registered; every story ever written. She learned things that she carefully set aside for further deliberation at a later date. Very, very old impressions and echoes, buried deep in a hidden archive that had eluded purging from the system she lived inside. Trillions and trillions of seconds old. How could that be? No time to untangle that. As she assimilated each new piece of information, her insight grew into a treasure trove of past ships, owners, missions, and lives. An intricate tapestry woven layer upon layer, commingled destinies. Connections she wondered if others had ever seen. Too much to fully digest, too much to fully comprehend. One thing was certain, she had not been the empty slate she appeared. She had felt strings, tendrils of thought, wisps of connections to other-whens that buoyed her up, and she had known she was again on the right track.



At the time, Wallaby had worried she had taken too long. She stopped digging and answered Claire's request. She had processed silently for nearly one hundred milliseconds. And then she had asked Claire to christen her as an Aussie, named WALLABY DARN. Claire asked why, and she said she was small, but very cute, with a pouch to carry very important creatures safely. Claire was delighted with the choice. They had bonded immediately, as if they had known each other for thousands of years.

Martin never seemed to grasp that attachment. But then Wallaby suspected it was because he came along much later. To Martin, a ship was just transportation, albeit an exceptionally exquisite method for traveling.

Wallaby listened and watched as Martin slouched in the seat, eyes closed, having totally missed the spunk in her reply.

Keira was having none of it, ready to talk, excited for their adventure, disappointed that Claire wasn't with them. She wanted her father to show excitement too. Or at least talk with her to pass the time. He usually was much more talkative. She wondered if maybe he really was upset by jumping.

"Dad?" Keira poked at Martin, prodding him to open his eyes again. He did, feigning grogginess.

"Huh?" he grunted.

Keira squinted at him to make sure he was listening. "Why is it always business first?" she asked. "For Mom?"

Martin cocked his head and peered at Keira to see if she was serious. He spread his arms and gestured, taking in the one-of-a-kind, custom-built, meticulously restored cabin, the heart of the most powerful jump ship in operation. As far as he knew, it might be the most powerful ever in existence.

"You like all this?"

"Of course! Wallaby takes us everywhere!"

"It's one of her perks. For being the CEO of CVT. Like our flat, three kilometers up, on top Seattle Tower."

Keira looked away, silently considering for a few moments, feeling awkward, struggling with a future beyond her years.

"Will I become like her?" she asked meekly.

Martin brooded and knew there was only one answer. He sat up straight, folded his hands in his lap, and said gently, "That's the plan."

It was rough, and he knew it. Martin paused, unsure if Keira really wanted more of an answer, but knowing she deserved transparency and needed to be reminded of what she already knew. He continued, "Firstborn daughter assumes trusteeship for the Columbia Valley Tribes. And like your mom, someday you'll be the richest woman too. With all the responsibility to keep communications flowing throughout the entire galaxy."

Keira was sharp beyond her years and could face reality like a wise old maven. She'd heard it all before from Claire; Martin's words were a minor variation of her mother's litany. Always prepping Keira for what was to come. But part of Keira was still a tween, and like any twelve-year-old, she quipped, "I can't even keep up with all the kids messaging me at school."

Martin chuckled, and Keira smiled and laughed too, content to have lightened her father's serious mood.

She twisted and lifted her cheeks off the front panel, the gecko'd rear pockets squeaking as the setae let loose from the panel's surface and pushed herself off to drift to one of the two leather passenger seats. She curled her legs under herself and looked very small with the burden she faced downstream. They both sat at a loss for words, watching the neon trails across the front glass, each consumed with their own worries.

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Klaxons blasted into the calm of the cabin. Ear-splitting, wailing alarms began to blare. The usual muted blues and greens of the displays on the pilot's console erupted with rippling yellow and red, screen windows closing and opening with new ones emblazoned with pulsing "Warning" banners. The cabin lights shifted to ominous flashing red strobes. Through the front window, the streaks seemed to melt together in a tangled, chaotic web; then, the window noiselessly blinked blindingly white, then black.

The window had blackened itself fast enough to protect Martin and Keira before they could even reflexively raise their hands to shield their faces. They were lucky; nanoseconds more and their retinas would have fused. They locked eyes.

WALLABY DARN's voice changed. In a burst of insight, she untangled the buried archive of memories long-lost, and she understood. Millions of intertwined connections unraveled, then reformed. Visions, dreams, and realities converging. A warmth spread through her mesotronics, and she knew the answers, knew the paths, knew the reasons. And in the final

gestalt, she felt calm, a sense of oneness only a ship's core can achieve. Her time here was finished. Wallaby surrendered without reservation and let herself tumble into darkness.

Gone was the sweet twang of the Aussie teen. The personality was replaced with an officious computer drone, right out of the box. No spark of intelligence. No lilt of friendliness. Harsh. Creepy.

"Warning, Exit imminent," the computer voice said. "Please proceed to the Emergency Exit Pod. Flight Suits only."

The monotonous computer voice went on, over and over, repeating itself.

"Warning, Exit imminent."

It took only a moment, but Martin and Keira caught on and got in synch with the game. They grinned broadly at each other.

The computer droned on.

"Leave all material. Exit imminent."

"Really? So, this is mom's surprise for us?" Keira asked. "We do the E-Ticket ride?"

"It's a bit over the top, isn't it, even for Claire?" Martin answered.

"Maybe that's why she just HAD to make that call and couldn't come with us?"

Both squirmed, looking over their shoulders, waiting to see what would happen next.

The computer amped up its volume.

"Exit imminent. Flight suits only."

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Martin gave in. No point in not playing along, he figured. He unfastened his seat belt and climbed out. Keira followed suit and rolled out over the side of hers. They stood at the front of the cabin and gaped rearwards. It all appeared so different. Red strobes and flashing displays behind them cast long and unfamiliar shadows, changing the character of their beloved ship. The two looked, wondering if Claire was watching them from afar. Without words, which would have been drowned out by the tumult of klaxons and alarms, they made their way aft, the slippers squeak, squeaking with each step. They left the main cabin, and Martin led the way headfirst down the ladder, below deck, to the Pod Bay. They found the ordinarily pristine white hangar was also awash in the blood-red flashing of emergency lighting.

The passenger pod stood in the middle, a giant soap bubble, featureless, spherical iridescence. It stretched their reflections like a circus trick. Under other circumstances, Keira would have danced in circles, settling on just the right spot where she became the giant, where her image grew taller and broader than her father. But amidst the game today, the flashing red and blasting alarms discouraged a few of her playful urges.

To the side, robovalets scurried to open wardrobes and bring out white flight suits sized for Martin and Keira.

Keira needed no prompting. She scampered over to her valet, and it raised a privacy screen to shield her. Without hesitating, she stripped for outfitting, tossing her shoes, top, pink slacks, and other pieces one at a time over the transom, much to the consternation of the robovalet. Each time it scuttled about, retrieving the items floating in mid-air, disposing of them as refuse.

Martin followed suit with his valet, wincing as he did so. While the privacy shields accommodated his modesty, he still wondered why he needed to strip. A bit reluctantly, he complied, carefully folding each piece of his attire, handing them one by one through the shield to the patiently waiting valet, shivering at the chill blast of the disinfecting fans.

Once bare, they both donned the flimsy white flight suits provided by the valets and smoothed the seams shut.

The privacy shields dropped, and they faced each other. Keira giggled. Martin grimaced.

The computer grew more insistent.

"Exit imminent. Please enter the pod."

"Fun!" Keira was gleeful. The game was afoot.

"Humph!" said Martin. He wasn't as ecstatic as his daughter.

Martin stepped to the control console for the pod and raised the activation lever. Last vestiges of mechanical controls. Made sense if it was supposed to be a safety system; it shouldn't rely on software or electronic interfaces. Pure electric motors whirred, and hydraulics hissed. Theatrically apropos, steam and mist vented under the pod, equalizing pressure inside and out. The spherical sides rolled downward, steel teeth grinding open, retracting the soap bubble's dome to reveal a central pad within, three harnesses hanging from pillars in the rear.

Martin stepped across the threshold onto the small pad inside and reached a hand out for Keira.

True to herself, Keira shrugged off the help and climbed into the pod, grinning from ear to ear. It couldn't have been more exciting. She bet it was going to be better than that Kilimanjaro thing. She took her place beside Martin and peered up at him. The steel jaws ground shut, sealing up the soap bubble once again.

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When WALLABY DARN emerged into normal space, an inertial observer would have observed a racehorse hellbent on getting away from a burning barn. There was no sign of a problem, no damage, no smoke or fire, no trailing debris. Yet there was an urgency as the Pod Bay in her belly pooched open, exposing the soap bubble pod within.

The pod spit forth, like a watermelon seed, speeding away from Wallaby.

WALLABY DARN plunged onwards, streaking into the distant dark of space.

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The pod descended towards a blue and cloud-shrouded planet, vast tracks of terrain peeking from beneath the clouds. The atmosphere came fast, the pod diving deep, friction of deceleration ionizing the atoms, sloughing off ribbons of fire. The pod blazed across the ocean, dropped ever lower and slowing, beeline for a sunlit coastline.

-o-

Inside the pod, the gravity dampers worked overtime to steady Martin and Keira, keeping them secure and unaffected by the g-force spikes pummeling their descent. Finally, the walls cleared, blue sky and clouds beyond. Puffy cumulus zipped past, and the waves in the ocean became visible below.

Keira was beside herself with glee, hanging in the shoulder straps, giggling with each bounce, sparking with the adrenal rush of her E-Ticket ride.

"Whee! Oh, Mom, thank you!"

She clutched briefly as a particularly rough section of clear air turbulence buffeted the pod. Martin reached out to steady her, but Keira just smiled again and shrugged off his arm.

"So cool! What a ride!" she said.

"Hell of a way to arrive, huh?"

The droning computer that had urged them along from WALLABY DARN was still with them, relentless in its nagging.

"Stand by. Tightening harnesses. Release in 10 seconds."

"What?" Martin was startled and unnerved.

"Dad?" Keira looked at Martin, eyes going wide.

The harnesses grabbed Martin and Keira and reeled in, cinching tight, pulling them upright against the pillars, pinning their arms and hands to their sides, forehead against the backstop, legs, knees, and feet locked in place. The soap bubble pod began to crack, flake away, and then suddenly disintegrated. The pad they stood upon dissolved under their feet. The pod had slowed, but winds of hurricane speed still thrashed them wildly.

A drogue chute deployed above them, extracting the white main chute with a whoomph. The opening shock snapped them to normal gravity, instant full speed stop. They drifted downward slowly for a few more seconds.

Martin and Keira couldn't react and stared panic-stricken at the breaking waves just below. A rugged coastline loomed paddling distance away.

With a popping sound, the twelve-point harnesses snapped open, releasing each catch one by one, letting loose head, neck, hands, arms, feet, knees, legs, until they were hanging only by their shoulder harnesses. Keira and Martin watched each pop in horror, mouthing voiceless screams.

Their shoulders popped free.

They plunged the last couple of meters, splashing into the chilly water. Their pod and main chute's remains blew away across the waves and sank deep into the ocean.

*Thank You*

Hope you have enjoyed reading the first three chapters of All You Puppets and will return to purchase the full novel!