

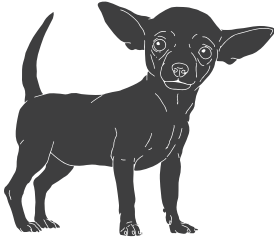
**SOHO
TEEN**



Dogs! Don't you love them? Don't you wish you could live with them still? Friends, we are very excited to tell you that you can!

The Organics may no longer be with us, but the scientists at Mechanical Tail have spent many years and millions of dollars perfecting the next best thing: robot dogs!

Did we say the next best thing? In some ways, our robot dogs are even BETTER! Our robot dogs are the same as Organics—they'll walk with you, they'll play fetch, they'll even wag their tails! (Remember that?) But all without any risk or danger or vet bills!



PROLOGUE

I've never gotten used to the rep from Mechanical Tail showing up once a year to replace my robot dog with a new one.

As always, it's a cheerful girl wearing a turquoise-blue Mechanical Tail polo. Her tag says "Rain." Maybe it's her name, or maybe it's an order to the universe. Rain! No more drought!

She stoops down to my eye level—I'm on the floor, holding Derrick—and tells me in a chipper voice: "You're going to love this year's dog *so much*."

I'm bawling, my arms around Derrick. He's little and orange and white. I've spent the previous year walking him, playing with him, talking to him. Loving him. I think the other Dog Islanders have developed thicker skins, harder hearts. We all go through this once a year, every year. I know it's coming, but it hurts so much every time.

"Is that really your name? *Rain*?" I ask. I want to make her feel bad and to put off what is coming.

She nods. "Yes," she says. "Hippie parents. Idealistic. They thought if they gave me the name, it might help end the

drought.” She smiles. She has cute dimples. I really resent this fact.

“Yeah, that really worked,” I say, sarcastically. Though, actually, the drought has been easing up a little lately, thank Dog. But *Rain* must be thirty or forty years old, so I can’t imagine her stupid name had anything to do with it.

“Where did you grow up?” I ask. Stall. Stall. Stall.

“California,” Rain tells me. “I went to engineering school. Then I got my dream job at Mechanical Tail. And now here we are.”

“This is your dream job?” I ask her. “Taking away my best friend? Killing him.”

“Oh my Dog. I put that so badly. I apologize, dear. But don’t you know how special you are? You’re so special. That’s why you are trusted with these different robot dogs instead of just being stuck with the ones the normal kids have to buy in the store,” Rain says to me. “You are blessed to have this special opportunity.”

Yes, of course, I do feel special—I know that we are very special, living here, with the world’s last real dogs, all six of them, as well as the world’s newest robot dog models. I’ve spent my whole life here. I know how lucky I am to be one of just a few dozen households with the privilege of being an integral and permanent part of this community. I’m one of just three kids. Three *remaining* kids.

Sure, lucky. Right now I feel devastated though. Every single time, this is how I feel. This is my fourth go-around. This is my fourth time being crushed. And that’s just counting my own *personal* robot dogs. My family’s had, and lost, others

as well. Like we had the one that wasn't very fun or friendly but was supposed to be able to wash dishes with its tongue. (That function didn't work very well; it was one of the last times Mechanical Tail went for a practical robot dog instead of one that served as a companion.)

Honestly, even losing that one was hard and I don't even remember its name. But not like this. Not like Derrick. They really perfected the model this time in terms of making me love the hell out of a piece of machinery.

"Please let me keep him," I cry, knowing it's futile but having to say the words all the same. "I promise. I'll take good care of him. I won't tell anyone. You won't miss him, you're going to kill him anyway!"

"I can't," says Rain. It's what the reps always say. "I'm sorry. You're going to love your new dog. I swear. And you're performing an important public service, Nano Miller. The world is a better place because of your sacrifice. A kinder place. You will never forget David."

"Derrick!" I shout.

"Forgive me," she says. "I practiced saying the right name all the way here. I wanted to make this easy for you, Nano. I'm so sorry. You'll never forget *Derrick*. And we will never forget what you did, which helps us make sure no flesh-and-blood animal will ever suffer again. Thank you, Nano."

I am crying so hard my head hurts. My tears and snot are getting Derrick's fur wet. The fur doesn't react well to dampness. It clumps in a distinctly unnatural sort of way.

"Come here, boy," the rep says to Derrick.

He looks up at her with those trusting eyes (*programmed to*

look trusting; I know this, I know this, I know this is true). He licks my cheek ever so delicately and walks to her.

She pats him on the head and says, “Good robot dog.”

Derrick wags his tail. It’s a little jerky, the wag. That part hasn’t been perfected yet. Still, I love it.

“Do you want to say goodbye?” the rep, Rain—*Rain*, what a stupid name, what a stupid person—asks me and my mom.

Dad has decamped to the designated Parents’ Room, where he can shut the door and no one is even allowed to knock, except Mom, and then only if it’s an emergency. He and his robot bartender will be having some intense one-on-one time.

I think Dad imagines this space as his own private tiki bar. Mom and Dad used to go to a tiki bar in Rhode Island before they moved to Dog Island. It was called East Greenwich Eden. They sometimes still talk about it, wondering if their favorite bartender, Raymie, is there behind the bar slinging punch bowls after all these years.

Actually, the Parents’ Room has got a terrible couch that Mom won’t let Dad keep in any *public* part of the house. The couch was left behind by another family that left back fifteen years ago or so. It has cup holders. Mom finds the cup holders “really visually offensive.” But the Parents’ Room is just for comfort and privacy. And a water-free rum punch, made by a bow-tie-wearing robot, from powder and chemical slurry.

Maybe Dad’s in the Parents’ Room now having a drink because he doesn’t much care that my robot dog is dying. Maybe after this many times he doesn’t care anymore. Or

maybe he's decamped to the Parents' Room because it's too hard for him to be here for this terrible ritual, again.

Mom stands over me. She has a look on her face that I can't quite read. Somewhere between pain and pride, with a dash of distractedness.

I grab Derrick in my arms again and kiss the top of his head. I tell my robot dog I love him. I thank him for being my robot dog, this past year. For being such a good boy, even if he's got no choice in the matter; it's all programmed in. His programmers did a good job.

"Thank you," I whisper in his little pointy ear. "Thank you. I love you. Thank you."

The rep reaches under Derrick's belly as I am holding him. She's about to press the button that will make Derrick shut down.

I've been through this four times now. I know how it goes. His eyes will go dark. There will be quiet. You don't even realize the robot dogs are making any kind of constant white noise, until the sound is gone.

And now it's gone.

Mom rubs her eyes.

"Goodbye, friend," I say one more time to what is now just a thing. Derrick is a shell now. Wet "fur" and no life.

The Mechanical Tail lady whistles. She smiles so big as the new dog walks into the room, eyes bright, tail up. The tail seems to have been given an upgrade. This new one's face seems more engaged, more Organic. He's got brown fur, brown eyes, and a big blocky head that makes him a little scary looking. One ear is up, the other down, which is cute. His fur is obviously

softer. Looks more like hair than nylon or whatever it is they used on my Derrick.

“This model is designed to bond strongly with one person. For owners who don’t like their robot dogs being too indiscriminately friendly,” says Rain. *Rain. My Dog*, what a stupid name. “Plus, it has certain vocal abilities and a couple of new safety features. I hope you will enjoy it.”

The robot dog wags its tail slowly back and forth as it looks around the room, taking it all in: me, my mom, the sky blue walls, the old shabby wicker furniture. Mom prefers shabbiness with a touch of cool over comfort with cup holders.

The robot dog walks over to me and sits down. Raises one paw.

“It wants to shake your hand,” says the rep. “You’re the one it will bond with.”

I don’t take the paw. I resolve to stay hard this time. Not to let myself care for the machine. At least not so much that I can’t say goodbye without it hurting so much.

The dog looks at me with a quizzical expression. It then lies down and rolls over to show its belly, its tongue lolling out the side of its mouth. I don’t rub the belly.

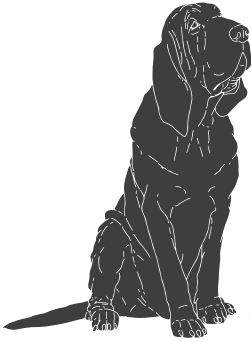
“Let me show you,” Rain says, bending down and stroking the new robot dog’s stomach. It shakes its hind leg while she gives a scratch. Derrick didn’t have that feature. Rain smiles at me as if I’m supposed to be *amazed*. I am kind of amazed; I start to cry again. I miss Derrick and I’m already betraying him.

“I thought it was only going to bond with me,” I say.

“This isn’t bonding. It’s just a belly rub. It’s more for me

than for him—it,” Rain says. “What are you going to name this guy?”

There is only one name that seems possible: Billy, for my brother. And a year from now, I will lose this Billy as well. Maybe if I steel myself right, this one will be easier.



CHAPTER 1

Wolf, Jack, and I are sitting on the sand at the beach. It's just past sunset. You can still see a little bit of the sunset's pink-and-orangeyness over the horizon, while the rest of the sky is now a smoky gray.

The sand feels cool on my hands and toes but the air is finally warm; the Florida version of winter is winding down. This year the "winter" lasted four whole weeks. Longer than last year. I don't like the cold. But on the other hand, every day we're below 85 degrees feels like a little more reassurance that the drought won't come back.

We all grew up here at the sanctuary. The only three kids who are still here. We've been sitting in this same place, on this same beach, basically, for all our lives. What's new—newish, at least—is that Wolf's hand is just grazing mine. It makes me feel like my whole body is submerged in a warm bath and that everything around me is a little muffled or something. It's kind of embarrassing how his hand touching mine conjures the memory of what a warm bath feels like, given how many years it's been since I have had one. I get the

occasional “real” shower, using actual water, but mostly I just wipe myself down with those smelly Sani-Fresh pads once or twice a day. Wolf smells the same, though. We all do.

Wolf. Wolf with floppy, curly brown hair. Wolf, who is kind of short, but so am I, so who cares. His small nose. His big eyes. Hazel. They’re hazel, “with rings of gold around the hazel,” Wolf likes to say, batting his long eyelashes. A group of long-time residents who call themselves the “Bad Bitches of Dog Island” always say those eyelashes are wasted on Wolf.

I like them. “Don’t I have beautiful eyes?” he asks me. He stares into my eyes. My mud-brown eyes. No gold rings.

This thing with Wolf is recent and thrilling and unexpected. It’s also making Jack act really weird. He keeps grunting and refusing to look at us and making passive-aggressive comments at his robot Chihuahua, Mr. Chi-Chi Pants.

“Mr. Chi-Chi Pants,” says Jack, looking into his robot dog’s face. “Do you think anyone here is being extremely rude?”

Jack, whose black hair is always a little bit stiff and crinkly because of this gel that his mother rubs into his head every day. Jack wears the same Dog Island clothes that we do—stiff shorts, old T-shirts, all in materials that don’t need washing with water, that can be blow-cleaned—looks different than me and Wolf. He somehow looks like he’s going to go off to the office soon. He just gives off an impression of professionalism and no-nonsense-ness.

We, of course, have no offices here on Dog Island. We have plenty of nonsense. I’d like to have more nonsense with Wolf right now, in fact. He and I start to gaze into each other’s faces once more.

Mr. Chi-Chi Pants doesn't say anything. He's an old model, pre-speech. (He's also not really a he. The robot dogs aren't gendered per se, but you invariably end up using pronouns that correspond to the names you give them.)

Wolf can speak but is choosing not to, I guess. Jack takes the last hit of weed, carefully stubs out the joint and slips it into his pocket. He never litters.

I just run my fingers through the sand, feel how soft it is, how cool compared to the warmth of Wolf's skin.

With my free hand I toss a ball to Billy. He catches it, brings it back, panting heavily and thumping his tail. He yips until I throw the ball again.

"Okay," I tell him. "Okay, Billy. Hold your horses."

"He doesn't have any horses," says Wolf. "Who even has horses anymore?"

"Want to go robot horse riding next weekend?" I ask.

There's a small "stable" of old-fashioned robot horse models that the three of us muck around with sometimes. These are some very old Mechanical Tail prototypes. They were supposed to replace "real" horses—the Organics—out in the real world so as to minimize or eliminate the cruelty we humans inflict on these magnificent creatures. No more hideous carriage rides. No more punishingly cruel horse racing. And so on.

Except the Mechanical Tail versions never caught on. They didn't run fast enough to replace Organics at the track. No one liked a robot horse-pulled carriage ride through Central Park in New York City. There was nothing "romantic" about that, apparently.

Plus, the robot horses kept breaking. Ours are broken and rusted, too, but since Wolf has been apprenticing with the Dog Island handymen and handymen, he's learned how to tinker with them enough to get them walking a few steps every now and then. And that's pretty fun. Plus it helps to fill the day.

"Sure," Wolf says. "Jack, you coming robot horse riding?"

Jack grunts. Billy whines softly. Then something catches his attention. He lifts his front paw to point. I didn't know he had that function. I pull out my phone, which is on a chain around my neck, tucked under my shirt, and unfurl the flexible, rolled up screen to press the "positive interaction" button, so the Mechanical Tail robot dog developers will be able to tell that I enjoyed what Billy just did, in their quest to build the perfect robot pet. Then I follow Billy's paw with my eyes.

A cat, just strutting along by the water. I squint; I can't tell if it's a real cat or one of the robot cats from this distance, and I don't want to get up.

"Go get it, Billy," I say.

Billy dashes over the sand toward the cat and picks it up by the scruff of its neck. He trots back over to the bench and puts the cat down in front of me, wagging his tail. Its tail. His tail. He's Billy now, already.

"Good boy," I say, pressing the "positive interaction" button again. I feel a twinge of guilt. I remember pressing the button for positive interactions with Derrick all the time at first, but then I got used to him and it dropped off. I only gave him one negative interaction that I remember.

It was when he accidentally got wet, after I'd had him a few months—and then his tail wagged against my leg and gave me a small shock. That wasn't his fault, though. I shouldn't have pressed the button.

Billy wags his tail even harder. It's hard not to love Billy. (Which is, of course, the whole point.) It's hard to remember that he will be taken from me, a year from now, to stay cold inside. That *it* will be taken away.

I lean forward to look at the cat more closely. Wolf moves his hand to the top of my back, just below my hair. My cold insides get warmer. My face feels hot; I'm sure I'm turning red. Luckily, it's almost dark out and the beach lights haven't come on yet.

The robot cats have gotten so realistic it's getting hard to tell them apart from Dog Island's few remaining Organic cats anymore. It's really just in the eyes now, where you can see a bit of difference. A robot cat's eyes are just a wee bit brighter. Of course if you look closely at its tummy, you can see the belly button spot where it gets recharged every month or so.

Solar-powered robot cats would make more sense in Florida, of course. But they wouldn't work so well in Michigan, or Russia, or Rhode Island. And the robot cats are being developed as a sort of insurance, in case what happened to the dogs happens to other animals as well. It won't take so long to replace the Organics, if Dog forbid, it's necessary to do so. In that case they will have to be dispersed around the world, same as the robot dogs.

"Robot, right?" I say.

"Yeah," says Jack. He pushes back his brown hair with one

hand and grimaces. “Nothing real here. No need to call in the authorities.”

I squint at Jack. He sounds bitter. He sounds bitter a lot lately.

“Hey,” says Wolf. “What gives?”

“Nothing,” Jack says. He stands up and slides his feet into his paw protectors—that’s what we call flip-flops—without even brushing the sand off first. Still, not looking at us, he says, “I’m going home.”

“Be safe,” Wolf calls out, as Jack shuffles across the beach, holding Mr. Chi-Chi Pants with one hand and raising the other. He makes a very aggressively hostile gesture with one of his fingers. Wolf laughs.

“That guy,” he says. Then he picks up my hand again. “This girl,” he mumbles. My heart starts pounding. If there were a button for “positive interaction” with Wolf I’d have broken it by now.

Wolf leans in to kiss me. His lips are soft. We start to lean back, start to lie down. My fingers in his soft hair. His hand on my hip, my waist, even my boobs, which have gotten mortifyingly prominent recently. The world disappears. Nothing exists, except for this, except for us.

Except for: “Nano. Nano Miller. Please come home for dinner, Nano Miller.”

This order comes in Mom’s voice through the speakers in Billy’s mouth. He’s dropped the ball and his mouth just hangs open the whole time that he/Mom are speaking. I really, really hate this new “human speech” feature. The old model just sounded like a *dog* when it “spoke.” This is really creepy. Plus embarrassing!

“Okay!” I shout at Billy while pressing the “negative interaction” button on my phone several times. At least this model can’t hear what you’re saying or broadcast it. This is more like a radio, not a phone. At least for now. I’m sure we’ll be getting that function soon enough. Well, unless enough people like me complain. Why can’t they just keep the dogs dog-like?

“You can invite Wolf and Jack if you’d like,” says Mom, through Billy’s mouth.

I look at Wolf. “You want to come over?” I ask.

“I wish I could,” he says. “Judy and Peter need me at home.” Wolf calls his parents by their first names. That isn’t more or less common than any other way of addressing the people who created you, on Dog Island, since Jack, Wolf, and I are currently the only kids here. Jack only has a mom, and he calls her Mom.

Billy gives me a stare that seems very meaningful. I wonder if Mom is somehow directing him to make that look. He might just want me to throw the ball again. Alternatively, he might just be having an electrical glitch in his “brain.”

“I’m leaving!” I say, getting up. I brush off my feet before putting my sandals back on but feel too embarrassed to brush off my butt and back and hair.

Billy wags his robot tail. It’s a bit jerky. I’ll add a note about the jerky tail to my notes for Mechanical Tail. Maybe I will add a note about jerky Mom, too.

“I’ll walk you home,” Wolf says.

He takes my hand. Billy picks up the ball and walks alongside us. Wolf grabs the ball from Billy’s mouth, tosses it. Billy

does nothing. I run up the street and get the ball, then throw it half a block. Billy runs after the ball, gets it, brings it back, sticks his mouth to my free hand until I take the ball and lob it on down the street again.

I guess I like that Billy only likes me. I don't get why robot dogs like chasing balls. It feels manipulative. They aren't Organic Labrador retrievers.

It's about a mile walk, over those pretty brick streets and not-as-pretty cracked sidewalks. We stroll, not talking. Just calling out "Heya!" and "Shalom!" and "Dog be with you!" to the occasional other Dog Island residents we see out along the way. We have this wonderful multitude of ways of saying hello. *Heya* to those we know well. *Shalom* to the newcomers or people we are a little formal with. *Dog be with you* to anyone who's achieved some amount of, I don't really know how to say it, *holiness* here. You just know who you have to say it to.

I, like, can't think of anything to say to Wolf right now. It's making me a little anxious, honestly. Wolf and I didn't have any trouble finding topics of conversation before. Being quiet wasn't any trouble then, either.

"So, are your parents all kinds of worked up about tomorrow?" I finally ask. Marky Barky is coming for a visit, which sets the grown-ups into a tizzy.

Marky Barky is our nickname for movie star Mark Mooney, Dog Island's biggest celebrity supporter. Even though he's super old, in his fifties now, he is a very, very handsome man, with salt-and-pepper hair and an irresistible smile. He is also the one who donated the land for this sanctuary.

Usually, Mr. Barky—another of his nicknames, along with

MB, and Hot Bod—comes to Dog Island once or twice a year, when he is free from his other movie star obligations. It's a really big deal. Generally that's when the newest robot dog model is unveiled.

Hot Bod gets photographed out and about with his new robot dog, the pictures are posted *everywhere*, and sales go through the roof. Or, as our founder Dorothy Blodgett likes to joke, "Through the woof." Mechanical Tail is part-owned by Marky Barky, so it's really a winning situation for everyone.

Everything gets a fresh coat of paint before he gets here. Dog Island is always beautiful, but when we're spruced up I feel especially proud.

"I guess so?" Wolf says.

"Me, too," I say. "Our house got painted. Bright pink." I shrug, as if I am trying to sort out some complicated feelings about having a newly pink house. My actual feelings about the house being very pink are: yay!

"Ours, too," says Wolf. "Green, though. I know yours is pink because I helped paint it."

"Oh yeah," I say.

This is torture. Why can't we just go back to the beach and make out some more? Every time we stop talking I start thinking about how he is so adorable, and I have dirt-brown eyes. Dirt on my skin, too. And a funny smell, I think. I try to discreetly sniff my armpit, and no, it is not good. *Oy*.

Billy yips and lifts his paw again to point. Another cat. A black one. There are still some old-timers out there—though not *here* per se—who get superstitious about black cats being

unlucky. We know that really they are just hated because of myth and superstition. Which unfortunately turns into its own reality, driving people to do terrible things to these cats. Oh, the stories I've been told about these poor creatures being caught and tortured by horrible people; they've given me nightmares. It just all means black cats *especially* need our protection.

"Go get it, Billy," I say.

Billy dashes off and comes back with the cat. He drops it gently at my feet. I pick up the cat. It's black with a white chest and green eyes. Not electric looking. Organic eyes. Organic cat.

"You could get hurt out here," I say to the cat. I put it back down and pet its soft fur. The cat purrs and rubs against my ankles.

I unlock my phone so I can see the screen. I open the "Cat Report" app and hit a button, to let the Animal Safety Division know about this poor vulnerable being. They will come soon, to look for and capture the cat. They will make sure the cat never suffers.

"It smells nice out," Wolf says. "I love this time of year."

"Me, too," I say. I take a big whiff. Sweetness. Spring is in the air. It's a soapy smell. The "scent of renewal in nature," is how lofty old Dad puts it. ("It's the plants having sex and my allergies are terrible," is Mom's more usual take.)

And suddenly I remember that it smelled just like this last year, when Billy disappeared.

I stop tossing the ball to robot dog Billy. It can't really enjoy playing, anyway. It's a robot.

WOLF WALKS ME ALL the way home. When I'm walking with him these days, I can't help but *notice* all sorts of things that used to just be background.

To think, before Billy was gone, we were just old friends. Same as me and Jack. Same as him and Jack. The three of us were always together, from the time we were born. Our parents are all best friends, even. (Or were. They don't seem to hang out much anymore.)

But Jack stepped back after Billy went missing, just when Wolf came forward. Became essential. And now here we are. *Here we are*. I dance a couple of steps on the sidewalk and smile at Wolf. He seems so certain, of himself, of everything.

Our founder Dorothy Blodgett drives by in her custom GoPod. She honks and waves as she drives by. She must be going home to her Spanish-style house that overlooks the water.

Her GoPod is always so filthy—full of food wrappers and dirty paw protectors, and there's always something damp on the seat. She's funny for the leader of the world's most powerful animal movement. Messy and lovable. She's been married like six or seven times but says she's done with all *that* now. Now it's just about protecting animals.

We yell "Dog be with you" as loud as we can, and then laugh, and then kiss, and then walk.

"Dog be with *you*," Wolf says to me.

"No, with *you*, I must insist," I say back.

The Spanish moss dripping down over the oaks. The yards that are quickly becoming wild and unruly again after having been reduced to mostly dust and spiky cacti for so

long. Mowing isn't allowed here at the sanctuary; mowing kills habitats for the birds and rodents and lizards. Those are still Organics, not robots, so they need to be protected to the utmost so they will not suffer.

There's that one palm tree that's grown so much taller than the others, a strong survivor of a tree. Then in my head I can hear Mom lecturing me: Palm trees aren't actually trees. They are grasses. If you cut them open, they don't have rings, like a tree. You couldn't tell how old they are by killing them. Mom says this every chance she gets, like it's extremely profound. Sometimes it seems profound. Sometimes it seems like the one fact she remembers from junior high school and won't quit mentioning.

So I say to Wolf: "Did you know that palm trees are grasses, not actually trees?"

"No, Nano," says Wolf. "You've never told me that before."

"It's true. If you cut them down—"

Wolf starts talking: "—they don't have any rings and you won't know how old they are. Killing them serves no purpose."

"So, ah, you've heard that one before."

"Only about forty million times," he says. "You can cut me down and see how many rings I have. That'll tell you exactly how many times you've told me this."

"Well maybe I will!" I shout.

"Please don't. Don't cut me down, little Nano," Wolf says.

"Okay, not yet," I say.

"Can we make out before we get you home?" Wolf asks.

"I think that would be okay," I say. I bite my lip. I smile.

My mouth is a little dry, but I don't care. The water we drink here is about 90 percent recycled pee that's been treated with chemicals. I had pure water once; my brother gave it to me—he said he “found” a bottle but I'm sure he probably stole it from somewhere. Ever since then I've always felt kind of dry mouthed and thirsty, no matter what. When it drizzles, those rare instances, I stand outside with my mouth open just to get another taste of the real thing.

Wolf and I step off the sidewalk and underneath one of the big old mostly dead trees about half a block from my house. My back is against the trunk. Once upon a time, you might get hurt when dead branches fell unexpectedly atop your head. But most of the branches with the potential to do serious harm fell a long time ago.

Wolf stands in front of me. He touches my face.

“Little Nano,” he says, then leans in and kisses me. And kisses me. And kisses me.

Maybe an hour goes by. Maybe it's just thirty seconds.

“Nano, would you *please* get your behind home now, please,” my mom orders, via Billy. Billy's tail is still wagging. It's humiliating. I am definitely letting Mechanical Tail know that I hate Billy's “human chat” function.

“You have nothing to wag about,” I tell him.

“I do,” says Wolf. He swishes his behind back and forth a couple of times. Then he asks me to turn around. I do, and he brushes sand out of my hair, off my shoulders.

“Now you're presentable,” he says.

I give him one last peck on his cheek and run the last little bit to old 2644 28th Avenue, with its newly pink facade.

My parents really need to lose the pair of old pink plastic flamingos in the front “garden.” It’s nothing more than a rock-and-cactus collection, anyway.

Approaching, I catch a glimpse of a human-sized blur out of the corner of my eye. I’m probably just imagining things, I tell myself, trying to tamp down the sense of foreboding and doom that I’ve walked around with a lot, since Billy’s disappearance.

Just imagining scary, terrible, frightening probably hopefully, hopefully, hopefully (I pray to Dog) not-true things. My robot dog would probably point if something were really there.