

ARBY

by

Joe Fordham

BLACK SCREEN

Digital text prints out three words:

SERVE. PROTECT. OBEY.

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
Welcome to the future. Welcome to
American Automata.

The AMERICAN AUTOMATA LOGO appears with dynamic MUSIC.

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
Welcome to the AA-RB-40. At home,
in the office, on the factory
floor. Government certified
to serve, protect, obey.

The logo segues to an ANIMATED TV COMMERCIAL: Squat, multipurpose robots with telescopic limbs serve cocktails, bag groceries, build other robots.

Back to the LOGO, polished by one cute mechanical creation.

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
Trust America's number one. Trust
American Automata.

GLITCH to BLACK and the MUSIC fades to a rhythmic, repeating BUZZ... BUZZ... BUZZ...

EXT. SERVICE STATION -- NIGHT

A malfunctioning neon sign 'Jack's Last Gasp' flickers. The sign is on a tower above a desert service station, a workshop and generator windmill to one side, a single story home in back, glowing lights inside.

ARBY a small robot -- well-worn AA-RB-40, with a barrel body, stumpy legs and spindly arms -- sweeps the forecourt. Arby props up his broom, waddles to the workshop, plops onto a recharging station. The robot's lights flicker. It CLICKS and WHIRS. End of a hard day.

INT. LINCOLN - DAY

Viewed through a dirty, black-tinted vintage automobile windshield, detergent squirts INTO FRAME and Arby leans in to clean the glass. Punk rock plays within, as a bluish smokey exhale puffs into view.

EXT. SERVICE STATION - DAY

The retrofitted Lincoln, all pipes and bolted-on superchargers, is parked in front of the service station.

From inside his workshop, JACK FRENCH -- grimy, burly, mid-thirties -- views the Lincoln with distaste.

To drown out the Acid Rock, he turns on his radio, playing John Coltrane.

KITTY FRENCH -- intelligent, pretty, age five -- backs out of the house bearing a plate of sandwiches and a mug of coffee 'World's Greatest Daddy.' She stops inside the workshop to view Jack critically before he looks up.

JACK
Hey, lunch time already?

Jack corrects the time on an old Michelin clock hanging nearby, wipes his hands, takes a sandwich, wolfs a bite.

KITTY
Have you fixed my scooter?

From Jack's expression, obviously not. He speaks with his mouth full.

JACK
Finish your homework?

Kitty glumly hands him a folded printout, which he views with approval, chewing and nodding.

KITTY
(small voice)
Nobody can make it to my party.
It's my birthday in two days.

Jack chokes on his sandwich.

Kitty hands him his coffee, which he sips to clear his throat.

JACK
Thank you. Your birthday. Right.
(recovering)
Well, there's you and me and...
and Arby... And Tommy and Molly...
Tutor Tim.

KITTY
Tommy's interactive.

JACK
Molly then.

KITTY
Molly's in hospital with chemo,
that's why she has a bald head. I
don't have real friends, not any
more.

JACK
How 'bout me and Arby?

Kitty regards Jack, sullen.

KITTY
I have to feed my lizard.

Kitty walks away. Jack views her with a heavy heart.

JACK
(calling out)
Chinese tonight, okay?

She nods as she continues to the house, past where the robot is
finishing with the Lincoln.

KITTY
Hey, Arby.

Arby gives her a wave. In daylight, it is now obvious the robot
has been remodeled, most notably with a front radiator welded
into a permanent, U-shaped grin. Faded kiddie stickers --
stars, unicorns and love hearts -- adorn his dented chassis.

INT. SERVICE STATION - DAY

KITTY'S BEDROOM

A nest of books and electronic games. Kitty sits before a
plastic terrarium, takes a jar of desiccated grubs and drops a
few inside to a BRIGHTLY COLORED LIZARD.

A framed photo of Jack and Kitty hiking with a young, smiling
woman -- MOM (27) -- oversees the operation.

EXT. DESERT - NIGHT

Headlamps flash by a roadside billboard: a happy Rockwell
family served dinner by their impressive home-help robot:

TO SERVE, PROTECT & OBEY

TRUST AMERICAN AUTOMATA™

Distant THUNDER rumbles.

EXT. SERVICE STATION - NIGHT

The vehicle with the headlamps delivers Chinese food to Arby on the porch. An ELECTRICAL STORM dances in the sky.

INT. SERVICE STATION - NIGHT

Arby serves food to Jack and Kitty in the cluttered living room. THUNDER. Lights dim, then return. Jack and Kitty stare -- then all power GOES OUT.

EXT. SERVICE STATION - NIGHT

Jack comes out into a blustering WIND, crosses to the generator shed, looks up.

The windmill blades are spinning crazily, SQUEAKING.

At the front door, Arby and Kitty peer out from behind bug screen. SOUNDS of a motor turning over but not catching come from the shed. Arby makes Kitty wait, goes to help.

INT. GENERATOR SHED - NIGHT

Jack fumbles with a flashlight and the generator rip cord. The machine won't start.

Arby appears in the doorway and stands inert, a menacing figure. After a moment, Jack catches sight of the robot out of the corner of his eye and yelps in fright. The robot illuminates an on-board lamp. Jack beckons him closer.

JACK
(annoyed)
Here.

EXT. SERVICE STATION - NIGHT

Kitty squints against the wind, can't see what's going on.

The glow from Arby's work light moves around inside the shed. The motor chugs, does not catch; chugs, does not catch. Jack emerges, flustered, heads for his workshop but stops as WIND and SQUEAKING increase. He looks up.

Clouds above the windmill are back-lit by LIGHTNING.

JACK
Oh, no...
(yells)
Arby! Wait!

Jack runs back for the shed.

INT. GENERATOR SHED - NIGHT

Arby tugs the rip cord, one metal hand on the generator casing. It catches, ROARS TO LIFE.

EXT. SERVICE STATION - NIGHT

LIGHTNING strikes the windmill.

Jack shields his eyes as WHITE SPARKS EXPLODE above, and from inside the generator shed. Arby SHRIEKS within.

Kitty SCREAMS in fright.

KITTY

Arby!

INT. SERVICE STATION - NIGHT

Power now resumed, Jack staggers in with Arby in his arms. The robot is charred and lifeless. Kitty is in close pursuit, choking back tears. Jack dumps the robot on the dining table, swipes clear a space. Kitty joins in with passion.

JACK

Kitty, cool it, please. Come on,
honey --
(softly)
-- I need you to help me here. Can
you do that?

KITTY

(through tears)
Is he going to die?

JACK

He is a machine. If he's broken, I
can fix him. Now go fetch my tool
belt. Okay?

Kitty gives a feeble nod.

JACK

Good girl. In the workshop.

Kitty wipes her eyes, hurries through connecting doors which lead into the

WORKSHOP

Kitty finds Jack's tool belt.

KITTY
(muttering)
If he's broken, he can fix him.

BACK IN THE LIVING ROOM

Jack uses a table knife to pry open a dented panel in Arby's chassis, reveals a scorched mess of microcircuitry.

JACK
This is not good, Arby.

Kitty arrives with the tool belt. Jack finds a pair of spectacles inside. He puts them on and gets to work.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. SERVICE STATION - NIGHT

Kitty sleeps on the sofa, hugging a flickering MINI-TV. Jack reaches over his sleeping child, turns off the TV and tenderly drapes a blanket over her. He sees a door nearby posted in Kitty's handwriting 'Danger Daddy Keep Out.'

DEN

Jack enters and views a rat's nest of papers and computer gear. Copies of a novel 'Sudden Death by Jack French' are stacked in a box on an upright piano. Jack picks up a copy.

From the back cover of the book, Jack's own face smiles back at him, clean shaven, younger.

Jack sits at his workstation. He pulls a plastic cover off an archaic monitor, activates the digidrive, which emits a high-tech version of the APPLE CHIME. Jack cleans his spectacles and stares at his computer as it boots up.

His face just as blank as the screen.

INT. SERVICE STATION - DAWN

Arby lies amongst wiring and tools on the kitchen table. His camera eye feebly glows yellow.

ROBOT P.O.V.

The kitchen ceiling GLITCHES TO a montage of digital images, a cascade of ARBY'S MEMORIES:

(i) Jack - Kitty - windmill - GLITCH. Robots - rock fall - GLITCH. Supervisor - GLITCH. Jack - GLITCH.

(ii) BLACK SCREEN splits to reveal a POV inside a box opened by a YOUNGER KITTY, with Jack and Mom in party hats. Young Kitty stares INTO CAMERA, uncertain, then smiles - GLITCH.

(iii) Clouds. Arby floats into view. Kitty drifts toward him, LIGHTNING BOLTS whip her away - GLITCH.

Arby jolts upright, WHIRS.

INT. SERVICE STATION - DAY

JACK'S MONITOR SCREEN

The cursor pulses mid-paragraph in AUTOSCRIPT DELUXE™:

*Sidney's finger was on the
trigger. 'You lousy, no good
snake. I oughtta finish this
right now, before I.....*

Jack is slumped asleep. A CLATTERING (O.S.) wakes him. He blinks at daylight, rubs his face, goes to investigate.

KITCHEN

Jack halts in the doorway.

Kitty is seated at a table set for three. Arby shimmies in an apron, waving two frying pans, both containing omelets. Seeing Jack, he stops. Jack takes the pans, tips the omelets onto plates. The egg is speckled with dark flecks.

JACK
What is this?

Jack plucks a fleck from the egg, sniffs it, tastes it.

KITTY
Arby omelet.

JACK
Chocolate chip?

Arby offers ketchup.

KITTY
He only wants to help.

Jack dumps the omelets in the garbage, then takes out two bowls with a box of cereal. Arby sidles up, Jack elbows him away.

JACK
Coffee, black. One orange juice.

Arby retreats to the sink as Jack resets the table for two.
Kitty takes out her mini-tv, turns it on. Jack turns it off.

KITTY
Aw--

JACK
Did you reboot him?

KITTY
No. Arby did it himself.

JACK
Don't be silly, Kitty. I'm calling
Uncle Carl.

KITTY
You said you could fix him.

Jack finishes preparing the cereal, sits and holds out a hand.
Kitty sits on Jack's knee.

JACK
I can. But I'm not finished with
him yet. I need a little help. No
questions asked. *Comprende?*

Arby brings coffee for Jack, orange juice for Kitty, WHIRS.

Jack glares at the robot.

JACK
Arby -- Dishes -- Please.

Arby attends to last night's dirty dishes.

KITTY
You never finish anything.

Kitty slides down from Jack's lap and exits, leaving him with
Arby, at a loss or words.

EXT. SERVICE STATION - ROOF - DAY

The roof antenna WHIRS and rotates.

INT. SERVICE STATION - DAY

Kitty brushes her teeth. She rinses, wipes her face, puts her brush away, and then exits to her

BEDROOM

Kitty stops by her terrarium. The cage door is open. No lizard.

INT. SERVICE STATION - DAY

Jack, cleanly dressed and shaved, dials the Vidphon in his study. Arby is seated opposite, out of camera range, and turns to the door.

Kitty looks in.

KITTY

Have you seen my lizard?

Jack is about to answer her but holds up a finger, signaling for her to wait, as a musical TONE interrupts.

Kitty sighs and enters, impatient and still annoyed at Jack. The robot holds her hand.

A logo appears ON-SCREEN:

*Welcome to
American Automata, Mid-West.
Please wait for
your call to be answered.*

The logo is replaced by TEXT and a sultry VOICE:

AUTOMATA VOICE

Good morning, Mr. French. How may
I help you?

JACK

Carl Hobbs. Service Resale.

More text and the VOICE:

AUTOMATA VOICE

Please hold.

Then, just TEXT:

Speak after tone.

Jack frowns, not expecting this. He quickly checks his reflection in the back of a mini-CD, waits for the tone.

INT. VIDPHON LINK

Surging through a fiber optic steam, snippets of DIALOGUE and glimpses of JACK'S VIDPHON IMAGE flash by, channeling towards

INT. AUTOMATA SHOP FLOOR - DAY

At a dongle outlet in a desk, and LED lights up.

An unseen WOMAN'S HANDS adjusts her headset, keys switches at a computer.

ON SCREEN (INTERCUTS)

JACK'S IMAGE appears, frozen, then PLAYS:

JACK
Hey, Carlo! Been a while. Look, do
you think you could stop by? We,
ah, had a little wing-ding here
with Arby last night. Where are
you? Buy you a beer.

The image cuts to black, with text:

Message ends.

The woman's fingers pause.

The desk is one of many in the sprawling mission control of American Automata, Mid-West, SERVE PROTECT OBEY emblazoned across one wall.

The woman's index finger taps, she types.

*List account:
French, Jack
ref. #1135760*

Text clears, shunts through a huge list of data: charges and debits in columns, to arrive at a single phrase:

Account overdrawn.

The woman's fingers pause, type again:

What would you recommend?

The screen clears, types:

Retrieval.

INT. SERVICE STATION - DAY

LIVING ROOM

A chirpy Mister Rogers style INTERACTIVE TUTOR SHOW begins on the wall-tv in front of Kitty, who gloomily sets out school books at a little desk. VACUUM NOISE continues (O.S.)

DEN

Arby runs a vacuum cleaner around. He knocks over an easel, picks it up to reveal a pinboard covered with text printouts and story notes.

EXT. SERVICE STATION - DAY

Jack has Kitty's scooter up-ended on his workshop bench. His screwdriver slips, Jack cuts his finger, sucks blood.

JACK
Ow, shhhh-- Damn.

Jack heads in to the house. Arby exits with bags of trash. The robot crosses the forecourt, stops, looks down.

Kitty's lizard stares up at him.

INT. SERVICE STATION - DAY

KITCHEN

Jack cleans the cut on his hand at the sink, cannot find a towel. He looks in a drawer, finds unwashed plates inside. He opens a cupboard, dirty laundry tumbles out.

JACK
What the--?

LIVING ROOM

Kitty looks up from her school books.

TV TUTOR
Kitty, can you tell me what the
Tin Man wanted? Kitty? Hello?

EXT. SERVICE STATION - DAY

Arby lays on his belly, playing with the lizard, the trash forgotten nearby.

JACK (O.S.)
(annoyed)
Ar-by!

The lizard cocks its head. Arby does so too, then climbs to his feet to stare off up at the road.

A tow-truck is approaching, hauling a disabled luxury car.

INT. SERVICE STATION - DAY

Jack marches out past Kitty.

KITTY
Tin Man wanted a brain.

TV TUTOR
No, the Tin Man wanted a heart!

EXT. SERVICE STATION - DAY

Jack comes out, ready to yell, then sees Arby greeting SKYLER, the driver of the truck, a biker boy in clothing jangling with automotive parts.

SKYLER
Howdy! Busted my transmission on
the turnpike! Don't say the Sky
Man don't look out for you!

INT. SERVICE STATION - DAY

Kitty scowls at the sight of Skyler through the window, while her Tutor READS.

EXT. SERVICE STATION - DAY

Arby and Skyler work on opposite sides of the car, releasing tie-downs. Skyler chatters non-stop.

SKYLER
I tell you, Mister F, this baby
had what I call a chassis. With
supercharged twin cams. Dig?

JACK
(emphatic)
No.

SKYLER

C'mon. You gotta be open to the motion, boss. How long's it been since you greased your bearings?

JACK

Skyler, can we drop this?

SKYLER

We cool.

Skyler checks out his appearance in a wing mirror.

Arby unfastens the last tie-down, notices his own reflection in the immaculate shiny vehicle.

Jack releases the winch, annoyed.

Arby goes up and down on his toes, as if in front of a fun-house mirror.

SKYLER

Hey, metalhead, you clear?

Arby BEEPS, sees a speck of dust, flicks it with his finger, leaves a two inch scratch. Skyler approaches. Arby pulls out his cleaning rag, squirts fluid and polishes the scratch. Skyler gives him a pat.

SKYLER

Beauty.

Arby steps back, halts.

The lizard is in the middle of the forecourt.

INT. SERVICE STATION - DAY

Kitty steps up to the window, seeing Arby bent over outside.

KITTY

My lizard...

EXT. SERVICE STATION - DAY

The lizard runs under the car. Arby gives chase, vaults over the vehicle's hood.

JACK

Arby! No!

Arby lands, metal feet first, scraping paint.

The lizard darts out, runs at Skyler.

Arby leaps after the reptile.

Jack pulls out a remote control, zaps it at Arby. No effect.

Skyler tries to stomp the lizard, misses. The lizard scoots away. Arby pulls up before him, quaking. Skyler stands before the scratched and dented wreck, speechless.

Jack keeps thumbing his remote in vain. Arby runs right by Jack and disappears into the house.

INT. SERVICE STATION - DAY

Jack makes sandwiches, tight-lipped, Kitty seated at the dining table.

KITTY
(very quiet)
He was trying to catch my lizard.

JACK
Kitty, no discussion. He just cost
me a lot of money.
(with restraint)
Please, stay away from him 'til I
figure out what's wrong, okay? --
Want some ice cream later?

Kitty nods her head, her eyes on the silent Vidphon. She picks up the receiver, listens, SLAMS it down again.

EXT. SERVICE STATION - DAY

Arby has been relegated to his recharge station -- a grimy power port in a corner of the workshop decorated with Kitty's art. He sags.

ROBOT P.O.V.

The workshop floor, a mess of tools and discarded auto parts.

GLITCH TO:

Scrambled digital images: Skyler - Jack - Lizard - Kitty.

GLITCH TO:

Arby's dream: GRAINY VIDEO of Arby in clouds, he extends a robotic claw. Kitty drifts away. Her scooter floats into foreground.

GLITCH TO:

Arby jolts up straight.

ROBOT P.O.V.

Kitty's scooter sits nearby, on Jack's work bench.

INT. SERVICE STATION - DAY

Jack works a home-made ice cream maker, hears a BUZZING (O.S.). Kitty's sandwich sits uneaten, the front door open. Jack walks to the window. Something flashes past. He runs outside.

EXT. SERVICE STATION - DAY

Jack comes out to see Kitty on her scooter making circuits of the forecourt at high speed.

Arby stands by the workshop, hands on hips, wearing Jack's tool belt.

KITTY

Chill out, Daddyo! He's getting smart now! *Comprende?*

Kitty heads straight for Jack, he leaps out of her way.

JACK

Arby. Stop this. Now.

Arby steps into Kitty's path. She skids to a stop. Jack strides toward the robot, reaches for the tool belt. Arby backs away. Jack corners him.

JACK

You think you're so clever? How'd you feel if Kitty hurt herself on this? If she rolled out on the highway and a great big truck came by? Give me that.

Jack snatches the tool belt.

JACK

You're a robot, okay? You do what I say. I want no more outbursts, no more improvisations, and no more trying to make it up to me, because you're really starting to piss me off!

Kitty puts her hands over her mouth in shock.

JACK
Sorry -- Ice cream?

Jack extends a hand to Kitty. She dismounts, takes it gingerly, Arby starts to follow.

JACK
No! -- Stay!

Jack takes Kitty in.

Arby WHINES, alone.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. SERVICE STATION - NIGHT

SAME ANGLE, stars come out. Arby stands alone.

Jack steps out on the porch, WHISTLES for the robot to follow to his workshop. Arby complies.

INT. WORKSHOP - NIGHT

Jack works on Arby referring to a dog-eared book, 'You and Your RB-40.' He looks up at his clock, checks his watch, takes the clock off the wall, adds it to a pending pile and exits.

Arby closes his own maintenance hatch.

INT. SERVICE STATION - NIGHT

Kitty sits up in bed in her pajamas, a kiddy science book open in her lap. Jack looks in.

JACK
Lights out.

Jack dims the light, sees a glow emanating from Kitty's book. He walks back in and removes the mini-tv.

JACK
I thought we had a deal. No TV
after nine.

KITTY
Tell me a story?

JACK
Sweetheart, not while Arby's sick.

KITTY
He's not sick. He's a machine.

Jack tweaks Kitty's nose, tucks her in. He picks up a rag doll spaceman (Robbie Rocket) and tucks it in with her, triggering a GRAVELLY VOICE à la Lionel Stander.

ROBBIE ROCKET
Hey, Kitty baby, hows about a squeeze?

Arby WHIRS outside Kitty's bedroom door.

Jack looks round at the noise, sees nothing.

KITTY
Daddy?

JACK
Hm?

KITTY
If you need money to fix Arby, I don't need to have a birthday.

Jack strokes hair from her pale face.

JACK
Don't you think Mommy would want us to celebrate your birthday?

Kitty gives this some thought.

KITTY
Sorry I was mean. At breakfast.

JACK
Hanging in there, tough guy?

KITTY
I'm not a guy. I'm a little girl.

She yawns, lays down, closes her eyes. Jack lovingly strokes her hair, this strange little kid. He kisses her cheek.

JACK
I'll remember that. No TV.

Jack exits, leaves the door ajar. No sign of Arby.

Kitty opens her eyes, very softly WHISTLES. Arby's work light clicks on from the linen closet across the hall. He enters, pokes around a pile of storybooks.

Kitty sits up to watch. Robbie Rocket falls from her bed.

ROBBIE ROCKET
Hi, I'm Robbie Rocket. Do you
wanna play?

EXT. SERVICE STATION - NIGHT

Jack heads back to his workshop.

INT. SERVICE STATION - NIGHT

HALLWAY

Arby peeks out from Kitty's room, checks the coast is clear, exits, dragging Robbie Rocket. Kitty peeps out after him.

EXT. SERVICE STATION - NIGHT

Jack re-emerges from his workshop, annoyed, hears KITTY'S LAUGHTER (O.S.), mutters to himself.

INT. SERVICE STATION - NIGHT

Jack enters, stops outside his den. The door is closed. Wires trail underneath. More LAUGHTER (O.S.) from Kitty.

Jack follows the wires to Kitty's bedroom door. Also closed. The wires disappear underneath. A faint GRAVELLY VOICE within. Jack opens the door.

Kitty is in bed, Arby in the chair beside her with his legs crossed in studious repose. The wires from Jack's study feed into his chassis.

KITTY
(very small)
I'm not watching TV.

JACK
I can see that. Arby, time out. Go
recharge.

KITTY
Can't he finish?

JACK
Finish what?

KITTY
He was telling me a story. Like
you used to, only it was funny.

Jack sees further cables connecting Arby to Robbie Rocket.

JACK
What's he done to Robbie Rocket?

KITTY
That's how he did it. That's how
he speaks.

JACK
Speaks...?

Jack laughs nervously.

JACK
Arby, disconnect.

KITTY
No, Daddy, don't!

Jack tries to wrench the connection out of Arby's side. Kitty hammers Jack with her pillow. Robbie Rocket falls onto the floor. Arby WHIRS.

ROBBIE ROCKET
Freeze or you're a dead man.

Kitty continues to swipe at her father, but he is now staring, amazed, first at Robbie Rocket, then at Arby.

JACK
Wait, Kitty. What did he say? Can
you make him say that again?

KITTY
Leave him alone!

Arby WHIRS again.

ROBBIE ROCKET
"Scram, punk."

JACK
Do you know what he's doing?

ROBBIE ROCKET
"I said beat it, kid."

JACK
These are lines from my book. The
new one I've been writing.

ROBBIE ROCKET

"Okay, wise guy, you asked for it." Valentine was staring right at him, but he couldn't tell if she really had the guts to do it. "If Sidney was here you wouldn't do that." "Yeah, but he ain't." "Look behind you, sweetheart."

Jack hurries out.

STUDY

Jack slams open his study door.

Inside is a SOFT HUM. Jack enters and stands before his computer. Lights are blinking beneath the dust cover. Jack pulls the cover off. The monitor is alive with text, digidrive DOWNLOADING.

JACK

Oh, God.

Jack grabs the power cable, stops. Looks back.

JACK

Oh, God, no.

The text is not only scrolling past, it is rapidly changing. Paragraphs disappear, dialogue shrinks, a whole page blanks out to become a three word phrase.

JACK

Kitty!

The text stops advancing.

Jack falls heavily into his chair, covers his face with his hands. He GROANS painfully, half sobs, half laughs.

Kitty appears timidly in the doorway, the SOUND OF ARBY'S FOOTSTEPS behind her (O.S.).

JACK

Come here. Just you.

With difficulty Kitty convinces Arby to remain out of sight. Jack sits up as Kitty enters. She stops out of reach.

JACK

(with great restraint)
Were you in here today?

KITTY

No.

JACK
Was he?

KITTY
Only cleaning.

JACK
Did you tell him to touch my book?

Kitty shakes her head.

JACK
He's been changing it. Did you
know that?

KITTY
Weren't you stuck?

A MECHANICAL CLUNK makes them both look to the door. Arby is looking in.

JACK
(to himself)
It's completely irrational.

KITTY
I thought it was funny.

Jack can't find the words, looks away and shakes his head.

JACK
Maybe you should go to bed.

Kitty goes out. Arby does not follow. Jack's head is drooping, his eyes are closed. He senses the robot's gaze, looks up.

JACK
What do you want?

A pause. Jack eyes the monitor screen. Arby WHIRS.

JACK
Forget it.

Another longer pause. Jack sighs, finds his glasses to read.

Arby watches from the doorway as a moment passes... and then Jack LAUGHS, not sarcastic, a genuine unexpected uncontrolled outburst. He looks at the robot, uncertain, disbelieving, then scrolls text to continue reading.

Arby shifts his weight, WHIRS.

Jack sits back in his chair. Another pause.

JACK

Come here. I won't hurt you.

Arby steps in. Jack rummages through a drawer, finds a small box dangling wires. Arby BEEPS, alarmed.

JACK

It's a circuit meter.

Jack shows Arby the meter, opens up a hatch in the robot's body, fastens wires inside.

JACK

Plug in. Over here.

Arby WHIRS, then is silent. Jack becomes strangely calm, gets up, leaves Arby alone. Arby taps a finger, curious. Jack returns with Kitty in his arms and plants her in the chair before the robot.

KITTY

Daddy?

Arby BEEPS again, WHIRS, connects with the computer. The on-screen text begins advancing and changing again. Jack LAUGHS, checks the circuit meter, adjusts connections, feverish.

KITTY

Daddy, what are you doing?

The reading 'LOGIC ERROR' appears on the circuit meter screen as Jack taps solenoids inside the robot. He keys another terminal.

JACK

(to himself)

I've practically rebuilt him. It's authorship by proxy.

KITTY

Does that mean you're not mad at us any more?

Jack holds out a hand. She climbs off her chair to sit on his lap. He kisses her head.

JACK

You see that flashing?

Kitty points. Jack nods. She presses a flashing button and activates a printer. The first page spits out:

THE SLIPPERY SLEUTH

The Adventures of Sidney Lizzard

Chapter One

Jack LAUGHS again, delirious. Kitty looks perplexed as pages of typescript appear.

Arby WHIRS, circuit meter still attached, obstinately flashing 'LOGIC ERROR... LOGIC ERROR... LOGIC ERROR...'

INT. SERVICE STATION - DAY

THE VIDPHON SCREEN

pulses: LOADING -- BEEPS -- types out:

Download complete

Transmission ready

Jack stares into space, seated in the LIVING ROOM. He hasn't slept or changed his clothes since the night before. He types and punches up the title page:

THE SLIPPERY SLEUTH

The Adventures of Sidney Lizzard

Jack deletes the subtitle, adds:

by Jack French

KITTY

Morning!

Kitty walks through to the kitchen, Jack quickly keys SEND, stands, yawns deeply. Kitty turns on her mini-tv, pours herself cereal.

KITTY

Did we finish?

JACK

Almost.

KITTY

Cool. You want some cereal?

Jack watches her eat.

JACK

Listen, Kitty...

Jack removes his glasses, joins her at the breakfast counter.

JACK
Last night has to be our secret.
Don't tell anyone. Not Uncle Carl,
not Molly or Tommy.

KITTY
Why?

JACK
You know the three laws?

KITTY
Uh-huh.

JACK
Let's hear them.

Kitty munches, regards her father suspiciously.

KITTY
Serve, protect, obey.

JACK
Good girl -- No writing, huh? We
don't want Arby to get in trouble.

A TOOT from outside (O.S.). Arby emerges from the study.

JACK
Hey! First customer and we're not
even open! Things are looking up!

Jack ruffles Kitty's hair over-cheerfully and exits.

EXT. SERVICE STATION - CONTINUOUS

Jack halts on the porch, dismayed.

An American Automata company car is parked in the center forecourt. ALEXANDRA REINSCH, steps out into the desert heat -- mid-twenties, attractive, overdressed. She regards the run-down station, and Jack.

JACK
(under his breath)
Shit.

ALEX
Jack French?

Jack walks up to squint at the name tag on Alex's lapel.

JACK
Might be.

She offers a hand to shake.

ALEX
Alexandra Reinsch, American
Automata.

Jack smiles, apologetic. vigorously shakes her hand.

JACK
Lithium or nicad? Carl send you?

ALEX
What?

JACK
Your fuel?

ALEX
Oh, yes. Nicad. I'm handling Mr.
Hobbs' accounts.

JACK
(laughing)
'Mister' Hobbs? You must not know
Hobbsy.

Alex stares at the hand she shook with Jack, and sees it has
has been soiled.

JACK
Sorry.

He hands her a paper towel, plugs a charger to her car.

JACK
We go way back. Used to be his
partner. How is the old dog?

ALEX
Fine.

Alex goes to the back of her car, opens the hatchback and bends
to retrieve equipment inside.

ALEX
Out of town. I'm taking over his
accounts. So far it's been, well,
enlightening.

JACK
I'll bet.

She catches him viewing her rump.

JACK
Nice. Nice chassis. Good
condition. Car.

Alex locates a palmtop computer, slams the hood.

ALEX
Company owns it.

JACK
Boston accent, right? M.I.T.?

ALEX
Harvard. PhD.

JACK
So, what am I? Your thesis?

ALEX
Just a delinquent account. I have
a long drive back?

Jack is rattled by her point blank attitude. None of his charms
are working, and this woman has him cornered.

ALEX
Shall we get started?

JACK
Right! Sure.

OUTSIDE THE LIVING ROOM WINDOW

Kitty peers out.

KITTY
Who is that?

Arby appears beside her. She shoves him out of sight.

KITTY
Keep down.
(to herself)
That's not Uncle Carl.

BACK TO SCENE

ALEX
...married Alyssa Allen-French in
'25, left Automata in '26 to set
up here as a syndicated automotive
service supplier.

JACK
Not any more. Not married.

Alex consults her palmtop.

JACK
Cancer. '33.

She loses her place, makes a note, embarrassed.

JACK
You're thorough.

ALEX
Almost done. Level 3 home-mech,
plus one RB-40 unit, obtained
through... Mr. Hobbs.
(re: palmtop screen)
I have a transcript of your
service request. No codes, no
serial number. I assume it was a
service request?

JACK
Initially.

ALEX
Meaning?

Jack unplugs the charger, hangs it up.

JACK
I had no idea they'd send a field
rep, no offense. Carl and I, we
had an understanding.

Jack gives a nervous laugh. Alex looks disapproving.

JACK
You look hot. I mean thirsty. How
about a drink? Water? Beer?

ALEX
(an icy smile)
I'd like to see your robot.

Beat. Jack gives a 'thumbs up.'

JACK
You got it.

He heads inside. Alex immediately loses her grin.

INT. SERVICE STATION - DAY

Kitty climbs down from the window. Jack enters, very animated, sees Arby has spread a deck of cards into geometric patterns across the table.

KITTY
Uncle Carl?

Jack jumbles up the cards -- to Arby's dismay -- straightens Kitty's hair, takes a napkin, wipes her face.

JACK
He sent a friend. Speak only when
I say. And you --
(re: Arby)
Act stiff.

Arby straightens, raising up on his legs.

EXT. SERVICE STATION - DAY

Alex looks up from the back of her car.

Jack opens the screen door. Kitty leads Arby by a hand.

ALEX
Good God.

Arby and Kitty walk out into sunlight. Alex pulls out a scanning device, starts taking readings, circling.

JACK
Is that really necessary?

Arby rotates his head 360-degrees, following Alex. She stops. Arby stops. She points to Arby's radiator 'grin.'

ALEX
What's this?

Arby chatters, almost bites her finger. Alex pulls away.

JACK
His smile. He likes you.

Kitty hides behind her father's legs. Alex consults her palmtop.

ALEX
I see Hobbs cleared you for home
maintenance. Why call?

JACK
Oh, a burn out. I should've called
back. He's better now.

The Vidphon starts to RING inside (O.S.).

JACK
Honey, get that for me will you?

The RINGING continues. Kitty tugs on the robot's arm, hisses at him to follow, he reluctantly complies.

ALEX
What is he? 12-11?

JACK
12-13, rebuilt -- Look, I'm on my
own out here. I need him.

ALEX
File for a replacement.

KITTY (O.S.)
Dad-dy! It's Uncle Hubie!

JACK
I can't if you report me --
Listen, I forgot your drink. Will
you excuse me?

Alex nods. Jack hurries back to the house.

INT. SERVICE STATION - DAY

Jack enters, finds Kitty at the Vidphon, Arby jockeying with her to view the screen.

ON-SCREEN

A large man in a heavy metal T-shirt seated at a desk behind the name-sign HUBIE HARTZ.

HUBIE
That a fact? You don't look a day
over five and a half -- Hey! How
are ya, Jackie?

JACK
Dandy -- Kitty, glass of water for
our guest.

Kitty scowls and exits to the kitchen, Arby on her heels. Hubie finds a manuscript, wags it solemnly at the screen.

HUBIE
Just back from Reedomatic.

JACK
Already?

Hubie grins.

JACK
Well?

HUBIE
Slippery Sleuth? -- They love it!
It's brilliance! I gotta tell you,
Jackie, I always knew you had it
in you!

EXT. SERVICE STATION - DAY

Alex sorts equipment, frustrated, then hears Jack WHOOP and YAHOO (O.S.).

INT. SERVICE STATION - DAY

Kitty stops in the kitchen doorway with a glass of water. Jack is hopping up and down, punching at the air.

HUBIE
Hey, take it easy, man.

Kitty's eyes go to the doorway. Alex looks in through the screen door. Arby SQUAWKS.

Jack sees her too and reseats himself, angling the Vidphon screen away, lowering his voice.

JACK
Hubie, I have a customer. I need
to call you back.

HUBIE
Ha! I don't hear from you in
months and you've got to go clean
windshields? Those days are behind
you, pal!

Kitty opens the screen door to present Alex with the glass of water. Alex notices the water is brown.

JACK
Right now I could use the income.
(MORE)

JACK (CONT'D)
Unless you've something to tell
me?

Hubie studies Jack intently, rifles through more papers, finds one, feeds it into his phone. It emerges from Jack's, a list headed 'REEDOMATIC.' Jack tears it off to read.

JACK
What is this?

HUBIE
Publisher's proposal.

Arby sits with Kitty, picks up his cards, Kitty tries to pull them away. It becomes a game.

Alex checks her scanning device, frowns at the reading.

JACK
We-- It's not finished.

HUBIE
So we publish in two parts. It's a
sweet deal. Iron out the kinks,
then it's six weeks to the
Lennies.

JACK
What? Wait a second. Kinks?

HUBIE
We can do this, man! Call me after
the weekend -- Okay?

Arby SQUAWKS as he fights for the cards.

Jack hangs up on Hubie.

JACK
Arby: Freeze, turkey!

Arby goes rigid. Kitty pulls the cards from the robot's hands.

JACK
Kitty, go to your room.

KITTY
You're not going to let her take
him?

JACK
Kitty, please...

Kitty exits. Jack sighs, takes out a knife and opens a panel in Arby's side.

ALEX
'Freeze, turkey'?

JACK
It's from Kitty's favorite TV
show. You can't use it too often,
but his remote is broken -- There
you go, old fellow.

Jack clicks a switch. Arby jolts back to life, bemused. Alex
sets her water down, pulls out her palmtop.

ALEX
I'm not going to report you, Mr.
French.

JACK
Thank you.

ALEX
I will return for a complete
analysis once I have the correct
equipment.

Alex prints a ticket, rips it from her machine.

EXT. SERVICE STATION - DAY

Arby peers out through the screen door.

Jack walks Alex to her car.

JACK
You should call next time. I could
cook us all some breakfast.
Dinner. Whatever.

She climbs into her car.

ALEX
I'll be seeing you, Mr. French.

Alex takes off in a cloud of dust. Jack slumps, exhausted, rubs
at his face, sees Arby staring out.

INT. AUTOMATA SHOP FLOOR - DAY

The logo SERVE, PROTECT, OBEY overhangs a messy expanse of
workstations.

Alex enters in a hurry, still dusty from the desert. She passes her co-workers -- a hefty woman, BABS, and an older black man, GABBY -- and dumps her bag.

GABBY
Isaksen is looking for you.

BABS
Ooh, she's in trouble now.

Alex continues to a glass enclosure where ISAKSEN, a burly supervisor with a large mustache, is with a colleague (STAN).

INT. ISAKSEN'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Alex knocks, opens the door. A skeptical look between the men.

STAN
Later, Bill.

ISAKSEN
G'night, Stan.

Alex steps in to allow Stan to exit, closes the door. Isaksen takes his time clearing his desk.

ISAKSEN
(sarcastic)
Ms. Reinsch. Nice of you to stop by.

ALEX
I can explain--

ISAKSEN
No need.

Isaksen refers to his workstation, gestures Alex to sit. She does so, impatient.

ISAKSEN
'Reinsch, A. Operator 2416.
Reference RB-40, G6. Cognitive
function failure. Analysis:
Unrated owner rebuild and excess
environmental input... blah, blah,
spontaneous fractal bias... blah,
blah, latent autonomous
cognition...

Alex remains silent.

ISAKSEN

'Recommendation,' here we go:
(with emphasis)
'Further field analysis' -- So you
take off for six hours and forgot
to pack a tool kit?

ALEX

No. I brought the wrong one. Hobbs
had the client listed 12-11, he
was running 12-13--

Isaksen hushes her, feels his pulse and checks his watch.

ISAKSEN

You're supposed to be cleaning up
his mess, not creating more.
(derisive)
'Latent autonomous cognition' --
Do you even have a motive?

ALEX

No. I'll explain in my report.

ISAKSEN

You will not.

Isaksen's glare is withering. Alex is undaunted.

ISAKSEN

You're a bright girl, Ms. Reinsch,
but here you're just a service
tech. That is all I promised your
father--

ALEX

Do we have to bring him into this?

ISAKSEN

No! Fine -- but I will not let you
turn this operation into own your
private laboratory.
(he stands)
Let me show you something...

Isaksen points Alex to the logo SERVE, PROTECT, OBEY outside on
the wall.

ISAKSEN

There are forty thousand units in
this state alone running by those
rules. They break down, we fix
them.

(MORE)

ISAKSEN (CONT'D)
Remember that in your report --
Now I have a mainframe meltdown
waiting.

Isaksen exits, Alex goes after him.

INT. AUTOMATA SHOP FLOOR - CONTINUOUS

Employees look up as Alex follows Isaksen.

ALEX
I could take this to tribunal.

ISAKSEN
Ms. Reinsch. Don't go chasing
theory you don't understand.

ALEX
What don't I understand?

Isaksen does not stop. He nods to Babs and Gabby as he departs.
Alex returns to her desk, dejected.

BABS
What's up with hot shot?

GABBY
Leave it, Babs -- You got a
message, kid.

ALEX
I noticed.

Babs makes a sourpuss face, Babs drags him away, scolding. Alex
activates a video message:

ON-SCREEN

Skyler, the tow truck driver, ranting, mute.

Alex hits 'pause,' puts on her headset, hits 'play' and starts
to pay attention.

INT. SERVICE STATION - DAY

Arby sits wired up in Jack's study, Jack connecting Robbie
Rocket, Kitty seated nearby with the Reedomatic pages. A FLASH
and Robbie Rocket EXPLODES. Jack receives an electric shock.

JACK
Ow! Shhh--
(MORE)

JACK (CONT'D)
(sees Kitty)
Damn.

The printer starts to print. Jack and Kitty lean over:

THE SLIPPERY SLEUTH

by RB-40/G6/12.13/#1135760/PR-RG

Jack tears the paper from the printer, crumples it and throws it across the room. Arby stomps out.

EXT. SERVICE STATION - DUSK

The back door flies open, Arby exits, grabs a tennis ball, lets the door shut in Jack's face. Jack continues after him with the Reedomatic page. Kitty follows.

KITTY
Don't yell at him, Daddy.

Jack stops as Arby bounces the tennis ball against the aluminum siding. Arby catches the ball, throws it, catches it, throws it. Kitty catches up.

JACK
I wasn't going to yell.

Arby misses a beat, continues bouncing with less force.

JACK
I'm amazed at what he's done. It's
a miracle.

KITTY
It is?

JACK
It's... a new perspective.

Arby continues bouncing, stops.

JACK
Arby, come on, pal. It's just to
please Hubie. They'd never print a
novel written by a machine.

Arby SLAMS the tennis ball into the side of the house. Jack flinches. The ball drops, burst, leaving a fist-sized dent. Jack picks up the broken ball.

KITTY
He doesn't understand.

JACK
What does he want? I'm trying to
save our necks here and suddenly
he's Norman Mailer.

KITTY
Who's Norman Mailer?

JACK
I don't need this! I'm a writer!
I'll fix it myself!

Jack heads inside. Arby CHATTERS at Kitty. Saddened, she also
walks away. Arby slumps, despondent.

INT. AUTOMATA SHOP FLOOR - NIGHT

Most employees have gone home. A small robot trundles past,
cleaning the floor. Alex works at her computer, oblivious.

She types:

*Account #1135760
Retrieval Postponed.
Require further access
consumer trading data.*

The screen clears, prints:

*Consumer trading
rep Hobbs, Carl
DEFERRED.
Access denied by order
Automata Control
Criminal Practices Division.*

Alex pauses, types:

Search: Jack French

The screen clears, prints:

*Try American Library Catalogue
Publication Data*

Alex frowns, checks her palmtop, types:

Access account #1135760

The screen clears, prints again:

French, Jack (b.1998)

SUDDEN DEATH

1. Title Fiction, Crime

924'.65 Ps4672.2594

ISBN O 340.33161 5

Copyright © 2026 H&A, 2026

A final line of text prints out, bold faced:

Digi-text: unavailable.

Analog: out of print.

EXT. CHINATOWN - NIGHT

Low-life vendors hawk robot parts. A taxi pulls up, Alex steps out before a crummy antique store.

INT. ANTIQUE STORE - NIGHT

Alex waits at the counter. A young ASIAN SALESMAN with an improbable hair style walks up clutching a hard-backed book.

SALESMAN

Nobody wants analog these days.
Me, I love 'em. Yeah. The look,
the smell, the feel. Mmm-hm. This
guy, he used to be some writer.

The salesman lays down a ratty copy of 'Sudden Death' by Jack French. Alex picks it up, sees Jack on the back cover.

SALESMAN

How'd you find us? CPD search, eh?
Pretty nifty, lady. You maybe
wanna grab a drink, I can show you
my full catalog?

Alex regards the salesman, hasn't heard a word he's said.

ALEX

I'll take it.

INT. TAXI - MOVING - NIGHT

Alex reads 'Sudden Death' -- fascinated.

EXT. SERVICE STATION - NIGHT

Bright flickering light emanates from the WORKSHOP. Arby is huddled behind a translucent plastic screen, welding.

INT. ALEX'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

In her sparse, high-rise kitchen, Alex reads Jack's book, seated with an untouched take-out meal. She closes the book, stunned, stares at her home PC on the breakfast table.

INT. SERVICE STATION - NIGHT

Jack sits cross-legged on his study floor, ashen, surrounded by a chaos of story notes. He comes across a Holoroid photo tucked between pages of an old copy of 'RoboWeekly' magazine.

As Jack move the Holoroid, the image of Jack's SMILING WIFE appears to move, in mid-laugh, in his hand.

Jack lets the moment pass, tucks the photo back into the magazine, and notices an advertisement:

PANABOTICS
we're there when you need us™
Call 1-800-ROBO-AID

BEDROOM

Kitty sleeps, her mini-tv playing mute, window open to the night. Arby's TELESCOPIC EYE pops up over the sill.

INT. ALEX'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Alex types.

ON-SCREEN

The ISBN listing for "Sudden Death" appears. Alex highlights Hartz and Arnold Publications. Double-clicks. The screen fills with the H&A logo.

Alex selects TITLES PENDING.

ON-SCREEN

ISBN codes scroll by, stops at:

French, Jack (b.1998)
THE SLIPPERY SLEUTH

*1. Children's Fiction
ISBN ref. Incomplete
Copyright Pending*

*ACCESS RESTRICTED
Pending Revision*

Alex frowns, keys her terminal.

ON-SCREEN

A second cursor appears. She guides it to the H&A window, double clicks. The screen blanks out:

ACCESS VIRUS ACTIVATED

A sudden burst of text. The list files past, closes in on one entry, which expands to fill the page:

THE SLIPPERY SLEUTH

*by Jack French
Copyright (Pending) 2034
Hartz and Arnold Publications
Restricted access only
Not for publication or reproduction.*

*FIRST DRAFT
August 14, 2034*

Alex scrolls to the next page, is stopped by what she sees.

ON-SCREEN

An epigraph, a blank page containing just a bar code.

Alex highlights the bar code, clicks.

ON-SCREEN

The bars translate:

For Kitty, Love RB.

INT. SERVICE STATION - DAY

Kitty wakes to find Arby squatting at the end of her bed, lights dimmed.

KITTY

Hey.

Arby snaps to attention, holds out a bundled rag and places it on Kitty's bed.

Something wriggles inside. Kitty opens it to reveal a metal sculpture welded with clock parts: a MECHANICAL LIZARD.

FOOTSTEPS approach (O.S.). Kitty throws a blanket over Arby and his lizard. Arby WHIRS, complaining.

KITTY
Hush! Quiet!

Jack enters, carrying a breakfast tray, gift-wrapped box and a flower. He sets the tray down, knows something is wrong.

The mechanical lizard walks out into view.

Jack jolts back, takes a closer look, pulls the blankets back, revealing Arby.

KITTY
He made it for me.

Beat.

JACK
That's great, honey.

Jack hands Kitty his gift.

JACK
Happy birthday. Pizza tonight?

KITTY
Pepperoni! I love you Daddy!

Kitty rips into her gift, shredding wrapping paper.

KITTY
Is it that new game? That one with
the laser?

Kitty pulls out a little yellow dress.

KITTY
(astonished)
It's lovely.

A car TOOTS (O.S.). Jack looks out of the window.

KITTY
(brightly)
Is it the mailman?

EXT. SERVICE STATION - DAY

Alex unloads equipment from her Automata car. She sees Jack appear from the house.

ALEX
I would've called, but I didn't
want to wake you.

Jack steps closer to view Alex's equipment: Colored bricks, pegs in holes, a board with colored wheels and bells.

JACK
What is this? A gymboree?

ALEX
No. Standard field tests, some are
my own. A/V response, pattern
sense, associative behavior...

JACK
Miss, ah... Wrench.

ALEX
Alex. Now where is --
(re: palmtop)
'Arby'?

ENGINE NOISE interrupts as a courier truck arrives. It's shaping up to be a bad morning for Jack.

JACK
I have a delivery. Excuse me.

Jack greets the truck. The DRIVER starts to off-load a large, heavy box bearing a Panabotics logo.

ALEX
You purchased another unit? How
could you possibly afford that?

Jack walks into his generator shed. The (O.S.) SLAM of the bug screen door makes Alex look round at the house.

Arby has stepped out, Kitty staring from inside.

Jack reappears, wheeling out a beautiful 1960 Royal Enfield Indian Chief motorcycle. Alex watches, mystified.

Jack parks the motorbike by the delivery van, signs a delivery readout and watches wistfully as his prized possession is taken away. He returns to Alex, who is still staring, bewildered.

JACK
I need an extra pair of hands. I'm
really busy now.

ALEX
Of course. I'm forgetting your
records didn't show you're also a
writer.
(re: palmtop)
Tell me, Mr. French, are you
running any self-help software?
Autoscript? Writer Toolz?

Jack is distracted as the truck drives away and Arby follows
Kitty out to examine the Panabotics crate.

ALEX
Mr. French...?

Arby starts to BEEP and CLICK. Kitty hushes him.

JACK
This is really not a good time.
It's my daughter's birthday.

A sudden SQUAWK from Arby silences them both.

The Panabotics box starts to move, rocking on its base. A new
robot punches its way out in a spray of packing material --
HANDYMAN™ -- all chrome and hard lines.

JACK
Kitty, say hi to Handyman.

Alex looks to Kitty.

Kitty is regarding the new robot with mistrust.

Handyman takes a step toward Kitty.

Arby blocks his way.

Handyman BEEPS.

Arby BLEATS and runs at Handyman, chasing the new robot in
circles around the forecourt.

JACK
Arby, get back here! Arby!

The robots scurry past Alex. She returns to her car.

Jack looks helplessly at Kitty. Kitty puts her fingers in hie
mouth and WHISTLES.

Arby halts immediately, and leaves Handyman twittering.

Alex observes the robots' behavior, amazed.

JACK
Good boy, Arby. Stay -- See? He's
fine. He's just playful. I adapted
him that way.

Alex picks up a rubber toy, makes it SQUEAK. Arby ambles over.
Jack grabs hold of Arby and struggles to restrain him.

ALEX
'Adapted,' Mr. French? Adapted him
for what?

Alex fumbles for her camera, aims it back at Jack.

JACK
I adapted him for Kitty. Wait! You
can't do that without a warrant.
I'm serious, I'll sue--

Alex takes a shot. Arby SQUEALS at the FLASH. Jack is blinded,
rubs his eyes, stumbles.

KITTY
Leave us alone!

Alex's camera fires another FLASH. Arby slips Jack's grip, runs
at Alex, shrieking. Alex jumps into her car, slams and locks
the door and skids off raising dust.

Kitty walks up to Arby and takes the robot's hand, calming him.

INT. AUTOMATA ELEVATOR - DAY

Isaksen and Alex both stand in air conditioned silence, Alex
still dusty from the desert, Isaksen very tense, sharing the
ascending elevator with an android AUTOMATA GUARD.

INT. AUTOMATA CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY

Isaksen and Alex sit with CORBY -- a youthful, balding male
executive -- who scrolls through Alex's PHOTOS on table-top
displays. Two TYPESCRIPTS lay conspicuously before him.

CORBY
No logic-based control system can
tolerate free consciousness of its
own illogical position in a
meaningless universe.

Alex sighs, but Corby overrules her.

CORBY
As your department counselor, Ms.
Reinsch, it's my duty to inform
you of the facts.

ALEX
Mr. Corby, I'm not disputing the
company's textbook definition.

CORBY
Any comment, Bill?

ISAKSEN
I'm not reading those books.

ALEX
Figures.

ISAKSEN
It's the Frankenstein effect: The
database asks questions none of us
can answer. What is my purpose?
Why am I here? It snowballs, we
lose control...

ALEX
(imploring)
This robot has found meaning.
Right there on your desk!

Corby gives Alex a learned smile.

CORBY
Let's stop this and be thankful
Mr. French has not yet pressed
charges.

ALEX
All I want is to study this
machine.

CORBY
Yet you used an illegal virus to
over-ride the owner's copyright
protection. Unauthorized access
renders evidence obsolete.

Corby touches a switch, freezes an image of Jack yelling into
camera. The screens go blank, room lights brighten.

CORBY

If the unit overloads, its
failsafe will cut in and we'll be
fully justified to bring it back
to base.

ALEX

For demolition.

CORBY

American Automata will not support
development in this line of
research. No-one really wants free
will in machines.

Alex sinks back in frustration. She glances at Isaksen but
finds no support.

ALEX

What if I still want to take this
to tribunal?

CORBY

We will have no choice but to
revoke your license. We must keep
the peace.

INT. SERVICE STATION - DAY

Handyman vacuums the living room floor, occasionally slamming
into furniture. Kitty's new toy lizard scampers for cover.

Kitty, wearing her new dress, solemnly sets the table with Arby
while Jack chops salad in the kitchen.

JACK

Even birthday girls need a little
salad with their birthday pizza,
I'm telling you. We're all gonna
be just fine.

Kitty looks concerned as a throaty muscle car pulls up (O.S.)
and toots its MUSICAL HORN.

JACK

(teasing)

Uh-oh. Now who is that?

Kitty realizes something is up, runs to the window.

KITTY

(excited)

Uncle Hubie! Cool car!

Jack smiles. Kitty runs out.

EXT. SERVICE STATION - DAY

Kitty runs out and leaps into the waiting arms of Jack's agent, HUBIE HARTZ -- dressed in a suit with shades. Hubie swings her round, then Kitty goes quiet as a CHERYL -- a lissome, red-headed woman -- steps out of Hubie's car.

HUBIE
Cheryl, meet Kitty French, the
birthday gal!

Cheryl hands over a handful of droopy-looking flowers, speaks with a Southern accent.

CHERYL
Sorry, darlin' -- guess they
didn't make the trip.

Jack emerges. Hubie removes his shades and embraces Jack in an emotional bear hug, crushing the wind out of him.

JACK
Thanks for coming, Hubie.

HUBIE
Good to be here, buddy -- Cheryl:
my oldest hot new client. Jack:
Cheryl Bee, my editor.

CHERYL
Oh-my-God! Slippery Sleuth? What a
scream! I read it in one gulp! You
are such a funny man!

Cheryl presses Jack's hand effusively, embarrassing Jack. Hubie raises his eyebrows, Groucho-style, ducks back to his car. Arby and Handyman peer out through the bug screen.

CHERYL
(uneasy)
Ooh, who's that back there?

JACK
Oh, the kids? I can send them out
back, if they make you--

Kitty SQUEALS with glee, reacting as Hubie pulls a large birthday gift from the car.

HUBIE
So ask us in, ya bum!

INT. AUTOMATA SHOP FLOOR - DAY

Gabby works at his computer, his terminal adorned with auto racing trophies. He exchanges a knowing look with Babs as Alex turns up with an empty packing box and noisily begins dismantling her work-station.

ALEX

Two weeks suspension, then I'm transferred to data storage.

GABBY

Poor baby.

BABS

Those assholes.

GABBY

If there's anything we can do.

Alex stops, gives this some thought.

EXT. SERVICE STATION - EVENING

Hubie's car is still parked outside the home, where living room lights go dim.

INT. SERVICE STATION - NIGHT

In the darkened living room, Arby enters carrying a cake with candles. Jack, Hubie and Cheryl all SING 'Happy Birthday to You,' wearing paper hats. Arby sets the cake in front of Kitty.

Handyman brings up the rear with a serving knife and plates. Cheryl flinches as Arby grabs the knife from Handyman, and the two robots have a brief tug-of-war.

JACK

Arby. Let Kitty make a wish.

Arby seizes control of the knife, and stands ready.

Kitty meets eyes with Jack, he nods, she blows out the candles. Jack, Hubie and Cheryl applaud. Arby WHIRS and BEEPS excitedly.

Room lights automatically brighten, and Cheryl gives Arby a wary look as the robot moves in to pluck candles from the cake.

HUBIE

You did the place up, Jack.

JACK
Well, I had a lot of time in
between the windshields.

CHERYL
Talented, handsome and modest?
Why've you been hiding this
godsend from me, Hubie?

Jack smiles, uses a remote to start MUSIC -- an old jazz tune,
'You Can't Take That Away From Me.' Arby cuts the cake,
Handyman waits to distribute plates.

CHERYL
Teensy piece for me.

Arby splats a huge, chocolaty wedge onto Cheryl's plate.

Hubie taps his wine glass.

HUBIE
Jack, a toast.

Jack gestures Handyman to top up the glasses.

Arby meanwhile takes his place in a converted high-chair next
to Kitty, with a fork and his own slice of cake. The robot
teasingly nudges Kitty as she eats, and then raises an empty
glass as Jack makes a toast.

JACK
To the girl who inspired me to
leave the rat race five years ago
today. And who continues to take
me places I have never been: Happy
birthday, Kitty!

KITTY
And Arby. It's his birthday too.

JACK
Absolutely. Three years ago today.

A chorus of 'To Arby.'

The robot WHIRS and BEEPS.

As they eat and drink, Cheryl shares a look askance at Hubie,
who simply winks at her.

KITTY
Can I play my game now, Daddy?

Jack smiles and nods. Kitty races to the wall-tv. Jack holds Arby back, claps his hands, signals the robots to clear the table. Arby jockeys Handyman for possession of the plates.

CHERYL
Mind if I join her?

JACK
Knock yourself out.

Cheryl follows Kitty, giving the robots a wide berth.

Arby beats Handyman to the kitchen, Handyman bumps into the doorframe.

HUBIE
Two robot family now, Jack?

JACK
Well, if you weren't such a slave driver.

HUBIE
You always were a gearhead. I guess it's in the blood.

JACK
I might say the same.
(quizzically)
'Editor'?

Hubie gives a dry laugh. Across the room, Cheryl plays the shoot-'em-up video game with Kitty.

HUBIE
What can I say? Glad to have you back, pal.

Hubie pats Jack's hand.

JACK
Kitty keeps me sane.

HUBIE
Kitty, or that sweetie you cut me off for yesterday? Eh?

Jack shakes his head, stone-faced. Hubie laughs again, takes out two cigars, offers one to Jack.

HUBIE
C'mon. Let's talk man-talk on the porch.

JACK
Meet you out there.

Hubie rolls his eyes, Jack heads for the bathroom.

HUBIE
Sugar, we'll be outside.

Cheryl acknowledges Hubie with her wave. Hubie heads out onto the porch to smoke.

Arby peers out from the kitchen, catches sight of smoke drifting in through the bug screen door.

KITCHEN

Handyman closes the dishwasher, and then looks up as Arby exits via the back door. Handyman cocks his head, listening like a dog. Arby re-enters, carrying a garden hose.

LIVING ROOM

Cheryl and Kitty continue to play their video game.

Jack returns in time to see Handyman step out of the kitchen, aiming the hose.

JACK
No! You! Stop!

Water erupts across the living room, soaking Cheryl and Hubie.

Jack wrenches the hose from Handyman. The stream dies to a trickle. Jack looks into the kitchen in time to see the back door slam shut behind Arby. Jack storms out after him.

Hubie enters from the porch, dripping.

EXT. SERVICE STATION - NIGHT

Jack appears from behind the house, dragging Arby SQUEALING and flailing to the

WORKSHOP

Jack opens a tool cupboard, throws Arby inside, slams and locks the door. Arby WAILS within.

INT. SERVICE STATION - NIGHT

Viewed by Handyman from the kitchen, Hubie and Cheryl take their leave of Jack, wearing borrowed sweats.

Kitty watches her visitors drive off. Jack returns to face her through the bug screen door.

KITTY
It wasn't Arby fault. It's the new one. He's stupid.

JACK
Kitty, compare to Arby, Handyman is... slow.

KITTY
How long are you going to keep Arby locked up.

JACK
Until he learns his lesson. Want me to read to you?

Kitty turns away, heads for bed. The Vidphon STARTS TO RING and stops them both. Handyman appears from the kitchen wearing an apron, heading for the phone.

JACK
(calling through)
No! Don't! Don't touch that!

Instead of the receiver, Handyman picks up a banana from a fruit bowl.

HANDYMAN
Moh-shee-moh-shee? Moh-shee-moh-shee?

Jack enters, grabs the phone receiver, and picks it up on the last ring. Handyman continues to answer the banana, locked into the same repeated phrase.

JACK
Handyman, stop! Handyman, stop!

KITTY
What's 'mushi mushi'?

JACK
It's 'hello' in Japanese--
(at Handyman)
Hey! Stop that! Sayonara!

Handyman is silent. Jack snatches the banana from him.

Kitty starts to laugh.

JACK
It's not funny, Kitty.

KITTY
Yes, it is. He's not slow, he's
Japanese. That's funny.

Jack glares, points Handyman outside.

JACK
Domo! Recharge! Out!

Handyman bumps into a table, makes it to the door. The Vidphon RINGS again. Jack picks it up. Alex appears ON-SCREEN:

ALEX
I thought I'd do you the courtesy
of calling first this time...

Kitty's laughter stops. Jack sits with the phone.

ALEX
You can hang up any time. Or I
could stop by...

EXT. QWIKEE MART - NIGHT

Alex is using a public Vidphon booth at a roadside convenience store.

ALEX
...I'm a couple of hours away. I
have something to discuss. I'd
prefer to do it in person.

INT. SERVICE STATION - CONTINUOUS

JACK
I have nothing to discuss with
you.

ALEX
Yes, you do.

Alex finds her throat is dry.

ALEX
They know what you're doing. At
Automata Control...

Jack surveys her steadily.

EXT. QWIKEE MART - CONTINUOUS

ALEX
...That you've tampered with your
robot. And now he's re-writing
your novel.

INT. SERVICE STATION - CONTINUOUS

Jack takes a moment before he can reply.

JACK
Why would they think that?

INT. SERVICE STATION - NIGHT

A copy of Jack's manuscript drops onto the coffee table.

Alex is seated before Jack. He picks the manuscript up, flicks through pages annotated with Alex's scrawl.

ALEX
I'm sorry. It's out there if you
know where to look. You know what
they'll do now? The next time he
screws up, they'll take him away.
Instant demolition.

Jack stares out the window to where Kitty is making laps of the flood-lit forecourt on her scooter.

Handyman emerges from the kitchen.

HANDYMAN
*Soo-mee-mah-sehn gah, oh-cha-nee-
ha omo-chee-shee-ma sho-kah?*

JACK
He's making tea, you want some?

ALEX
Thank you.

Jack signals Handyman for two cups, the robot bows, backs into the kitchen. Jack throws down the manuscript.

JACK
Why are you doing this to me?

ALEX
Life story, or short version? I
want to study Arby. I thought the
company would, too.

Handyman enters with two cups of tea, sets them down, bows, Jack excuses him with a wave. The robot retreats. Alex sips her tea, frowns and peers into the cup, quickly sets it down.

ALEX

I want to monitor his writing. If
we can build a case by the time
you're published--

Jack cuts her off.

JACK

It was an accident. He won't
cooperate any more. I have a
rewrite to deliver by Monday.

ALEX

I have equipment in my car. Let me
find what really makes him tick.
What do you have to lose?

Jack looks out of the window, then views Alex critically. She will not back down.

EXT. SERVICE STATION - NIGHT

Kitty skids her scooter to a halt, watches with distrust as Jack and Alex exit and cross the forecourt to the

WORKSHOP

Jack makes Alex wait. He enters, finds the tool cupboard open, picks up the dismantled lock. Alex approaches with a pen-light, illuminates Arby's recharge station, which is now a nest of stolen toys, magazines and knickknacks. She finds a dog-eared copy of 'Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.' A sudden movement makes them turn. Alex crouches, beckons softly.

Arby shivers, a dark shape in the shadows.

Alex takes out a small wind-up toy robot, twists the key and places it on the ground. The toy hops around.

Arby WHIRS, edges forward. Alex observes, fascinated.

INT. SERVICE STATION - NIGHT

DEN

The text of 'Slippery Sleuth' scrolls by on Jack's computer.

Alex compares the monitor with an old printout. Jack sits opposite with Kitty, Arby drumming his fingers, bored, connected to the computer and Alex's equipment. Arby WHIRS, slides off his stool, pulling equipment with him. Alex dives to save her hardware before it hits the floor.

ALEX

Arby -- Want to play?

Arby stops, looks back.

THE KITCHEN

Jack shuffles cards, deals to Arby, Alex, Kitty; Kitty in her pjs. Handyman serves cake and coffee, milk for Kitty.

Alex watches Arby intently over her hand.

Arby WHIRS, flips a card onto the table, taps a finger once.

Jack deals him another card.

Arby adds it to his hand, WHIRS, pushes forward a stack of chips, taps twice.

KITTY

What do I do now?

Jack looks at Kitty's cards. A pair of threes.

JACK

Either quit or raise his bid.

KITTY

Go for it!

JACK

It's your funeral.

Jack pushes forward Kitty's chips. Alex adds her own.

ALEX

I'm in, and raise you twenty.

Jack throws in his hand. All eyes to Arby. The robot WHIRS, pushes forward more chips, which Jack counts.

JACK

That's, twenty, forty, sixty.

Arby taps twice.

JACK

And the gentleman will see you.

Kitty looks again to Jack. He throws in her cards.

ALEX

Okay...

(matches the bid)

Let's see what the gentleman is
made of.

Arby WHIRS, turns over his cards. Two jacks.

Alex reveals her hand. Three queens, two tens.

JACK

Queens and tens has it. The lady
wins. Arby, your deal.

Arby drums his fingers as Alex gathers the chips. Jack collects the cards, hands them to the robot. Arby WHIRS, leaves the table and exits, elbowing Handyman out of his way.

JACK

(sarcastic)

That was productive.

ALEX

It was. He should be winning every
time. It's puzzling.

Kitty slides down from her chair, heads out.

JACK

Guess it's time for bed.

EXT. SERVICE STATION - NIGHT

Arby marches out, heads for the workshop, stops inside. Regards a newer, cleaner Panabotics recharge station.

INT. SERVICE STATION - NIGHT

Jack joins Kitty in her bedroom, where she is curled up with her toy lizard, already asleep. He tucks her in, kisses her, turns out the light.

THE KITCHEN

Alex is washing dishes, Handyman drying. She turns as Jack comes through to the living room with an armful of blankets, sees Arby outside looking in.

Jack sees him too, dumps the blankets on the sofa.

JACK
There are no motels out here.
Unless you're expected back.

ALEX
I have the car 'til Monday.

JACK
Handyman. *Soo-goo!* Recharge, *ah-chee-keh!*

Jack whistles, opens the front door. Arby follows Handyman as he exits. Jack locks them out, sees Alex viewing him, concerned. He pours a drink, offers it to Alex, she declines.

ALEX
You know the MV35?

JACK
Sure. We used to fit them all the time.

ALEX
My father invented it.

Jack looks up from his Scotch. She nods.

ALEX
Maxwell Reinsch. He built the MV after my mother died. That damn thing raised me. We were very close, 'til he pulled the plug. She was alive to me. Dad was afraid I'd gotten too attached -- Since then I've been trying to figure which of us was right.

JACK
That explains a lot.

Alex steps up to Jack, annoyed.

ALEX
You know Arby was a drone.

JACK
So?

ALEX
So now he's creative, stubborn, moody. He's lousy at cards and he loves your little girl -- He learnt all that from you.

JACK
Wrong. All he got from me is
writer's block. That's all been
for Kitty. None of it's for me.

Alex shakes her head, not buying it for a second.

ALEX
Arby's potential is infinite.
Wonderful or bad, it's something
you're going to have to face.

EXT. SERVICE STATION - NIGHT

Arby stands on the threshold of the darkened workshop, staring in.

Handyman enters and stops before his recharge station. He hesitates, stares back at Arby, rotates and lowers himself onto the exposed electric power point.

Seen from across the forecourt, a bright FLASH illuminates the workshop. A beat of silence, then CICADAS resume.

INT. SERVICE STATION - NIGHT

Kitty emerges from her bedroom, sleepy, glances sullenly at Jack's closed bedroom door, pads through to the

KITCHEN

A light automatically comes on. Kitty climbs on a stool to retrieve a glass, stops and stares, astonished, at the

LIVING ROOM

Robot parts are everywhere. Alex enters from outside with another armful, locks eyes with little Kitty.

ALEX
It's Handyman.

KITTY
Did they have a fight?

ALEX
Accident, I think. Arby's fine.

KITTY
He is?

Kitty climbs down from her stool to join Alex, who carefully deposits the parts with all the rest. Arby enters carrying more, drops the lot. Alex cringes at the noise.

KITTY
Relax. Daddy slept through an
earthquake once. He snores like
one, too.

Alex smiles. Kitty lets her guard down, briefly smiles back, then returns to the kitchen.

Arby WHIRS, stares at Alex, kicks robot parts aside and continues to the den. Alex quickly follows.

DEN

Arby activates the monitor, starts noodling at text.

Alex watches from the door in excited anticipation. Kitty joins her with her water.

KITTY
What's he doing?

Arby shoots them both a look, then turns back to the computer, hunt and peck. Alex gently shoves Kitty forward.

Arby stops typing as Kitty sits nearby. She yawns, rubs her eyes -- smiles. Arby plugs into an access port. The screen starts to blaze through text.

EXT. SERVICE STATION - DAWN

Sunrise over the station.

INT. SERVICE STATION - DAY

JACK'S ROOM

Jack is sleeping alone. Kitty jumps on top of him.

KITTY
Daddy! Daddy! Wake up!

JACK
M'okay-- Wha--?

KITTY
Come see! In your den!

LIVING ROOM

Kitty drags Jack through to the living room. Jack stops. Furniture has been pushed back, the floor now completely covered with an array of wired-together robot parts.

Disturbed and confused, Jack looks into his

DEN

Amidst the BUZZ of printouts, Alex has rearranged Jack's computer and rewired it through her own machines and Handyman debris, all focusing on Arby, who has a few additions.

KITTY

We did it! He's writing!

Kitty tugs on Jack's sleeve. He allows himself to be seated at his piano beside a box of typescript.

Alex is in high spirits.

ALEX

Jack! Handyman was a rival! Once he was gone, no more writer's block! I used his parts as a control. Not all of them would work, but...

Jack flicks through typescript, numb.

JACK

Arby did all this?

Alex adds final pages to the box, kisses Jack's cheek.

ALEX

For Kitty.

Kitty stares, perturbed, as Alex sets about disconnecting Arby.

ALEX

How about some breakfast? Do you like pancakes, Arby?

Arby BEEPS enthusiastically. Alex steers him out.

Kitty watches Jack as he puts on his glasses, picks up a pen and starts to read.

(MONTAGE)

(i) JACK'S VIDPHON flashes TRANSMIT.

(ii) HUBIE'S PRINTER spits out page after page of typescript.

(iii) JACK'S VIDPHON prints out cover art for Slippery Sleuth - Part One: Lizzard's Revenge, the same old author's photo on the back. Alex views the photo critically with Jack.

(iv) VIEWED THROUGH ALEX'S CAMERA: Jack, Kitty and Arby sit on their porch, Kitty unsmiling. Alex takes the shot.

(v) THE PHOTO prints out on the back of Lizzard's Revenge.

(vi) JACK'S VIDPHON prints out cover art for Slippery Sleuth - Part Two: Blue Moon.

(vii) JACK plays his piano. Kitty asleep in an armchair in his office. Arby works at the computer,

(viii) The same SHIFTING TEXT on Alex's home pc, dark outside.

(ix) AUTOMATA DATA PROCESSORS work in clean-suits in an antiseptic room. Isaksen speaks with one of them, sees Alex clock in late. She hurries by, fatigued.

(END MONTAGE)

EXT. SERVICE STATION - DUSK

Kitty sits on her scooter, sullen, trying to make it start. Alex's Automata car pulls up. Kitty abandons the scooter. Her toy lizard scampers after her as she heads for the house.

INT. SERVICE STATION - CONTINUOUS

Kitty enters and lets the screen door slam behind her. Jack sees her go by while preparing dinner in the kitchen.

JACK
Where are you going?

KITTY
To wash my hands.

ALEX (O.S.)
Knock knock.

Alex enters bearing a bottle of wine. Arby emerges from the den, stretching as if after a hard day.

JACK
What are we celebrating?

Alex lays a magazine open on the counter: A best-seller list.

ALEX
Lizzard's Revenge, number eight
with a bullet, Literary Review.

The Vidphon starts to RING. Jack escapes to answer it.

JACK
Hubie. Hi.

Jack gives Alex a weary look. She smiles, starts to rummage for a bottle opener.

BATHROOM
Kitty washes her hands, listening.

JACK (O.S.)
Yes, great. What...? Really...?
No, I'm thrilled...

LIVING ROOM

ON-SCREEN: Hubie, ebullient.

HUBIE
The Lennies, Jackie! The Lionel
Prize! They just announced it!
You're in!

JACK
When you say 'in'...

HUBIE
I mean in two days you better get
yourself a tux! You've been
nominated, Jackie.... Jack?

Alex pulls the cork on her bottle of wine.

JACK
Fine. I'm cooking. I'll call you.
Tomorrow.

HUBIE
Wait, Jack. Don't hang up--!

Jack hangs up the phone. He sees Arby nearby, apparently watching with his frozen grin.

ALEX
A Lionel prize?

JACK
A nomination.

Kitty comes out from the bathroom.

The Vidphon starts to RING again. Jack goes into his den and unplugs the receiver from the wall. Alex follows him in.

ALEX
Jack, this will validate
everything we've done.

Kitty stands, lost, as conversation continues in the den. Arby ambles over and holds her hand. Hold on Kitty as she overhears Jack and Alex (O.S.) in the other room:

JACK
I don't know, Alex.

ALEX
Don't know what?

JACK
I don't know if this is the right
way to handle this.

Arby lifts Kitty's chin, sees her empty stare.

JACK
It's not like just getting my name
in 'Scientific American.'

ALEX
You're backing out?

JACK
Alex, this is not about me. This
is about giant corporate policy!
They'll destroy us! -- They'll
destroy him!

Kitty snaps.

KITTY
Shut up -- shut up -- shut up!

Arby walks up to the doorway to the den, inserts a finger into the electronic lock. The door slides shut and LOCKS.

DEN

Jack tries the door. It won't budge.

JACK
Arby!

LIVING ROOM

Kitty stares, confused, at Arby, the door, the room.

Room lights flicker. The wall-tv TURNS ON, starts flipping channels and then GLITCHING with Arby's memory images: Jack -- Kitty -- Alex -- Jack's wife.

DEN

Alex sees room lights flicker here too. Jack's desk lamp glows ultra-bright, EXPLODES. The electric pencil sharpener starts SCREAMING. The printer starts spewing paper, the word processor pulsing with gibberish text.

JACK

Arby! Open this door now!

LIVING ROOM

Arby EXPLODES back from the door, crashes through the coffee table. Kitty shrieks and rushes to his aid.

DEN

Jack tries to control the emotion in his voice, but he is becoming terrified.

JACK

Kitty, open up. Do you hear me?

LIVING ROOM

KITTY

Shut up, Daddy! I hate you!

Kitty weeps over the robot lying smoking in the wreck of the coffee table.

KITTY

I hate it here.

Arby rotates his head to face Kitty with his radiator grin. Kitty wipes away tears, hugs him, looks up to see the wall-tv playing a HOME MOVIE of the French family hiking in the mountains. She nods her head, decisive.

DEN

Jack views Alex, mortified. She pulls plugs on gadgets but cannot stop them coming to life. The printer blows up, starts a fire, sprinklers cut in, a sultry female VOICE intones:

FIRE ALARM

Danger. Fire in Jack's office...

EXT. SERVICE STATION - NIGHT

The station is in chaos. Fuel pumps PING madly.

INT. SERVICE STATION - NIGHT

KITCHEN

Utensils going haywire. Arby grabs foodstuffs, tosses them to Kitty who fields them into a tote bag.

LIVING ROOM

Tutor Tim babbles on the wall-tv. Arby waddles past, heads outside. Kitty follows, dragging groceries, hears her father BANGING on the door and YELLING from his den.

Jack's wallet lies on the end table. Kitty snags the credit cards, leaves her own smiling picture.

DEN

Jack is drenched and growing weaker. Alex disables the sprinklers, perched on a chair. She hops down and surveys the door lock. A heavy ENGINE REVVING (O.S.) stops them both.

JACK

Oh, God, no.

Jack clambers to peer out of a tiny window high in the wall.

EXT. SERVICE STATION - NIGHT

Jack's truck backs out of the workshop, Arby driving.

From the office window, Jack sees Kitty run out to the truck with her bag of food.

JACK

Kitty!

Kitty dumps the bag in the truck, stops, runs back inside. A brief pause, then she reappears with her yellow birthday dress, climbs up beside Arby and the truck pulls away.

JACK

Kitty! No!

EXT. DESERT ROAD - NIGHT

Jack's truck swerves wildly out into the road, weaves across both lanes, powers off in a cloud of dust.

INT. SERVICE STATION - NIGHT

Jack collapses. Alex sees the computer screen lit up with manic text.

ON-SCREEN, an icon flashes:

SEND.

INT. VIDPHON LINK

Swooping, surging bits of light and text hurtle down a fiber optic tunnel.

INT. HUBIE'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Hubie's office is deserted. A WHIRRING begins, a single flashing light on Hubie's Vidphon screen begins to blink:

Incoming transmission.

EXT. DESERT - DAWN

Viewed from afar, Jack's pickup is a tiny bug creeping along the desert road.

INT. PICKUP TRUCK - MOVING - DAYBREAK

Arby drives, legs extended to the pedals, one hand on the steering wheel. Kitty tunes her mini-tv, morose, cannot find a channel. She starts to weep.

KITTY

I forgot my lizard.

Arby pats Kitty's shoulder, plugs into the lighter. The radio turns on, blaring C&W MUSIC. Kitty grimaces. Arby tunes to CLASSICAL. Kitty frowns. Arby tunes to JAZZ, 'You Can't Take that Away From Me.' Kitty turns the music off.

KITTY

We're going to the mountains.

(MORE)

KITTY (CONT'D)
 (wipes her eyes)
 We'll show them they can't trick
 us to make you write again. And
 we're only coming back if they let
 you live. Okay?

The driver's window rolls down. Arby rests an elbow trucker-style, makes a thumb and finger 'okay' gesture.

KITTY
 We're going to be okay.

Arby peers closer at the dash, taps one of the gauges. Fuel is showing almost EMPTY.

EXT. DESERT ROAD - CONTINUOUS

The pickup whizzes by.

INT. SERVICE STATION - DAY

DEN

The door is still firmly shut. Alex has the lock apart. Jack sits across the room, sorting scorched and sodden manuscript pages. A moment of Zen-like calm, then Jack violently bundles all the papers, stands and jams them in the trash.

JACK
 (distracted)
 Who am I kidding, right? It's all
 gone now. My wife. My book. My
 daughter.

ALEX
 They won't get far, Jack. Someone
 will pick them up.

JACK
 No.

Jack faces her, walks up, very close.

JACK
 Not someone. Us. You want the
 robot? You can have him. We are
 getting out of here and we are
 going to find them. Nothing
 matters to me now except my little
 girl. Nothing.

Alex looks away. Goes back to working at the lock.

LIVING ROOM

A war zone.

The door to the den pops open. Alex crumples with relief. Jack steps quickly past her.

Alex pulls herself up, exhausted. A toilet FLUSHES (O.S.), a beat then Jack reappears pulling on a clean shirt. He holds out a set of keys.

JACK
Are these yours?

ALEX
What? Yes.

Jack throws Alex's handbag onto the sofa, sees his wallet, grabs it and heads out the front door.

ALEX
Jack! Wait a second!

She goes after Jack.

EXT. SERVICE STATION - DAY

Jack makes for the Automata car, Alex on his heels.

ALEX
Stop!

Jack halts abruptly and glares at her, intently.

ALEX
I'm on your side, okay?

JACK
What side is that? The child-
abducting robot side?

Alex goes to her car, opens the door and grabs a removable dash-mounted SCANNER. She aims it out at the desert, adjusting the settings.

ALEX
If I ramp up the power, I can pick
him up within five miles.

Jack sits in the car, starts the engine, pops open the passenger door. Alex sits beside him and buckles up.

ALEX
Arby's not going to hurt anyone,
Jack. He can't, not with his
programming. You okay to drive?

Jack nods and they peel out, heading for the city.

EXT. QWIKEE MART - DAY

The pickup pulls in to a fuel pump.

INT. QWIKEE MART - DAY

A young clerk with an i.d. 'Hi, my name is OMAR' looks up from the cash register.

The pickup has parked just out of view.

Kitty enters, browses candy shelves, nonchalant, then stops at the register with Jack's credit card.

KITTY
My daddy's gone to use the
bathroom. He asked me to get the
gas.

Omar produces a large wooden dowel attached to a key.

OMAR
Daddy will be needing this.

Kitty hesitates, takes the key, then exits.

KITTY
Oh, Daddy!

Omar watches Kitty walk out of sight, rings up the card.

EXT. QWIKEE MART - DAY

Arby fits the fuel pump into the open gas tank.

Kitty appears, gives the 'thumbs-up,' disposes of the bathroom key behind a potted cactus and returns inside.

Arby pumps gas, sees a VENDING MACHINE.

INT. QWIKEE MART - DAY

Kitty takes a basket and fills up at the shelves. Omar watches over the top of his magazine.

EXT. QWIKEE MART - DAY

The gas pump sits wedged, pumping. Arby stands across the drive before the vending machine: automotive fluids, mini video discs, air fresheners, maps.

Arby plugs into the machine, WHIRS. Nothing. He extends a tool and ignites an ACETYLENE TORCH.

INT. QWIKEE MART - DAY

Kitty heaves her groceries up onto Omar's counter: Sodas, ding-dongs, chips, a couple of women's magazines. Omar slowly stands and scans each item.

KITTY

We're visiting my Mommy. She lives
in the city.

Omar regards Kitty without comment, fills a paper bag. Kitty glances out, sees Arby amble past with an armful of junk.

Omar rings up the tab. Kitty reaches for the credit card.

OMAR

Your Daddy needs to sign.

Kitty hesitates, smiles.

EXT. QWIKEE MART - DAY

Kitty returns to Arby at the truck. He is seated inside sorting his spoils.

KITTY

Where did you get all this? We
have to pay for everything. This
is bad. Very bad.

Arby WHIRS unfolds a map.

KITTY

Arby? *Comprende?*

Arby looks up, over Kitty's shoulder. Kitty follows his gaze.

KITTY

Oh, no.

Omar exits with their groceries. He sees the wrecked vending machine, advances on Kitty and Arby, furious.

Arby opens the door for Kitty.

KITTY

No. We're not going to be thieves.

Arby WHINES.

One of Omar's hands slaps down on Kitty's shoulder.

Arby SHRIEKS and leaps out of the truck, landing at full height, all his tools extended -- drills whirring, blades spinning, lights ablaze.

Omar SCREAMS and sprints back for the store.

Arby snaps back down, sees Kitty staring, shocked. He takes her hand and leads her to the truck.

INT. QWIKEE MART - DAY

Omar dives pell-mell for his desk, pulls out a massive HANDGUN.

EXT. QWIKEE MART - DAY

Omar runs out with the handgun.

The pickup screeches out onto an intersecting highway. A SHOT impacts the store sign overhead in a shower of sparks.

INT. PICKUP TRUCK - MOVING - DAY

Arby pulls Kitty down, out of the line of fire. She stares at him, afraid.

INT. HUBIE'S OFFICE - DAY

Hubie enters, loaded down with manuscripts, coffee and a donut.

He dumps his armload, sees print-out overflowing his Vidphon. He picks up one page, bewildered.

The American Automata logo is emblazoned across the top of the page:

CONFIDENTIAL REPORT, ALEX REINSCH.

Quiet VOICES (O.S.) make Hubie look up.

HUBIE
Cheryl? That you, sugar?

Through the frosted glass, several DARK FIGURES can be seen entering the adjoining room. Hubie goes for his desk drawer. The office door flies open.

INT. AUTOMATA SHOP FLOOR - DAY

Gabby looks up from his terminal.

Corby crosses the shop floor, enters Isaksen's office.

BABS
(sing-song)
Something bad is happening.

Babs sees Gabby staring.

BABS
Gabby, man? You okay?

Gabby shakes his head, pallid. From across the room, Isaksen looks confused and beckons Gabby to join them.

EXT. DESERT ROAD - DAY

The Automata car speeds past.

INT. AUTOMATA CAR - MOVING - DAY

Jack drives, Alex scanning the landscape with her tracking device, referencing a dashboard map display.

JACK
I just don't understand why they'd
be heading for the city. Kitty's
never been.

ALEX
Arby may be trying to lock on to a
location, a referent from his past
-- What?

Jack eases off the gas, something up ahead.

EXT. QWIKEE MART - DAY

Two highway patrol vehicles are parked outside with small crowd of ON-LOOKERS - travelers and local farmers. A PATROLMAN flags Jack down.

Jack slows, Alex sees a TV NEWS VAN parked, setting up a news report.

ALEX
Don't stop!

Jack accelerates, joins the highway to the city and leaves the Patrolman puzzled, watching the Automata car race off.

EXT. DESERT HIGHWAY - DAY

The pickup powers along.

INT. PICKUP TRUCK - MOVING - DAY

Arby's telescopic eye checks the mirrors as he drives. Kitty slots video discs one after another into her mini-tv: old WAR MOVIES, WESTERNS, GANGSTER PICTURES.

KITTY
They're all Daddy movies.

Kitty SIGHS, squints out up ahead.

KITTY
What's that?

Shimmering like a mirage, a vehicle approaches up ahead.

Arby's camera eye zooms in. He grips the steering wheel with both hands, shoots a third arm out to hold Kitty down.

EXT. DESERT HIGHWAY - DAY

The pickup veers off the shoulder, bumps across the desert, dips into a gully and buries itself head-first in a bush.

The approaching vehicle is a HIGHWAY PATROL CAR.

Dust settles around the pickup, now hidden from the road.

The patrol car zips by at high speed.

INT. PICKUP TRUCK - DESERT GULLY - DAY

Arby's camera eye peers over the back of the driver's seat. Kitty clambers out of the foot well where she has fallen. Arby fusses with his map.

KITTY

They're going to catch us, aren't they? We're going to go to jail. What are we going to do?

Arby WHIRS, looks up from the map, selects a gangster movie ('White Heat'), plugs it into Kitty's tv.

MOVIE GANGSTER

We're gonna hide out, see? Lie low for a while 'til the heat cools down. Anybody moves, they answer to me. Right, Ma?

Arby restarts the truck. They back out.

EXT. DESERT HIGHWAY - DAY

The pickup emerges from the bushes, re-joins the highway and shortly takes a turning onto a DIRT ROAD.

EXT. SERVICE STATION - DAY

The deserted station. TURBINE noise begins. A violent downdraft whips up dust, a SHADOW DESCENDS.

An ugly FLYING MACHINE bearing the Automata logo lands in front of Jack's service station.

EXT. SERVICE STATION - LATER

RETRIEVAL AGENTS swarm the station, bagging Jack's computers and household appliances. Isaksen observes from the TRANSPORT ramp as a young TEAM LEADER displays a palmtop report.

TEAM LEADER

It's a positive i.d. on an Automata vehicle at a Qwikee Mart sixty kilometers east.

ISAKSEN

I'm sure it's them. Make sure everybody keeps their distance.

TEAM LEADER

Sir?

ISAKSEN
She's our only lead. Chances are
they're taking us right to them.

GABBY
(calling out)
Mister Isaksen!

Gabby waves Isaksen over to the workshop where a group of Agents have cornered Arby's mechanical lizard.

GABBY
We don't think it's man-made.

Isaksen peers close at the tiny machine. It darts away. Agents dive to catch it, one snags it with a net.

ISAKSEN
(wearied)
Send it to the lab.

The Team Leader approaches, timid.

TEAM LEADER
Sir? Request denied.

Isaksen grabs the palmtop.

TEAM LEADER
Control wants suspects brought in
for questioning in view of the
substantial money sum being levied
on the unit.

ISAKSEN
A bounty? Every a-hole in the
state will be out there gunning
for this thing.

TEAM LEADER
Sir, it's not state-wide, it's
national.

Isaksen hands the Team Leader back his palmtop, heads for his transport. Gabby gives the Team Leader a conciliatory shrug, hurries after Isaksen.

EXT. DESERT HIGHWAY - DAY

The Automata car speeds east, passing a sign: Manx 35.

EXT. DIRT ROAD - DAY

The pickup trundles north.

They pass a mountainous pile of wrecked cars topped by a sign 'Skyler's Auto Salvage.' Kitty winds down her window.

They are approaching a seemingly endless sprawl of derelict machines rising out of the desert.

INT. PICKUP TRUCK - MOVING - DAY

Kitty is awed by the sight of the dead and decaying autos.

KITTY

Look at all the cars. This must be
where they come to die.

Arby checks his mirrors, swings the steering wheel around. They enter an opening in the vehicles. Kitty views Arby questioningly but he seems to know what he is doing.

EXT. JUNK YARD - DUSK

The sun is low as the pickup navigates the wrecks. Up high, a robot camera pans to follow the truck.

INT. AUTOMATA CAR - MOVING - DUSK

Alex's scanner BEEPS.

EXT. DESERT HIGHWAY - DUSK

The Automata car screeches to a halt on the empty highway, backs up wildly to an offramp, takes an exit posted 'Manx.'

INT. AUTOMATA CAR - MOVING - CONTINUOUS

Alex operates the scanner as she drives.

JACK

Why would they stop here?

ALEX

I had them a second ago. They must
be close. Keep driving.

EXT. MANX - TOWN STREETS - NIGHT

The Automata car passes mobile homes, turns on its lights.

They turn onto a dilapidated Main Street.

INT. AUTOMATA CAR - MOVING - CONTINUOUS

Jack peers out ahead. Sees a run down diner, DIGGER'S PIZZERIA.
He pulls over.

ALEX
Why are you stopping?

JACK
I don't trust that thing.

ALEX
Jack, I had them. Wait.

Alex tunes the dashboard display. Jake takes the keys.

JACK
You wait.

Jack climbs out of the car. Alex sighs, stares at her palmtop,
then looks up at the old neon sign above: DIGGER'S PIZZERIA.

INT. DIGGER'S PIZZERIA - NIGHT

Jack enters, pulls out his wallet photograph of Kitty. He
approaches a HEFTY MAN in a booth and an OLD GEEZER watching
hockey on a tv above the bar.

The BARKEEP views Jack with suspicion, overseeing a dented,
ROBOT BUS-BOY behind a serving hatch.

JACK
I'm looking for this little girl.
She's six. Katrina French. Kitty.

The Barkeep squints at Jack's photo and the car outside.

JACK
She's fond of pepperoni.

The Bus-Boy DROPS A PLATE (O.S.). The Barkeep tenses, shakes
his head.

BARKEEP
Yeah, we seen her, guy. You with
the company?

JACK
Not personally, no -- You've seen
her?

Alex enters, attracting more attention from the clientele.

BARKEEP
Yeah, Katrina Kitty and her little
metal pal. You gonna nail his
little metal ass --
(points to the TV)
-- for that cash reward, hm?

ALEX
Jack...

JACK
Reward? What reward?

Another SMASH (O.S.) from the kitchen.

BARKEEP
You an' half the country --
Geraldo, you are dead!

The Barkeep pulls a baseball bat from under the counter and
storms into the kitchen, raising hell in ITALIAN.

OLD GEEZER
Time was men were men. Never sent
a machine to do a man's job.
String 'em up, I say. Show 'em all
who's boss.

ALEX
Jack, let's go.

Alex drags Jack out as the (O.S.) kitchen scene gets ugly.

HEFTY GUY
It's him. Robodaddy. Off tv.

OLD GEEZER
Naah.

HEFTY GUY
It is!

They view Jack and Alex through the window.

EXT. MANX - TOWN STREETS - CONTINUOUS

ALEX
(MORE)

ALEX (CONT'D)
(re: scanner)
Here, take a look at this...

Jack ignores Alex completely, steps back and regards her dubiously. Alex stops to see THEIR TIRES HAVE BEEN SLASHED.

JACK
What is going on here, Alex?

ALEX
I've no idea. Financial reward is not standard operations--

JACK
Damn right it's not!

Alex sees the pizzeria patrons staring.

ALEX
I think we should stay calm.

JACK
I've noticed you're very good at that. Maybe I'm missing something. Maybe I've been missing something for a while.

ALEX
You don't think... -- Jack, be real! If they let me get this far, they've used me as much as they used you. Come on, there's a gas stop ahead. We'll grab a rental.

JACK
Good idea.

Jack walks off without her, nods to the diner patrons.

Alex sees an OLD MAN IN A BALLCAP watching from a porch. She grabs the scanner from the car, pops the hatchback to retrieve a snub-nosed PACIFIER GUN and stuffs it in her bag.

EXT. JUNK YARD - HIDEOUT - NIGHT

Kitty and Arby camp beside their pickup, Arby roasting a hot-dog over an old heating filament; Kitty huddled in a blanket on a ripped-out car seat, viewing the end of her movie.

MOVIE GANGSTER
I'm top of the world, Ma! Top of the world!

Kitty ejects the disc, extends the tv's antenna, picks up an HISPANIC NEWS REPORT, fading in and out. Arby extends an arm, crimps the antenna and reception instantly improves.

ON-SCREEN: Jack's author photo from his first book.

KITTY
It's Daddy!

Arby takes interest.

ON-SCREEN

The HISPANIC NEWSCASTER chatters over pictures of violence in the streets, a robot being smashed, finally a split-screen image of Arby with a grainy shot of Kitty. A price tag flashes under Arby's image.

Arby hands Kitty her hot-dog and walks away, despondent, to recharge at the pickup. Kitty turns off the tv, walks to a mighty pile of junk and hurls the gadget as far as she can.

KITTY
I won't let them hurt you, Arby.
I'm glad we ran away. We won't
ever go back.

A figure rises from the junk and grabs Kitty by the mouth -- SKYLER, the salvage man from Jack's, levels a knife-gun at Arby (a combination handgun, brass-knuckles, combat knife.)

SKYLER
One move and you're salvage.

Arby snaps up in alarm but halts, seeing the weapon.

SKYLER
Quit wiggling, twerp. We're goin'
home to Daddy -- Ow!

Kitty bites Skyler's hand and slips his grip to YELL:

KITTY
Run, Arby!

Skyler pulls Kitty close, backs up. Arby starts to tremble, briefly stumbles.

Lightning fast, a claw flies from Arby's side, grabs the knife-gun, flings it.

The weapon spears the radiator of Jack's truck. Steam vents.

KITTY
(to Arby)
Oh, good going, dummy.

Skyler stands exposed, scoops Kitty up and runs. Kitty SCREAMS. Arby springs to full height and gives chase.

SKYLER

runs with Kitty SQUEALING in his arms.

ARBY

bounds through the wrecks, on feet and knuckles like an ape. He stops and glimpses Skyler take a turning up ahead.

SKYLER

enters a blind alley to the open backside of a buried bus. He pulls the engine cover shut behind him, sealing the way in, Kitty's CRIES cut short.

ARBY

runs up, halts, looks all around. No Skyler. Kitty's SCREAMS sound faint. His camera eye switches from white to blue.

ROBOT P.O.V.

NEGATIVE IMAGING reveals footprints in bas relief. Arby follows Skyler's steps to the solid wall of cars.

SKYLER

clangs through a darkened metal tunnel, feet pounding steel. He jumps out into night air, lands on dirt below, clutching Kitty to him, and takes off again.

ARBY

scales the wrecks, clambers to the top. He scans all about. His camera switches from blue to red, sees a THERMAL blob departing far below. Arby SQUAWKS, springs to action.

He leaps and grabs the cable of an over-hanging crane. He swings then releases, grabs a jutting chassis frame. He's a mechanical spider monkey in a metal jungle.

NARROW CORRIDOR

Skyler runs through a high, narrow corridor of cars. He hears a CRASH (O.S.), rounds a bend, skids to a stop.

Dust rises from an avalanche of cars, sealing the way ahead. Something flashes by above. Skyler raises his eyes, frightened, breathing hard. He retreats, muting Kitty. A squat shape lands behind them with a THUMP. Skyler spins.

Arby hunkers, tools extended, camera eye now green.

In NIGHT VISION, Skyler releases Kitty, backs up.

SKYLER

Okay, metalhead. You win.

Kitty stares between Arby and Skyler. Skyler tries to climb the wrecks. Pieces come loose. He slips and falls, terrified. Arby folds all his tools away except one serrated pincer.

KITTY

Arby... no.

Arby advances, looming over Skyler.

KITTY

Arby, I said no!

Arby's pincer shoots for Skyler's throat, plucks a chain from the boy's neck. Arby turns to display a set of keys to Kitty.

KITTY

Not funny.

Skyler flees.

KITTY

Wait! We've got to tie him up!

Kitty sighs. Arby takes her arm, trudges after Skyler.

CLEARING

Skyler continues running off as Arby and Kitty come out to a stop. Arby WHIRS and points. Skyler's CUSTOMIZED DUNE BUGGY sits across the way. Arby jangles the keys.

EXT. MANX - GAS STOP - NIGHT

Alex walks up to a dilapidated gas stop, carrying her bag. Jack is arguing with a short, dirty ATTENDANT in overalls.

JACK

I don't have any credit cards or
identification.

Alex pulls out her gun and her Automata i.d., points them at the attendant.

ALEX
Do you have a vehicle --
 (re: name patch)
-- Danny?

The attendant nods, makes a hasty retreat. Alex waits until he has gone inside, adjusts the setting on the gun.

ALEX
Guess I could've de-ionized him to
death. Whatever works, huh?

A thin VOICE makes them both look round.

SKYLER (O.S.)
I found 'em! They're here!

Skyler runs by, SCREAMING, drawing people out into the street. A crowd begin to gather.

Alex checks her scanner, meets eyes with Jack.

ALEX
I knew it. Arby's records show he
worked in a mine. There's a quarry
just outside of town. Get to him
first. Save Kitty. Here's your
ride -- Go!

Alex hands him the gun and scanner and heads off for the crowd as the Attendant comes back out wheeling a filthy, rusted NORTON MOTORCYCLE.

EXT. DESERT TRAIL - NIGHT

Leaving the junk yard behind, the dune buggy blazes along an unpaved desert trail.

INT. BUGGY - MOVING - NIGHT

Arby drives, Kitty trying to read one of their stolen maps, belted in beside him.

EXT. MANX - OUTSKIRTS - FIRST LIGHT

Jack rides the Norton away from town, the scanner BEEPING, taped to the handlebars.

EXT. MANX - MAIN STREET - DAWN

Alex cannot stop other townsfolk as they crowd into vehicles. Someone loads a shotgun, another loads a crate of dynamite.

ALEX

Whoa! Whoa! Where are you going
with that?

TOWNIE

Take a number, doll.

TURBINE NOISE whips dust up all around, then a XENON LIGHT stabs down. Alex looks up. The AUTOMATA TRANSPORT descends.

ISAKSEN

(amplified)

Drop your weapons, this is
Automata Control -- Halt!

Derision from the townsfolk. PICKUPS and OFF-ROADERS speed out of town.

EXT. HILLSIDE - CONTINUOUS

The buggy mounts a craggy rise, launching off rocks.

INT. BUGGY - MOVING - CONTINUOUS

Kitty clings on tight. Arby SHRIEKS, stomps on the brakes.

EXT. HILLTOP - CONTINUOUS

The buggy skids to avoid a wire fence, lurches to a rest. Kitty and Arby peer up at a sign, 'DANGER: High Voltage Electric Fence, Keep Out.' Kitty climbs out to view the barrier, looks back at Arby who has stepped out to peer back. The sun is almost up, the dawn vista behind them.

KITTY

Oh, no.

Kitty points. Arby extends his electronic eye.

ROBOT P.O.V.

The dust plume from Jack's motorbike switches to A CLOSER VIEW, then WHIP PANS to reveal the TOWN VEHICLES in pursuit.

BACK TO SCENE

Arby WHINES, rummages in the buggy.

KITTY
Who are they, Arby?

Arby reappears with a heavy wrench, weighs it in his hand, moves Kitty aside and stands before the fence. He swings the wrench above his head, whips it to a twirling blur and releases. Kitty hides her eyes.

EXT. MANX - OUTSKIRTS - DAYBREAK

One of the careening off-roaders YELLS, pointing at an ELECTRICAL EXPLOSION in the hills.

EXT. HILLTOP - DAY

Jack crests the hill, wheels to a stop, seeing buggy tire tracks leading through a gaping, blackened hole in the fence. Jack powers through the gap, following the tracks.

JACK
Kit-ty! Ar-by!

EXT. QUARRY - DAY

Jack's motorbike descends the rocky crater wall bordering a quarry populated by giant robot excavators.

The buggy navigates the digging machines.

Arby, scorched from his encounter with the fence, puts on a burst of speed. Kitty grips the dash.

EXT. HILLTOP - DAY

A pickup launches into view, skids to avoid collision with the fence, another races through the gap, raking sparks.

EXT. QUARRY - DAY

Arby's buggy speeds through quarry machinery. Arby extends an eye to look back as he drives.

Townies gain on Jack.

Jack sees a pickup aim a gun ahead, he rides into the vehicle's path, forcing it to swerve. The pickup side-swipes Jack back, causing him to lose control.

KITTY
Arby, look out!

A large mechanical hopper wanders out into their path.

Arby jerks the buggy steering wheel.

The buggy swerves, clips a mud bank, flips and tumbles then crashes into a ventilation duct. No explosion. The hopper continues past, regardless.

Jack throws down his bike, runs. Off-roaders zip by.

EXT. CRASH SITE - DAY

Dust settles around the upturned buggy.

Armed townsfolk leap from their vehicles, group around the crash.

Jack runs up at a sprint, staggers to halt a few yards from the wreck, closer than anyone else.

Arby is face-down, thrown clear. One robot arm snaps to life.

Townsfolk back off, including Jack. A few folks cock their guns. Jack is too charged up to notice.

Arby gains his feet, views the crowd, turns his back on them and limps to the inverted buggy. He peers underneath.

Kitty is unconscious, suspended by her seatbelt. Arby reaches under, supports her weight, snips her free.

Jack steps closer, almost all the way to Arby, but halts as the robot faces him with Kitty in his arms.

Jack can hardly breathe.

Arby cradles Kitty as if she were asleep.

TOWNIE
Get him.

Something snaps in Jack. He pulls out Alex's Automata gun.

JACK
Just no-one move, okay?

TOWNIE
Who in hell is he?

JACK
I'm her Goddamn father.

Arby sees a generator bunker nearby, starts toward it, limping, carrying Kitty.

Townie makes a move. Jack simply shakes his head, absolutely means it. A loud metal CRASH (O.S.) makes everyone look round.

Arby stands before the locked steel bunker door, now severely dented. He gives it another mighty kick, the door caves in on its hinges, he steps inside with Kitty.

Townie grabs Jack's weapon. A fight breaks out. Jack is quickly overpowered. TURBINE NOISE begins (O.S.).

EXT. BUNKER - DAY

A TV news vehicle hovers overhead, cameras aiming down.

Automata transports have turned the area into a military operation. Retrieval Agents assisted by LOCAL COPS have the bunker cordoned off, vigilantes rounded up. MARKSMEN check their weapons, preparing to go in.

Jack is searched, cuffed, then taken to a waiting transport.

INT. AUTOMATA TRANSPORT - DAY

Jack's cuffs are fastened to the seat by a robot Automata Guard, who proceeds to sit beside him, mute.

GABBY

Ugly mother.

Gabby finishes pre-flight checks in the cockpit area.

JACK

Where are you taking me?

GABBY

Wherever they tell me.

Gabby leaves as Alex appears with Isaksen in the doorway. Alex takes a seat opposite Jack.

ALEX

Jack French: Bill Isaksen. He's in charge of this retrieval.

JACK

If anything happens to my daughter
I'm suing your damn company.

A brief look between Isaksen and Alex.

ALEX

Jack, Bill is trying to help. We don't have a lot of time. I need you to explain the modifications you installed in Arby.

JACK

He's trying to help? He put a price tag on my daughter's life!

ISAKSEN

I had nothing to do with the bounty, Mr. French.

JACK

Who did then?

ALEX

Your publisher got hold of my report. I don't know how. We think they offered him a deal.

Jack glowers at Alex.

JACK

(to Isaksen)

He's a twelve-eleven casing running on a twelve-fourteen. There's a lot of other functions but he's modulated to my voice. He'll flip out if someone else tries to take her from him. You've got to let me in there.

ISAKSEN

I can only do that if I have your complete cooperation.

JACK

You've got it. Now get these things off me.

Isaksen takes out the Automata handgun.

ISAKSEN

I need you to destroy the robot as soon as the girl is clear.

ALEX

What? That's not what we agreed!
-- Jack?

JACK

(listless)

He kidnapped my daughter.

ALEX

He's protecting her! You said it yourself. Arby's never been a threat to anyone but the company. They're afraid of him because he's the future, Jack.

ISAKSEN

Ms. Reinsch, are you finished?

Alex views Jack in complete despair.

ISAKSEN

Help us, Mr. French, and I'll see you're given the opportunity to clear your name. Yes or no?

Jack finds that he can't speak, drops his eyes, just nods. Alex stares at Isaksen in pain and disbelief, then exits.

EXT. BUNKER - DAY

AUTOMATA SECURITY

keep the TV news at bay.

GABBY

sees Alex exit the transport. He finishes a cigarette, follows her behind another vehicle and finds her weeping. She sees Gabby but can't stop herself.

ALEX

Sorry. For getting you involved.

GABBY

Forget it. Don't get out much anyway. What's up in there?

Alex watches Isaksen lead Jack out to a group of Agents. They fit him for a flak jacket.

ALEX

I don't want to know.

ISAKSEN

arrives at a tented array of video monitors. The Team Leader appears with a portable Vidphon displaying 'Call Waiting.'

TEAM LEADER

Controller Corby for you, sir?

Isaksen takes his call: Corby in his office.

ISAKSEN

(into phone)

We're going in right now, sir. We have Mr. French's complete cooperation, marksmen at a hundred meters.

CORBY

(on-screen)

Very well. I'm on direct feed with your monitors on site -- We're all counting on you, Bill.

JACK

approaches Guards and Marksmen at the open bunker door. He's now wearing a headset with his flak jacket and gun. He takes a flashlight from a nearby Cop and enters.

INT. BUNKER - CONTINUOUS

Jack tries the light switch. No power. He uses the flashlight to illuminate a flight of steps leading down into a narrow concrete corridor. A trail of oil leads down the steps.

JACK

(into headset)

Are you getting this?

ISAKSEN

(filtered)

We read you, Mr. French.

Jack proceeds.

EXT. BUNKER - DAY

News cameras capture the scene as Marksmen enter the bunker.

Alex and Gabby join Isaksen at the monitors. He hands Alex a headset of her own, switches frequencies.

ISAKSEN

Nobody to fire except on my command.

MARKSMAN (V.O.)

(filtered)

Copy that.

INT. CORBY'S OFFICE - DAY

Corby views a video display unit at his desk showing Jack's grainy P.O.V. entering the bunker.

INT. BUNKER

CORRIDOR

Jack follows the oil trail, comes across a JANITOR'S ROOM, shines his light inside. An open locker, a broken vending machine. Spots of oil lead out to a half-open door ahead. Jack approaches the door, pushes it open, enters

A SWITCHING ROOM

crammed with relays and LED displays. A deep electric THRUM. Jack shines his light around, ventures in.

A SPARK and flash of light ahead.

Jack follows the trail of oil to the end of a row of switches. Heart pounding, he peers round.

One breaker is out of line with a row of others, occasionally SPARKING. Jack sees a nest of candy wrappers, a blanket.

JACK
(into headset)
He's thrown one of the breakers.
I'm leaving power down, I don't
want to scare him.

He sees the oil trail leading to another door.

JACK
(into headset)
In fact, I'll call you when I'm
done.

ISAKSEN
(filtered)
Mr. French, please! No!

Jack removes his headset and powerpack, pauses at the flak jacket, leaves that on. He tries the door. It opens.

EXT. BUNKER - DAY

ISAKSEN
(MORE)

ISAKSEN (CONT'D)
(into headset)
Team Leader, we've lost our eyes
and ears. Proceed with caution.

INT. BUNKER - CORRIDOR

MARKSMAN
Team Leader copy.

Marksmen advance, eyes glowing.

INT. GENERATOR ROOM

JACK

steps out on a catwalk, the THRUM all around now. He shines his flashlight down. Three massive TURBINES sit below.

Jack casts his flashlight around, sees something on the catwalk. He picks it up: A shred of Kitty's yellow dress. Jack takes a ladder down.

LOWER LEVEL

Arby is a silhouette against glowing readout dials, limping, dragging Kitty. He pauses, hearing JACK'S VOICE, not far off.

JACK (V.O.)
Arby...? Kitty...?

Arby's efforts grow more hurried.

JACK

walks along beside giant generators, shining his flashlight beam into every crevice.

JACK
It's Daddy.

Arby WHINES (O.S.). Jack halts, steps toward the sound. Streaks of oil lead to an access panel that stands open to another darkened crawlspace in the floor. Jack checks the safety on his handgun, tucks it in the back of his belt.

INT. BUNKER - SWITCHING ROOM

The Marksmen find Jack's discarded headset. The team leader points ahead.

Flashlight beams fall on the generator room door.

INT. CRAWLSPACE

Jack descends the ladder, barely fits into the opening. He twists his body round, comes face-to-face with Arby. Jack jolts back in shock and hits his head.

JACK
Ow! Dammit! Ow!

Kitty, who has been unconscious until now, opens her eyes.

KITTY
(very weak)
Daddy?

INT. GENERATOR ROOM

Marksmen come out onto the catwalk, take position aiming down.

MARKSMAN
Voices and a thermal on the
generator floor. Two sources.

ISAKSEN (V.O.)
(filtered)
Move in, but hold your fire.

INT. CRAWLSPACE

Kitty is in a corner swaddled in a blanket. The robot squats between her and her father, cutting tools extended.

KITTY
(feeble)
Where am I?

Both Jack and Arby see Kitty staring, bleary.

JACK
Honey, are you hurt?

Jack reaches for her. Arby snaps forward. Jack pulls away.

JACK
Arby! It's me! Give me a break --
Kitty, honey, can you move your
fingers and your toes?

KITTY
I can move them fine. We don't
need you, Daddy.

JACK
Kitty, I need you. I need you very
much. Come here.

KITTY
No.

Kitty backs up, winces at a pain in her shoulder. Jack attempts to help. Arby snaps again, chattering his teeth.

INT. GENERATOR ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Marksmen advance to flank the open crawlspace hatch, weapons trained below. Other gun barrels point down from positions above.

MARKSMAN
Target isolated and holding.

EXT. BUNKER - DAY

ISAKSEN
Hold.

All crew chiefs have gathered to watch the blurry images on the video monitors. PARAMEDICS stand by.

INT. CRAWLSPACE - CONTINUOUS

Jack faces off with Arby. The robot starts to droop. Oil leaks from a hole in his lower chassis.

JACK
Arby, both of you need help.

KITTY
(fading)
Don't listen, Arby... He's
tricking us again... so you'll
write another book.

JACK
Kitty...

KITTY
Go away.

JACK
Kitty, I don't care if I ever
write again. Don't fall asleep!

Kitty opens her eyes, closes them again.

JACK
Arby, Kitty's sick. If we don't
keep her awake she might not be
able to reboot.

Arby sinks onto his butt, stares at Kitty.

ROBOT P.O.V.

Kitty, fading, GLITCHES to:

(i) Windmill - Lightning - Jack - Kitty - GLITCH.

(ii) Lizard - Alex - Kitty - GLITCH.

(iii) Arby, falling, falling - GLITCH.

JACK (O.S.)
Arby...?

BACK TO SCENE

Arby's head swivels to face Jack, extends a metal claw. Jack gently takes the robot's hand. The robot WHIRS, then starts to TRILL a wavering version of 'You Can't Take That Away From Me.'

SONG
The way your smile just beams,/
The way you sing off key...

Jack pulls away, unnerved.

SONG
The way you haunt my dreams,/ No,
they can't take that away from
me...

Kitty opens her eyes to regard warbling robot. Arby leans in, extends a finger, brushes back a piece of her hair that has fallen in Kitty's face. Kitty manages a weak smile.

SONG
No-oo, they-yy can't take that
away from me.

Jack sees a jagged hole in the robot's underside. He rips off a corner of his shirt, stuffs the fabric in the hole.

JACK
Okay, blue eyes. Now help me with
her.

Jack reaches past the robot, slips his hands under Kitty's arms
and pulls her close.

JACK
That's it, baby -- Arby, up...

Arby does as he is told, helps Jack maneuver Kitty so her
father can lift her up the ladder.

KITTY
(barely there at all)
Daddy..?

JACK
Mhm?

KITTY
Maybe we can take a vacation... by
the ocean... when we're rich?

JACK
Hm. What do you think, Arby?
Sounds like this kid really banged
her head.

Jack's gun CLANKS against a rung on the ladder as he climbs.
Arby, pauses, WHIRS.

INT. GENERATOR ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Jack emerges from the crawlspace to see the Automata Marksmen.
Laser sights flick across his face. A brief, terrible beat,
then gunmen silently fall back into shadow.

KITTY
What was that?

Jack shushes her, then heaves Kitty out of the crawlspace,
still blocking Arby's exit.

Jack lays Kitty down, speaks close.

JACK
Hanging in there, sport?

KITTY
Yes.

JACK
Love me?

KITTY
Yes.

JACK
Trust me?

KITTY
Yes.

Jack kisses Kitty's head, climbs out of the hatchway and reaches down an arm.

JACK
Arby, up.

Beat. Arby takes hold, Jack pulls him up. As soon as Arby's head has cleared the hatch, Jack removes the handgun from his belt, presses the muzzle up against the robot's casing.

JACK
(whispers close)
Arby: Freeze, turkey.

Arby goes limp, a dead weight on Jack's arm, and the robot falls with a CRASH back into the crawlspace.

Kitty WAILS. Marksmen swarm in. Jack tosses his gun, scoops up Kitty and shields her with his body.

EXT. BUNKER - CONTINUOUS

Isaksen and Alex both YELL into the comlink:

ALEX
Don't shoot!

ISAKSEN
Hold your fire!

INT. BUNKER - CONTINUOUS

Marksmen shine lights into the crawlspace, do not open fire.

Jack hugs Kitty tight.

EXT. BUNKER - LATER

Automata Techs crowd the bunker door. Medics appear, carrying Kitty on a stretcher. Jack follows, blinking against the light. Guards hold back Reporters, keeping them from Jack.

REPORTERS

How does it feel to be a hero,
Mister French? Mister French, will
we be seeing you tonight at the
Lionel Awards?

Alex watches as Jack is hustled away. She stops a medic.

ALEX

How's the girl?

MEDIC

Blood-sugar's low. Nothing broken.
Mostly shock.

Retrieval crew emerge with Arby inert, strapped to a gurney. Alex reads a faintly BEEPING readout.

TECH

If he powers down his memory will
drain.

ALEX

Let's reboot -- Now!

Equipment is rushed in. Alex snaps open Arby's access panel, flips the switch repeatedly. The robot will not reboot.

INT. TRANSPORT - CONTINUOUS

Kitty is lifted into the transport, an oxygen tube in her nose.

KITTY

Daddy...?

Jack climbs in beside Kitty and an Automata Guard, takes hold of his daughter's hand.

EXT. BUNKER - CONTINUOUS

Alex is on her knees with Arby, adjusting connections, applying power, nothing works.

ALEX

(yells)
Arby! Wake up!

Other technicians regard Alex like she has lost her senses. Isaksen intervenes, speaks to her quietly.

ALEX

No!

Alex makes her way over to Jack's transport.

INT. TRANSPORT - CONTINUOUS

Alex appears in the doorway, sees Kitty. Jack's eyes beg Alex not to interfere.

ALEX

Hi, Kitty. How are you?

KITTY

Sore. Do you have Arby?

ALEX

Yes.

KITTY

Is he going to be okay?

Beat.

ALEX

We can't get him to reboot. Do you know why?

Isaksen steps up but halts. Kitty starts to weep.

KITTY

I don't know why.

Jack backs away. Alex takes over holding Kitty's hand. Jack faces Isaksen, draws him aside.

JACK

We need to discuss the terms of our agreement.

Gabby looks out of the pilot's cabin. Alex hushes him, squeezes Kitty's hand.

EXT. BUNKER - DAY

Alex supervises Automata techs, who load Arby on board Jack and Kitty's transport. The Team Leader confronts Isaksen.

TEAM LEADER
Sir? Sir? I have a separate
transport for the robot...

ISAKSEN
That won't be necessary.

TEAM LEADER
(re: palmtop)
But, sir. Mr. Corby gave me direct
orders--

Isaksen takes Team Leader's palmtop, steps on board the
transport and slams shut the vehicle's door.

INT. TRANSPORT - CONTINUOUS

Isaksen points a remote at the Automata Guard. The Guard goes
rigid. Jack and Alex look on beside Arby, who has been crammed
in next to Kitty, hooked up to a power cell.

ISAKSEN
You realize even if we succeed in
keeping him alive, there are no
guarantees? No-one's going to win
here, Mr. French.

JACK
Fine by me.

Isaksen tosses the remote to Alex, takes his place beside
Gabby, who is in the pilot seat, looking bemused.

ISAKSEN
Just fly.

EXT. DESERT SKY - TWILIGHT

Out of a vista of darkening blue, a needle point of light grows
to become the approaching TRANSPORT.

EXT. TRANSPORT - AIRBORNE

Kitty looks down out of the window, lights from below reflected
on the glass.

EXT. THE CITY - TWILIGHT

HIGH RISE ARCHITECTURE yawns open below, a spectacle of lights
in the last glow of day.

EXT. CITY UNIVERSITY - NIGHT

STUDENTS in an ivy-walled atrium stop to stare up.

The Automata transport arcs down to land on the grass.

INT. TRANSPORT - NIGHT

Gabby lands the transport. Alex makes a final check on Arby, who is lying, still inert. She reactivates the Guard, who sits up in a double take.

ALEX

We're taking him inside. Move.

Alex and the Guard maneuver Arby on the gurney. The door starts to open.

GABBY

You got yourself some fans.

KITTY

(excited)

Where?

Kitty pulls the oxygen tube from her nose, hops up to help Alex. Jack meets eyes with Isaksen, who offers the way out.

EXT. CITY UNIVERSITY - NIGHT

Kitty and Alex wheel Arby out through a small crowd of student bystanders who mostly keep their distance.

Isaksen emerges with Jack, who balks. Noises of recognition, some kids even clap. Jack declines autographs and they proceed, directed by the crowd.

Gabby stays with the Guard. A RINGING begins. He answers a Vidphon inside the transport.

GABBY

Mr. Corby, hi. How are you...? No, change of plan.

INT. UNIVERSITY CORRIDORS - NIGHT

Kitty and Alex, Isaksen and Jack wheel Arby through a grand corridor. They arrive at a double door, attended by a DOORMAN and a SECURITY GUARD with a tiny headset.

Security removes Alex's remote using a metal detector wand. The Doorman recognizes Jack. The doors open.

Jack declines another autograph, fans are held back, Alex sneaks Arby through.

Security speaks close into his headset.

INT. UNIVERSITY HALL - CONTINUOUS

SPEECHES are being delivered to the assembled DINNER GUESTS. The shambolic entry of Isaksen, Jack and Kitty turns heads but as Alex wheels in Arby people openly stare. A red-coated STEWARD shows Jack and company to their table.

ACROSS THE HALL

Beside a bank of cameras trained on the speaker's podium, another SECURITY GUARD notes the new arrivals, speaks into his headset.

SPEAKER

To present this year's Lionel
Prize for Best Dramatic Fiction,
please welcome the grandson of
Lionel Cross himself, Mister Jacob
Cross.

APPLAUSE as JACOB CROSS, a white-haired old man, walks onto stage with a fancy statuette. He speaks into the microphone.

CROSS

Thank you. Glad you could make it,
Mr. French.

LAUGHTER and APPLAUSE.

Hubie, dressed in a tuxedo, looks up in shock, seated at an empty table with Cheryl, who is in a daring cocktail dress.

Jack acknowledges the greeting. Arby twitches to life. A few bystanders react nervously but settle as Cross continues to address the crowd.

AT HUBIE'S TABLE

Hubie's shock turns to horror at the sight of Arby, who is still depleted but starting to revive.

HUBIE

Oh, God, no.

JACK

Hubie, Cheryl, these are a couple
of new friends.

(MORE)

JACK (CONT'D)
 Alex Reinsch and Mister Isaksen
 both work for the robot company.

Jack winks at Hubie, picks up Hubie's drink, downs the glass and sits. There are not enough seats for them all to sit. Alex takes Kitty on her knee, Arby close by on his gurney.

JACK
 Aren't you glad to see me? I'm
 saving you the price-tag on my
 daughter's life.

HUBIE
 Jack. What was I supposed to do
 after they told me about...
 (re: Arby)
 ...that?

Event Security steps up behind Isaksen.

JACK
 Great. We'll be needing one more
 chair, a crate of motor oil and
 another bottle of whatever we're
 already having.

SECURITY
 Sir, I'm sorry, but this is
 invitation only. Your guests will
 have to--

JACK
 (loudly)
 Do you know who I am?

Hubie cringes, nearby diners SHUSH.

ISAKSEN
 (to the Guard)
 It's okay...

The Doorman is conferring with the Steward at the door. CORBY enters with a small group of AUTOMATA AGENTS.

ISAKSEN
 Seems I have some guests arriving
 of my own.

Isaksen allows himself to be walked away.

ON STAGE (INTERCUT)

Jacob Cross takes out an envelope.

CROSS
Our main contenders tonight...

Alex meets Jack's look. They see Isaksen intercepted by Corby at the door. Hubie views the scene with dawning dread.

HUBIE
Oh, no. Jackie, no. Please, no.

CROSS
Agnes Fabian's 'Decimal Vacuum'...

APPLAUSE. Corby speaks into a radio. The men by the tv cameras begin to move in.

Hubie is looking pale. Arby starts to twitch.

CROSS
Marie Belfont's 'Narcissus of the
Napalm Nest'...

LOUDER APPLAUSE. Isaksen sees the men approaching Jack's table across the room, he protests to the Steward.

CROSS
'The Slippery Sleuth' by Jack
French...

APPLAUSE. Arby CHIRPS and jolts fully to life. Kitty remains stoic. Alex sees the men approaching their table.

CROSS
And Maxim Munzuk's 'Three Hundred
Years Before Dawn.'

APPLAUSE. Jack stands but fails to stop Corby's men taking hold of Alex. Arby BEEPS and struggles against his restraints. Nearby DINERS edge away.

Cross opens the envelope.

CROSS
The twenty thirty-four Lionel
Prize people's choice award for
most outstanding fiction, goes to
Jack French for 'Slippery Sleuth.'

LOUD APPLAUSE.

Cameras pan to Jack's table. A spotlight illuminates Jack.

Hubie, grinning broadly, jumps to his feet to slap Jack on the back and raise Jack's arm into a boxer's salute. A louder wave of APPLAUSE and LAUGHTER. Kitty quiets Arby.

Other diners stand to continue the ovation.

Alex pulls herself away from Corby's men to join in the applause. Hubie kisses Jack, Cheryl quietly follows suit. Jack sees Kitty is the only one not applauding. Hubie shoves Jack toward the podium.

Isaksen watches with Corby at the door. Corby signals his men to step down.

Cameras pan with Jack, following him through the crowd.

Alex is surprised to see Kitty quietly crying.

Jack climbs steps to the stage, shakes Jacob Cross' hand, accepts a check and, more hesitantly, the award. He steps up to the podium, looks out.

APPLAUSE continues with BRAVOS, the audience on their feet.

Jack waits until the noise abates, people take their seats. A moment of silence.

JACK

Oh boy....

Jack laughs at himself -- at the statuette in his hand.

JACK

I'm just thinking what my wife
would make of all this...

Kitty stops crying. Like everyone at her table, she is amazed to hear her father revealing real emotion.

JACK

This is for you, Lissy...

Jack stares at the trophy one last time, places it on the podium.

JACK

But I can't accept this award. I
didn't write this novel.

The audience react with confusion and disbelief. Hubie emits a low MOAN.

JACK

Kitty, bring Arby up here.

Alex nods at Kitty. Kitty jumps up to loosen Arby's ties. Corby's men attempt to wheel Arby away. One of the robot's arms rips free, grabs a table leg. Cheryl SCREAMS. The gurney overturns and spills the robot out.

JACK

Kitty!

Kitty stops, looks to her father.

He speaks into the microphone.

JACK

Bring him here.

CORBY

(raising his voice)

Stop!

Isaksen holds Corby back.

ALEX

Go on, Kitty.

Kitty steps up to the robot, Arby takes her hand, climbs to his feet, teeters, sways. Alex moves to catch him. Arby steadies himself on a chair.

KITTY

He can do it.

Cameras swing round, frame on Kitty.

She moves chairs out of Arby's way. The robot looks around, sees all the humans staring. Kitty beckons him forward.

KITTY

Come on.

Arby takes a step, wavers, then another. Kitty clears a path as he crosses the hall. Arby stops at the stage. Kitty climbs the first few steps, looks back and reaches out again.

Arby's metal fingers close on Kitty's tiny hand.

Kitty leads Arby up the stairs, takes him to the podium.

JACK

Good girl.

Jack brings Arby forward. A moment of silence.

JACK

This is Arby. He had an accident.
He took my unfinished manuscript
and rewrote it for my daughter,
Kitty...

Arby regards the sea of human faces before him.

JACK

I know how this sounds, but this really happened and I want you to know why I'm really here tonight.

(beat)

I gave this machine the ability to look and learn and feel, while I was losing mine...

Jack looks down at Kitty, she puts her arms around him.

JACK

I don't know if Arby is the future. I guess that's up to you. But I do think we should listen to what he has to say.

(beat)

That's all. Thank you. Sorry.

Jack leaves the podium with Kitty. Arby starts to follow, stops, picks up the statuette. WHIRS, SPEAKS:

MOVIE GANGSTER

Here's mud in your eye.

Scattered audience members LAUGH. Alex starts to clap.

Arby WHIRS. Jack halts on stage, bemused.

Hubie stares amazed as LAUGHTER and APPLAUSE continue to spread, slowly at first, but then with increasing force.

Isaksen sees Corby dumbfounded.

Cheryl LAUGHS and stands to add to the ovation. Hubie shakes his head with relief and incredulity, then he also LAUGHS and joins in as APPLAUSE fills the hall.

Corby walks out, fuming.

Jack sees the audience now all on their feet. Kitty points to Arby. The robot holds out the award to Jack. Jack shakes his head 'no,' smiles, gestures to the crowd.

The robot steps up, takes a bow.

APPLAUSE echoes, fading, as we

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. BEACH - DAY

WAVES crash into surf.

Two figures -- Jack and Alex -- cross a windswept beach. Jack's hands are planted in the pockets of his coat. Alex carries a mini-tv that plays a '60 Minutes'-style show.

As the TV PLAYS, neither Jack nor Alex pay much attention to the news report, Jack's eyes far off, Alex stealing glances at him.

TV VOICE

...novelist Jack French, beloved by readers young and old for his best-seller, 'The Slippery Sleuth,' still maintains his acceptance speech was not a prank to quell the wave of techno paranoia that recently swept the nation.

(beat)

We caught up with Mr. French at the Northern California home of Nobel-laureate cyberneticist Doctor Maxwell Reinsch, where the much-maligned AA-RB-40 domestic is currently being housed as part of further testing for Automata Control.

JACK

(on TV)

'Well, they dismantled our old home so we're living here now, but we're very comfortable, thank you. Arby's well. I don't know if he'll ever write again, but he's part of a very happy family. Really, looking back, I think that's all he ever wanted.'

Alex turns off the TV.

JACK

Thank you.

ALEX

Thank you.

They share a look. Jack stops, pulls a manuscript from his pocket, and hands the document to Alex. She flips through handwritten pages, impressed.

ALEX

Yours?

JACK
(nods)
I need a reader.

ALEX
I'd be honored. Congratulations.

JACK
Keep it between us.

Alex follows Jack's look to where Arby is building a sand castle with Kitty.

The distant figure of a WHITE-HAIRED MAN waves down from a cliff-top balcony on a sprawling Frank Lloyd Wright style house overhanging the beach.

Kitty and Arby wave back.

ALEX
Dinner's ready -- Wave -- Hi,
Dad...

Alex nudges Jack and he gives a wave.

The White-Haired Man goes back inside.

Alex puts her arm around Jack's waist.

JACK
What are you doing?

ALEX
An experiment.

They kiss.

Arby and Kitty look up from their sand castle. Arby tweaks Kitty's nose, Kitty makes a kissy-face at Arby. Arby chases after her, trampling the castle and scattering gulls.

Jack and Alex are interrupted by seagulls swooping overhead.

They see Kitty and Arby playing.

Alex LAUGHS. Jack takes her arm they start to walk again, heading for the house.

FADE OUT.