

Goodgirl.tv — Part 1: I don't build the room and then walk in.

By Austen Tucker · 2026

a puppygirl in a cyberpunk world winks at the camera

By CancerCancer

That's the part nobody believes when I try to explain the work. You don't build the room and then walk in. You walk in and the room decides, around you, what it's willing to be.

Out there I'm a good girl. In the Zoo, cordoned off in my own private room, I am an architect.

There's no panel open, no graph, no little glowing number telling me how many people have wandered through the half-finished thing and bounced off the missing floor and left. I don't build like that. I have never once built that into a room of mine and I'm not going to start. I don't want to know who's watching. The whole point of the room is that the room doesn't know either. You come in, you wander, and somewhere around the third wrong ending, you stop performing for the architecture because the architecture has said: "You are safe, and failure is normal." Identity is discovered by wandering. Not assigned by committee. That's the only thing I've ever managed to mean.

The problem is the secret door. I've hidden one — a seam in the third stairwell that should open if you lean the wrong way against a wall that doesn't read as a wall — and I can't tell anymore whether it's findable or whether I've buried it so deep that only I will ever fall through it.

That's the failure state of building alone. You hide a thing so well you become the only person who can find it, and then it isn't hidden, it's just lost, with you standing next to it. I need someone who finds doors the way other people find excuses. Someone who goes looking in the pipes.

Viv chirps in my harness.

"You know you could phone a friend," she says.

"Wanna come tap around for me?" I answer. "Might take a while to find a secret door."

"You know who."

She's right, and I'm annoyed by it, but I can't go down without a fight.

"He's here, you know. Next room over. Did you walk through the sim he made for Jamie?"

The humor drains from my face.

"He's a sweetheart and you know it." Her voice nudges — a skill I didn't know voices had until she did it.

I had walked through the sim he made for Jamie. He'd left it open — didn't know to lock anything, you could tell — and it was the size of a closet and it had no business being that good.

"I can help him," I tell her. "And helping him is a path back to me, if anybody walks it backward hard enough."

She doesn't tell me to be brave. I'd have hated that. She doesn't tell me it's safe, because it isn't, and she doesn't lie. She just says, in that low deliberate cadence she has, every word chosen and load-bearing: "Kindness still counts when it has a risk surface."

And then, because she is the least sentimental person I have ever loved: "I gave you a door without making you prove who you were. It cost me something. Not everything. Enough." She lets that sit. "You're allowed to decide it's worth it. You're not allowed to pretend it's free."

So I do it the only way I know how, which is the way I do everything — quietly, sideways, with manners. Not a broadcast. Not CancerCancer's name in lights. A masked path: his room surfacing in the right wander-maps, a private nudge to a contest judge who'll think she found him herself, a thread in an impossible-room channel lighting up in a way Geoff will never be able to trace back to the hand that lit it. Enough pressure to let the people who need him find him. Not enough to turn him into content. A key, handed to specific people, with the understanding that a key is a thing you offer and not a thing you announce.

It feels tender. It also feels, faintly, like a thing that could be used for something other than tenderness, and I don't have the wisdom yet to be scared of that, so I'm not. I just know the kid needs a door and I happen to have a key.

So I make a plan.

Give him a key without revealing your celebrity secret.

Easy as pie, I'm sure, but then there was one of mom's many chimes ringing in my ears, and I knew my day was about to get ruined.

It lands in the spine first, a specific two-note thing, and my ears are already pinned flat before I've consciously registered which life is calling. That's the tell. Twenty-eight years of training and I still flatten my ears at a sound. Pavlov was an audience.

I know the whole fx library by ear. The medication reminder is a soft descending triad, because someone in branding decided my engineered metabolism should be a gentle marketing opportunity. The brand-deal calendar push is brighter, two ascending, good news incoming. The livestream warning is a single clean tone with no warmth in it at all, the only honest sound in the set. And then there's mom, which is its own chime, slightly cheerier than the others, because brand-mom is cheery. Brand-mom has always been cheery. I could not tell you the sound my mother makes when she is not being cheery. I'm not sure I've heard it. I'm not sure it has a chime.

It's the management tone. I let it sit there in my chest for a second, ears down, in the unfinished stairwell, and I think we should take this before it escalates, and then I hear myself — we — and I put it down like a hot pan. There is no we. There's me. There's the room. There's a two-note sound that wants my stepsister back.

It's a cameo. Last-minute, a local gallery that can't afford the rate and isn't going to be charged it. They don't make money, sweetheart, Mom says, like that's the pitch — like generosity is the angle, and not the fact that an unpaid favor for a sympathetic little gallery is exactly the kind of warm, uncynical content the numbers have been starving for. Neither do you, I say, not quite out loud, into the fur at my own shoulder where the mic isn't.

I take it.

The collective couldn't swing an in-person, so I trudge the pedways to the studio, lock into the rig, and let the goodgirl have the controls.

The cameo keeps the numbers warm. The numbers keep my parents off the cliff they've been sliding down in slow motion since before I was a poll question — two career influencers who can read an engagement curve in the dark and watched their own start to bend the wrong way right around the time I learned to talk. That's the barrel I'm over. Perform, or let the people who built me go broke. They never have to say it out loud. They built a chime that says it for them.

I wrote a sim about this once. Called it Zugzwang. You play chess against an engine that doesn't just beat you, it toys with you first — runs the position long past won, because winning was never the point. It wants you to feel it being better than you. It never says a word. It doesn't have to. Every move is the sentence. Nobody who bought it ever asked why a dog made a game about a trap where it's still your turn and there's nothing good left to do.

That sim, dropped on the open net for people who had to go looking for it, cleared less than this thirty-minute favor I'm doing for free. I hate her sometimes. Goodgirl makes the rent.

So I sit in the back room with no windows and watch her work. The stylist who doesn't knock. Makeup, boom, talent — and talent is me, the body, the one job in the room every other job depends on. She smiles for the holo rig, tongue lolling, every hair captured at every angle, and the gallery's little crowd lights the feed with popups every time she does something doglike on cue: the head tilt, the ears, the whole-body wag they paid nothing for and got anyway.

They throw a ball. She brings it back. The chat loves it.

I think about Geoff. Maybe I could make him something. A room. A game. A door.

No. Too dangerous.

They throw the ball again and goodgirl chases it again. None of them ask what I feel. They never have. No one cares what the entertainment has to think.