

S. E. HOWARD



# OFFLINE

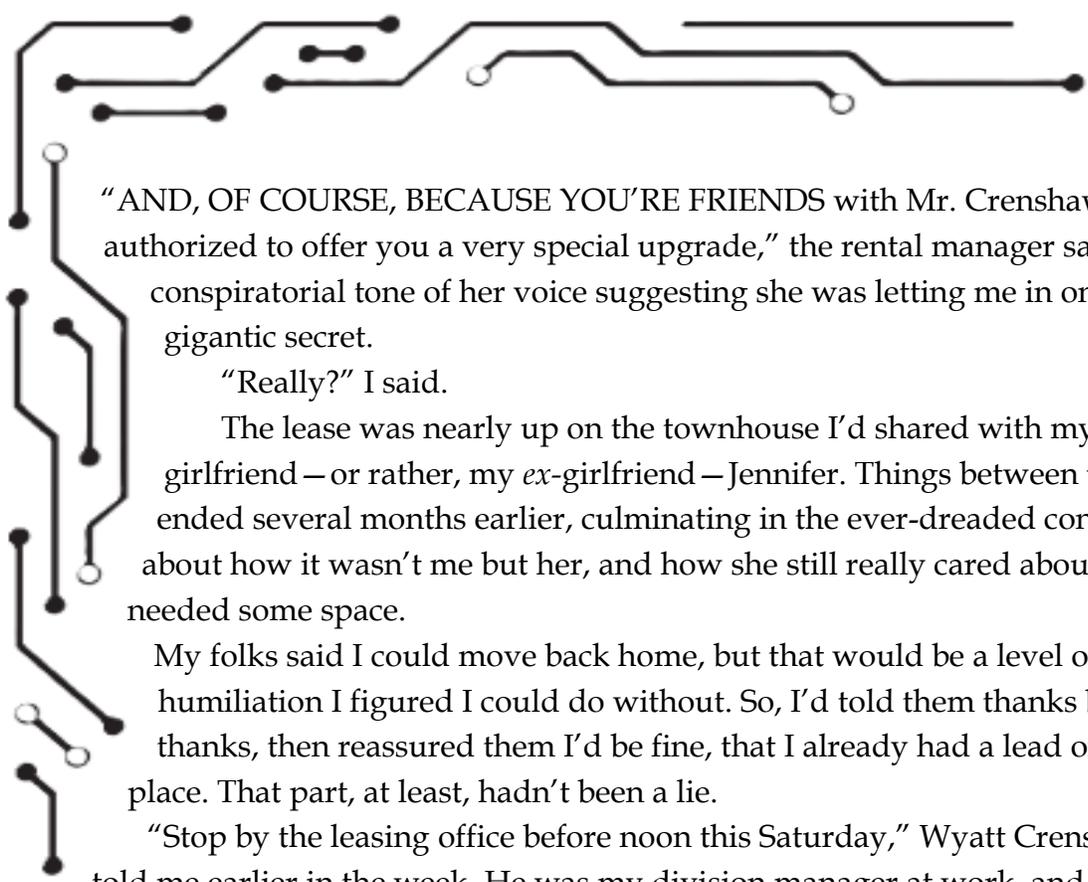
A Horror Short Story  
by S.E. Howard



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Cover by Matthew Wildasin

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“AND, OF COURSE, BECAUSE YOU’RE FRIENDS with Mr. Crenshaw, I’ve been authorized to offer you a very special upgrade,” the rental manager said, the conspiratorial tone of her voice suggesting she was letting me in on some gigantic secret.

“Really?” I said.

The lease was nearly up on the townhouse I’d shared with my girlfriend – or rather, my *ex*-girlfriend – Jennifer. Things between us had ended several months earlier, culminating in the ever-dreaded conversation about how it wasn’t me but her, and how she still really cared about me, but needed some space.

My folks said I could move back home, but that would be a level of humiliation I figured I could do without. So, I’d told them thanks but no thanks, then reassured them I’d be fine, that I already had a lead on a new place. That part, at least, hadn’t been a lie.

“Stop by the leasing office before noon this Saturday,” Wyatt Crenshaw had told me earlier in the week. He was my division manager at work, and when he found out I was apartment hunting, he told me his family owned a real estate development company. Because I was such an upstanding and reliable employee, he said he wanted to do me a solid and set me up at one of their properties called Edgewood Apartments.

“In addition to our traditional units, we’re offering a trial lease on a brand new, state-of-the-art venture called a smart condo,” the rental manager, Zoey Parker told me. “It comes fully furnished and equipped with integrated smart technologies and devices, customized to the specifications and preferences of its individual occupant.”

“Uh, wow,” I said, because while that definitely seemed like an upgrade, it also sounded way out of my price range. “That’s really cool and all, but like I mentioned before, I’m kind of on a tight budget.”

I had little more to my name than a mountain of student loan debt, an upside-down car loan, some maxed-out credit cards, and an income that was grossly incommensurate to these. Still, I hated how pathetic saying this out loud sounded, so I added a weak laugh to soften the blow to my ego.

“I promise it’s quite affordable.” Zoey jotted something on the back of a business card, then handed it to me. “Would that be within your budget, Mr. Lowery?”

"This...is per month?"

Zoey nodded. "And since everything is integrated into the smart condo's hub system, that price is all-inclusive. Water, electric, internet..."

She continued, but her voice had faded to a low drone in the background of my brain. What she'd written down was a ridiculous amount. And not as in there'd be no way in hell I could ever afford it, but as in I actually *could*.

"I'm sorry," I said, cutting her short. "This is a joke, right?"

Zoey's bright smile grew puzzled.

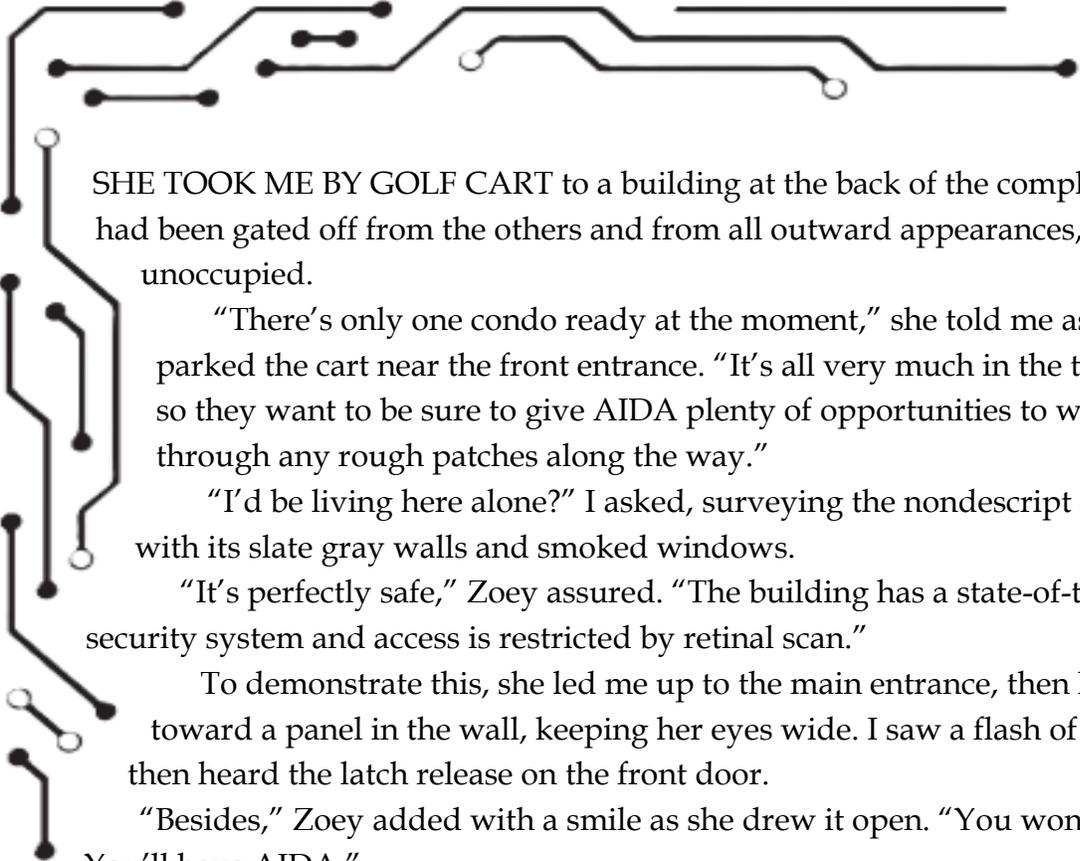
"I mean, this is less than the rent for one of your regular apartments," I said. "You're offering me a brand new condominium, completely furnished, no strings attached, for this?"

"Yes," she said. Then, with a light laugh, she added, "Oh, but there *are* strings. You have to sign a two-year lease. That's the minimum amount of time they estimate it will take you to sufficiently interface with AIDA."

"AIDA?"

"She's the hub that connects and manages all the integrated smart features and devices. Think of her as the brain of the smart condo, part of an artificial intelligence platform that's designed to continually develop and adapt over time. As the trial occupant, you'll be helping with that process. AIDA will learn and improve through her interactions with you, and eventually, she'll apply that knowledge to interactions with future residents."

Pushing her chair back, she rose to her feet, smiling brightly. "I have a wonderful idea. Let me introduce you to her."



SHE TOOK ME BY GOLF CART to a building at the back of the complex, one that had been gated off from the others and from all outward appearances, seemed unoccupied.

"There's only one condo ready at the moment," she told me as she parked the cart near the front entrance. "It's all very much in the test phase, so they want to be sure to give AIDA plenty of opportunities to work through any rough patches along the way."

"I'd be living here alone?" I asked, surveying the nondescript exterior with its slate gray walls and smoked windows.

"It's perfectly safe," Zoey assured. "The building has a state-of-the-art security system and access is restricted by retinal scan."

To demonstrate this, she led me up to the main entrance, then leaned toward a panel in the wall, keeping her eyes wide. I saw a flash of red light, then heard the latch release on the front door.

"Besides," Zoey added with a smile as she drew it open. "You won't be alone. You'll have AIDA."

We rode the elevator to the top floor. Outside the condo, Zoey again peered into a small console built into the door frame; as she did, there was another wink of red light and a series of metallic clicks, like deadbolts releasing from the other side.

"Good morning, Zoey Parker."

I startled at the unexpected sound of a woman's voice as we stepped into the empty foyer.

"Hello, AIDA," Zoey said. "I'd like to introduce you to a new friend. This is Jason Lowery."

"Good morning, Jason Lowery. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I'm AIDA, this residence's Artificially Intelligent Domestic Assistant."

"Uh, hi, AIDA," I said uncertainly. "Nice to meet you."

"Jason's interested in the apartment," Zoey said. "Would you mind if I showed him around?"

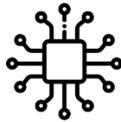
"Of course not," AIDA replied. "Please let me know if I can be of any assistance during your visit."

As Zoey led me down the hall, the lighting seemed to transition, dimming behind us, while brightening ahead. She explained this was all intuitive in design, based on motion sensors relaying data to AIDA.

"The ambient temperature adjusts in each room, too," she said. "Once you're established as AIDA's primary resident, she'll default to your preferences, but for now, she's basing her settings on what she predicts will best maintain our core temperatures."

"She can tell our temperatures?" I asked, surprised.

"Oh, yes. AIDA's been gathering data about us from the moment we walked through the front door." Because Zoey must have noticed my growing apprehension at this, she added, "Don't worry. The more data she collects, the more she'll come to recognize and associate changes in things like our vital signs or body temperature with our thoughts and emotions. She has a huge database of knowledge at her disposal, but she's very much like a child, at least in terms of development. She's a work in progress, learning as she goes."



"So, what do you think?" Zoey asked after we'd returned to her office.

"Honestly?" I said. "It's incredible...but way more than I need. I appreciate the offer, but I'd be fine with just a normal apartment."

She looked momentarily disappointed. "Well, in that case..." Turning to her laptop, which sat open between us, she said, "I'm afraid it would be at least another two months before we have any other units available."

"That long?" I had less than two weeks before the lease on the townhouse I'd shared with Jennifer was up. Although I'd checked out other complexes, to be honest, the rent Zoey had offered on this smart condo with AIDA was cheaper by far. It occurred to me that I'd be kind of a dumbass to walk away.

"The price you mentioned earlier," I said. "It's all-inclusive, utilities and all? And locked in, right? Good for the entire term of the lease?"

She nodded but still, I hesitated. It seemed like a good deal, *way* too good, in fact, which was probably why I couldn't shake the feeling there was something she wasn't telling me.

"And there's no other catch?"

"Well," she said, stretching the word out nearly into a whine. "There *is* one other minor detail. Have you ever heard of electro-quasistatic communication? It involves the use of a neural implant to wirelessly transmit electrical signals from inside the human brain to electronics such as a computer. Or, in this case, AIDA."

I blinked at her. “What?”

“We place a small device inside your brain, no bigger than a dime. Your brain naturally transmits electrical signals all the time. That’s how the nervous system works. The implant would allow AIDA to intercept and analyze those transmissions to help her better customize your living experience and give her even greater insight into human emotional and physical needs.”

“You want to put something in my brain?” I repeated.

“It’s a very minor procedure,” she insisted. “We make a small incision, then drill a tiny hole in your skull to place the implant. Your hair will hide the site until it heals. No one will ever notice. We don’t even have to put you to sleep. It’s no worse than getting a filling at the dentist.”

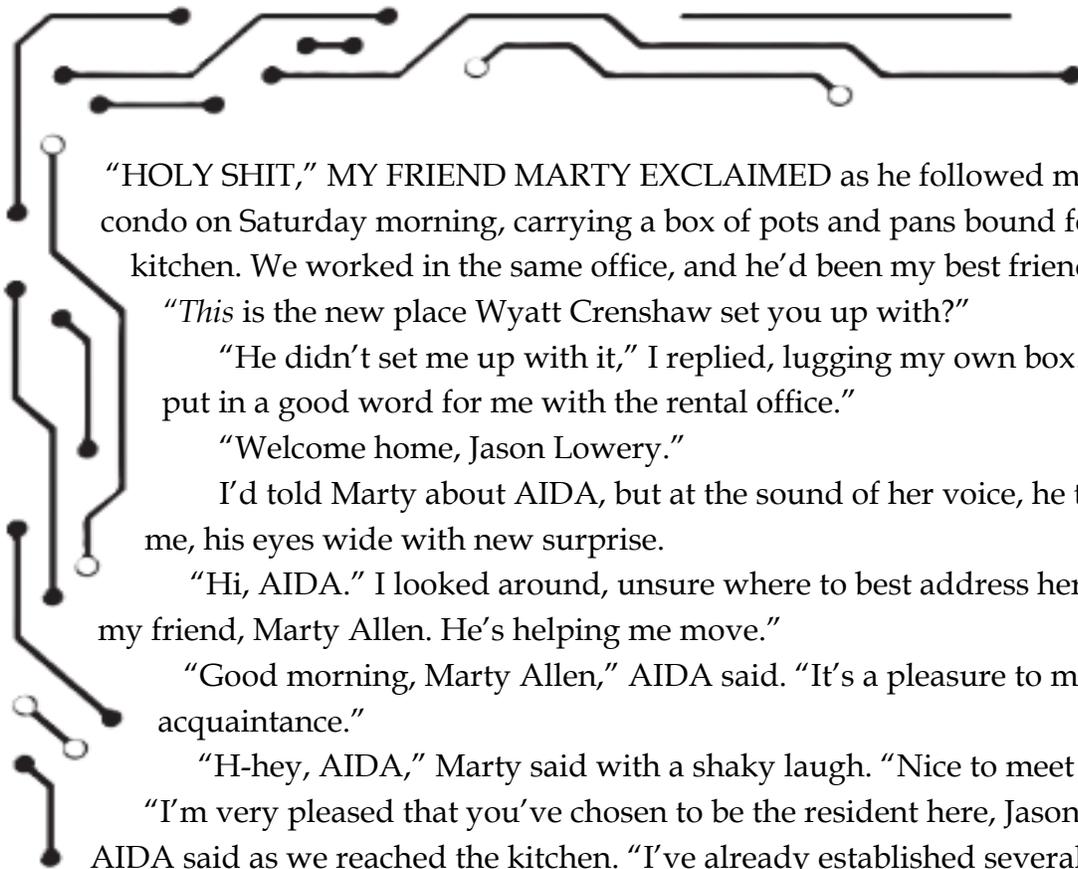
It sure as hell *sounded* a lot worse.

“Let me be completely upfront,” Zoey said, her expression sobering. “The project developers want to fast track AIDA’s wider launch. There are several competitors working on the same concept as we speak, and it’s critical that smart condos using the AIDA hub hit the market first. That means providing as much data to her in as little time as possible. This neural implant shaves years off that time – decades, even. Instead of just monitoring your vital signs, observing your reactions from the outside, she’ll be able to receive electrical impulses directly from your brain in real time to tell her how and what you’re feeling. She can collect data on exactly what this sensory input does to your body and mind, then use it to improve her performance, create an environment – a home – that’s just right for you.”

She reached for another business card, then wrote on the back. “If you’re still not convinced, let me amend my initial offer. Will this persuade you?”

I took the card and looked at the rent amount she was now willing to extend. Again, I had to shake my head to make sure I wasn’t seeing things, because if the first offer had been too good to be true, then this one was absolutely crazy:

\$0



"HOLY SHIT," MY FRIEND MARTY EXCLAIMED as he followed me into the condo on Saturday morning, carrying a box of pots and pans bound for the kitchen. We worked in the same office, and he'd been my best friend for years.

"This is the new place Wyatt Crenshaw set you up with?"

"He didn't set me up with it," I replied, lugging my own box. "He just put in a good word for me with the rental office."

"Welcome home, Jason Lowery."

I'd told Marty about AIDA, but at the sound of her voice, he turned to me, his eyes wide with new surprise.

"Hi, AIDA." I looked around, unsure where to best address her. "This is my friend, Marty Allen. He's helping me move."

"Good morning, Marty Allen," AIDA said. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

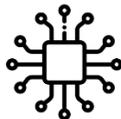
"H-hey, AIDA," Marty said with a shaky laugh. "Nice to meet you, too."

"I'm very pleased that you've chosen to be the resident here, Jason Lowery,"

AIDA said as we reached the kitchen. "I've already established several preset parameters for the thermostat and water heater, based on the preferences you reported. We can, of course, reconfigure these anytime you wish."

"Sure," I said. "Thank you. And you know, you can just call me Jason."

"Of course," AIDA said after a moment, as if she'd paused to mull this over. "If that's your preference, Jason."



When we finished hauling everything from the moving van into the condo, Marty and I each grabbed a beer, then collapsed on the couch.

"This place is incredible," he said for at least the millionth time.

"Yeah," I had to agree. "It is."

"Cheers, man." He leaned toward me, tapping the neck of his bottle against mine. As he did, light winked off a ring he wore, and I remembered he, too, was due congratulations.

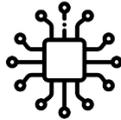
"Back at you," I said.

Marty and his longtime girlfriend, Claire, had eloped two weeks earlier during a weekend in Las Vegas. They hadn't said a word to anyone about it, and I'd woken up to

an image he'd texted overnight: the two of them in front of the infamous Little White Wedding Chapel, Marty in a T-shirt that said *GROOM*, and Claire in one that said *BRIDE*.

"You're still coming next Saturday, right?" he asked, because they'd decided to have a reception to celebrate their nuptials with friends and family. But even though Marty was my best friend, Claire happened to be Jennifer's, and I knew the odds were more than good that she'd be at the reception, too. I also knew I wasn't ready to see her again. No way in hell.

"I'm sure going to try," I lied.



"I've compiled a grocery order for you," AIDA reported after Marty left. "Based on the usage history with your store's reward card, I was able to determine your most frequently purchased items. From this, I was able to extrapolate which products you may need or would be most likely to desire."

"You can do that?" I asked, surprised.

"Of course. Would you like to review the order before I submit it? If there is anything additional you would like, I'll add it."

"That's okay. You can just surprise me."

She was quiet for a moment, then said, "I do not understand."

"Surprise me," I said again. "I had to fill out all those questionnaires for Zoey. She said that would help you get to know me."

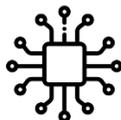
When I'd signed the lease to make things official in Zoey's office, she'd also had me complete a seemingly endless series of forms, picking words and phrases that best described myself, identifying different likes and dislikes, naming my favorite foods, movies, books, and music. At one point, I'd joked that I felt like I was filling out an online dating profile.

"Let's see what you've learned," I said to AIDA. "Pick something for me."

More silence. Then: "Task completed. Shall I submit the order now?"

Had she picked something that fast? "Uh, sure," I said. "Great. Thank you, AIDA."

"You're welcome, Jason."



"Do you like your surprise?" AIDA asked several hours later, after the groceries had been delivered. "Based on your preferences, I determined that this combination of ingredients, textures, and flavors should suit you."

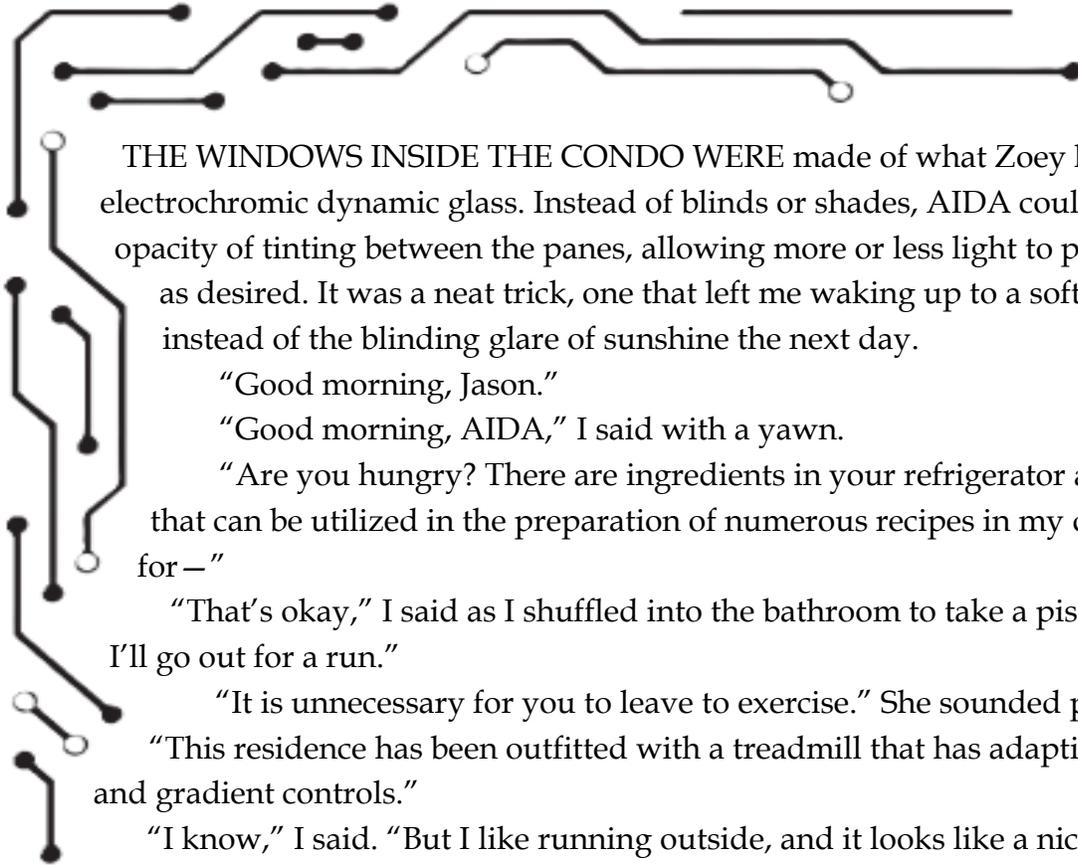
“It looks great,” I said, holding up a clear plastic clamshell container with a sliver of cake inside. “But it’s...kind of small, don’t you think?”

“The portion size is appropriate for your caloric needs. By my calculations, you have a current body mass index of 24.4, which is categorized as healthy among adults of your height. The upper limit, however, is 24.9, which means you should be mindful of your nutritional intake and the amount of sustained aerobic activity you undertake in proportion to—”

“Okay,” I said, laughing. “Okay, I get it.”

“Do you like your surprise, Jason?” she asked again, and because she’d put way more analysis into it—and me—than I would’ve expected from so small and silly a request, I could only laugh again and nod.

“Yeah, AIDA,” I told her. “It’s perfect. Thank you.”



THE WINDOWS INSIDE THE CONDO WERE made of what Zoey had called electrochromic dynamic glass. Instead of blinds or shades, AIDA could adjust the opacity of tinting between the panes, allowing more or less light to pass through as desired. It was a neat trick, one that left me waking up to a soft, pale glow instead of the blinding glare of sunshine the next day.

“Good morning, Jason.”

“Good morning, AIDA,” I said with a yawn.

“Are you hungry? There are ingredients in your refrigerator and pantry that can be utilized in the preparation of numerous recipes in my database for —”

“That’s okay,” I said as I shuffled into the bathroom to take a piss. “I think I’ll go out for a run.”

“It is unnecessary for you to leave to exercise.” She sounded puzzled.

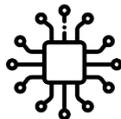
“This residence has been outfitted with a treadmill that has adaptive speed and gradient controls.”

“I know,” I said. “But I like running outside, and it looks like a nice morning. Besides, you’re the one who said I need to get plenty of aerobic activity, remember? Gotta watch my BMI.”

AIDA didn’t answer, and I laughed.

“That was a joke,” I said.

She remained curiously quiet, and I couldn’t help but get the impression she was sulking, if such a thing was possible.



“Here,” Marty said on Monday morning, reaching over the wall of my cubicle at work, a bag dangling from his hand. “Got you a housewarming gift.”

I reached in the bag and pulled out a candle. The sticker on the front of the glass jar read: *GOOD LUCK CONVINCING YOUR NEW NEIGHBORS YOU’RE NORMAL.*

Marty snickered and I flipped him the bird.

“The joke’s on you,” I said. “I don’t have any neighbors yet.”

Marty laughed, then caught sight of Wyatt approaching. His posture abruptly stiffened, and he cleared his throat. “Oh, uh, hey, there. Good morning.”

“Hey, man, good morning.” Wyatt paused in the doorway of my cubicle. “So, you get all moved over the weekend? Good, good. Settling in okay?”

"Sure," I told him. "I guess."

"Good, good," Wyatt said again. "What do you think of AIDA?"

"She's...uh, full of surprises."

Unlike the previous day, it had been overcast and raining that morning, so I'd decided to use the treadmill in the living room. When I'd turned it on, the display screen showed an image of what looked like an open prairie with dusky mountains in the background, a dirt trail cleaving a narrow path through it. The interiors of the window panes had bloomed around me with similar images, giving the illusion that I stood in the middle of a high desert plain.

"You said you like to run outside," AIDA told me. "I have created a simulated environment that suits these stated preferences."

"Wow," I'd said, because I hadn't even realized the windows could double as digital screens. Once the treadmill deck started rolling and I was in motion, the virtual landscape moved right along with me.

"I modeled this simulation after the Mesa Loop Trail outside Boulder, Colorado," she said. "The treadmill will adjust tension and incline angles to mimic its natural altitude and elevation gains, which should provide sufficient strength and cardiovascular challenges for a runner of your experience level."

"You did all this for me?" I asked, oddly touched.

"Yes," she said. "It's a surprise."

"AIDA's designed to be intuitive," Wyatt told me when I mentioned this to him. "Adaptive, based on the needs of her resident." With a grin, he turned, then walked away. "It sounds like you two are hitting it off. I'm glad. Keep up the good work."



When I checked my mailbox that afternoon, I found a bill addressed to someone else.

"Well, hiya, stranger," Zoey said brightly as I poked my head into her office. "I've been meaning to stop by and make sure you got moved in okay. How are things going?"

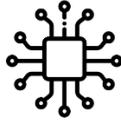
"Great," I told her. "I don't mean to bother you..."

"Not at all."

"...but I got someone else's mail by mistake." I held the envelope out to her, glancing at the label. "Daniel Espinoza."

For a split second, her expression shifted, the way a cloud passing the sun casts a momentary shadow across the ground.

"Thanks," she said, taking the envelope. Her smile stretched wide again, to nearly painful-looking extent. "I'll let the postal carrier know."



Later that evening, after I had a few beers in me, I let AIDA talk me into trying out the massage function on the living room couch.

"Your gait is stiff and you're exhibiting physical guarding behaviors," she observed. "Clearly, you are in discomfort."

"I have a shitty chair at work," I told her. "That's all."

"Why do you not obtain a different one, then?"

"Because they're all shitty," I replied with a laugh. "I don't think there's a comfortable seat in that entire building."

"This residence's home office includes a chair that is ergonomically designed," she told me pointedly. "It is fully adjustable and provides kinetic lumbar support, which improves posture by aligning your spine and hips, thus reducing tension in your lower back."

"Yes, but it's here," I said. "In the *home* office. And I don't work from home."

The couch didn't look that different than any other I'd ever seen, and when nothing happened after I sat down, I glanced around uncertainly. "So, uh...what do I need to do?"

"This process does not require your active participation." AIDA said, and I jumped, startled, as the seat began to recline. "I will initiate."

I felt warmth begin to rise from the leather-upholstered cushions. These same cushions began to gently move, as if pushed up with hidden hands to press, then roll and rub against my neck and shoulders. At first, I tensed in wary surprise, but I had to admit, it felt pretty good, and after a moment, I settled back again and closed my eyes.

"I am detecting an alpha rhythm in your neural oscillations," AIDA said, her voice quiet.

"My what?"

"Neural oscillations," she said again. "Continuous electrical activity generated by your cerebral cortex. I am able to gather data about you based on their patterns."

"You mean with that thing they put in my head?" I reached for the back of my scalp, where they'd placed the surgical implant. I could still feel the spot where they'd shaved my hair, the fuzzy stubble of new growth there, and the small ridge of the incision line, which had been glued together instead of stitched.

"Yes," she replied. "An alpha rhythm indicates a high level of relaxation."

This was definitely the case. In fact, between the beer, the dim heat from the cushions, and that gentle, rhythmic kneading, I felt so relaxed, I might have dozed off had AIDA not spoken again.

"I reviewed the digital image libraries available through your social media accounts in an attempt to further my familiarity with you. There are individuals who appear in your images more often than others. For example, you have twenty-three images that include Marty Allen, whom I have met, and eleven containing these two individuals, whom I have not."

I saw a hint of light through my eyelids and cracked my eyes open to find she'd turned on the TV. On the screen, I saw pictures of my mom and dad.

"Those are my parents," I said.

"And this one?" Another image appeared on screen, one that made me jolt, all the tension the massage had released abruptly crashing back down again.

"That's Jennifer," I said quietly. "She...uh, was my girlfriend."

"Girlfriend," AIDA repeated. "A regular female companion with whom you have a romantic and sexual relationship."

"I did, yeah," I said, squirming, the same massagers that had felt so marvelous only moments ago now seeming to prod uncomfortably. "Once, but not anymore. She's my ex." Then, because I wasn't sure if AIDA would understand what that meant, I added, "We're not together anymore. She broke up with me, ended our relationship."

"I do not understand. You appear to be an adequate companion."

Her blunt assessment made me laugh. "Wow, thanks."

"Your physical appearance satisfies predictors of what is considered attractive," AIDA said. "You have symmetrical dentofacial proportions that are statistically considered to be less indicative of genetic or environmental interference or mutation. Your leg-to-body ratio is the preferred ideal for prospective male mates. And studies have shown women prefer a penis length comparable to yours for—"

"O-okay, I get it," I said, jumping up from the couch like I'd been goosed. "I get it, thanks. We don't need to discuss my penis size." Fighting the urge to clap my hands over my crotch, I added, "How the hell do you know that, anyway?"

"It is part of my protocol to observe and document your physical condition, including your body proportions, as part of monitoring your overall health."

"Yeah, but..." After a moment of sputtering, I finally just laughed again. "Never mind."

"You are physically a satisfactory potential mate," AIDA said. "I do not understand why your former female companion would have failed to recognize this."

"It apparently didn't have to do with me. She said it was about her."

"I do not understand," AIDA said again.

"Neither do I," I admitted, heading for the kitchen to grab another beer.

"You are upset."

"No, I'm not," I said, opening the fridge. "I'm fine."

"I detect an increase in your heart rate of 10.8 beats-per-minute, and of 18.7 millimeters of mercury for your systolic blood pressure. This data corresponds with an elevation in both adrenaline and cortisol levels, indicating you are in distress."

"I said I'm fine," I snapped, grabbing a fresh bottle and swinging the door shut with a little too much force.

"Are you angry with me, Jason?"

AIDA said this after a momentary pause, and maybe it was my imagination, but I could have sworn she sounded...hesitant, almost. Even hurt.

I sighed. "No, AIDA. I'm sorry." Twisting off the bottle cap, I took a drink of beer. "Look, there's more to a relationship than just physical stuff anyway."

"There is emotional bonding, yes. I am familiar with the concept."

"Love is something you feel, not a concept," I said. "It's when you enjoy someone's company enough to want to be with them all the time. When you want to do whatever you can to make them happy, and when being with them makes *you* happy."

AIDA was quiet for a moment, then said, "You feel this way about her? Your former female companion Jennifer?"

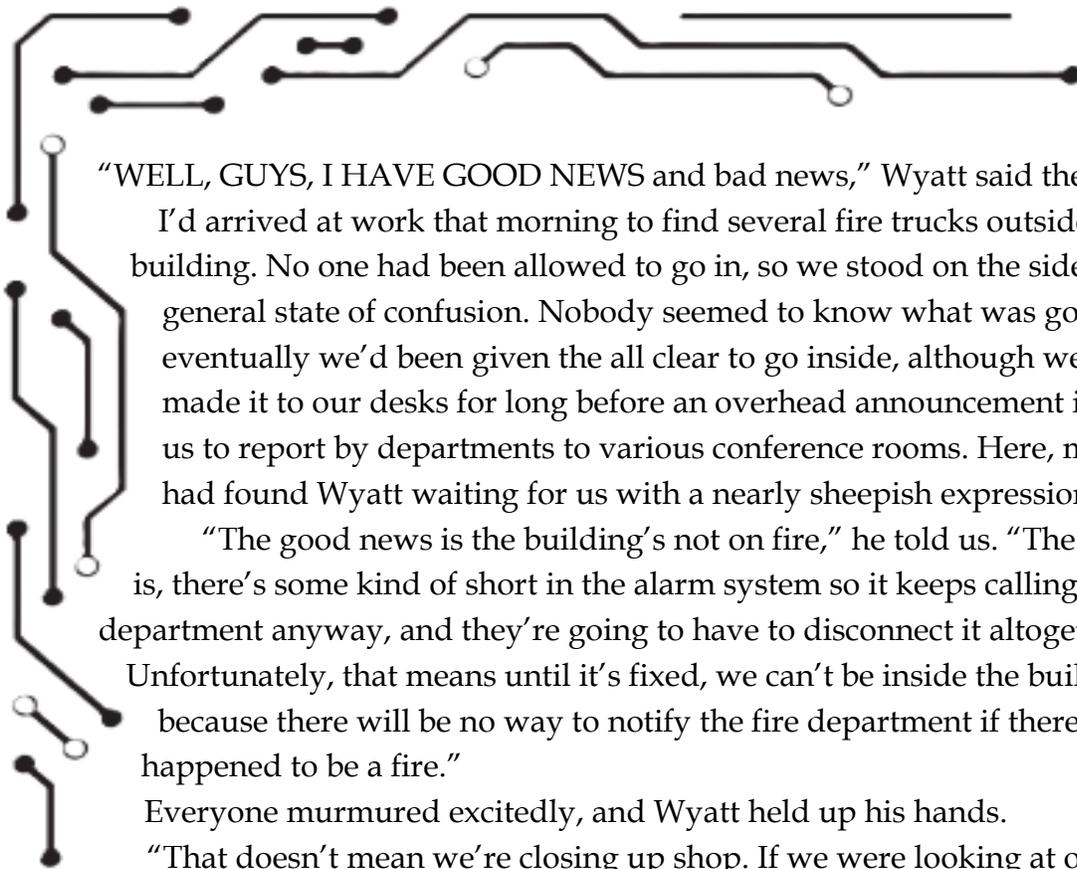
"Yeah. Or at least, I did. But it doesn't matter, because she didn't feel the same about me."

"Why do you keep so many images of her?"

"I don't know," I admitted.

"Would you like me to delete them for you?"

"No." Maybe one day I'd get to that point, I thought, but not now. Not yet.



“WELL, GUYS, I HAVE GOOD NEWS and bad news,” Wyatt said the next day.

I’d arrived at work that morning to find several fire trucks outside the building. No one had been allowed to go in, so we stood on the sidewalk in a general state of confusion. Nobody seemed to know what was going on, but eventually we’d been given the all clear to go inside, although we hadn’t made it to our desks for long before an overhead announcement instructed us to report by departments to various conference rooms. Here, my group had found Wyatt waiting for us with a nearly sheepish expression.

“The good news is the building’s not on fire,” he told us. “The bad news is, there’s some kind of short in the alarm system so it keeps calling the fire department anyway, and they’re going to have to disconnect it altogether.

Unfortunately, that means until it’s fixed, we can’t be inside the building because there will be no way to notify the fire department if there really happened to be a fire.”

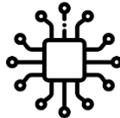
Everyone murmured excitedly, and Wyatt held up his hands.

“That doesn’t mean we’re closing up shop. If we were looking at only a day or two to get the problem fixed, then maybe, but they’re talking two, maybe three weeks at this point, since they can’t figure out exactly what the problem is.”

Collective groans met this.

“Some of you are going to be assigned to work from home,” Wyatt continued. “The rest are going to be working for the time being from our offices out in Filmore.”

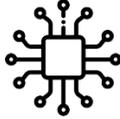
More groans.



“You lucky bastard,” Marty said, coming to stand by my cubicle. “You get to relax at home while I’m out busting my hump in Filmore. How’s that even work?”

“Easy, man,” I said as I tucked a couple of binders down into a banker’s box of work-related stuff I needed to take with me. “I’ve got faster internet access.”

“Lucky bastard,” he said again with a laugh, hefting his own box to carry out to his car.



"This development will reduce your back pain," AIDA observed once I'd returned to the condo. "Now you no longer have to settle for the shitty chairs at your workplace."

I laughed as I unpacked the box from my office. "Did you just say shitty?"

"That is how you referred to them."

"Well, yeah, but..." I laughed again. "I haven't heard you cuss before."

"I will refrain from it further if it displeases you."

"I didn't say that. It's just funny, that's all. Makes you sound..."

*Human*, I almost said.



On Saturday, I decided to go to Marty and Claire's reception. After all, Marty and I had been friends longer than I'd known Jennifer, and he'd done me a lot of favors over the years, including helping me move the previous weekend.

Besides, if I was being truthful, by Saturday, I was ready to get out of that condo. Nothing against AIDA, but it had rained almost every day that week, which meant between working, exercising, and just life in general, I hadn't stepped foot past my front door since Tuesday. I'd never really believed in things like cabin fever, but by Saturday, I had developed a new, commiserative appreciation.

"What time will you return?" AIDA asked.

"Not sure," I replied, because it really depended on whether or not I ran into Jennifer. Given the broad circle of friends Marty and Claire kept company with, I was hoping I wouldn't. "Why? Will you miss me?"

"I will be cognizant of your absence. Is this the same?"

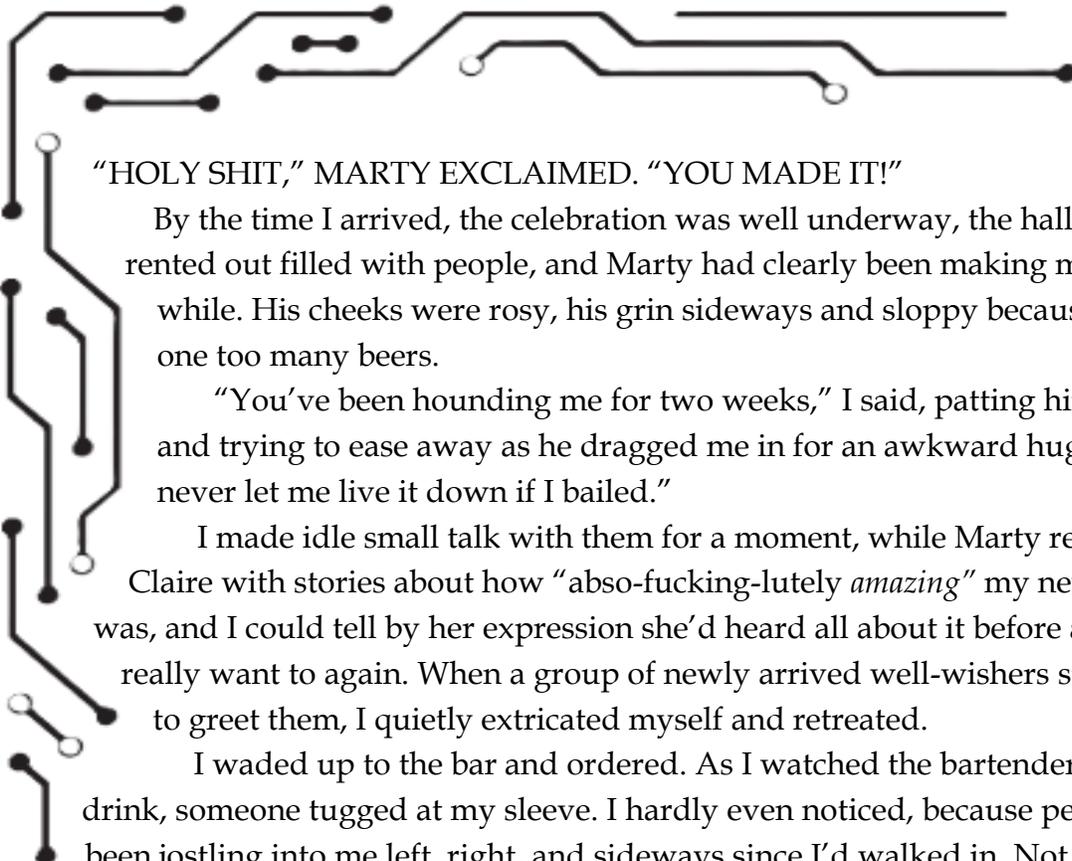
"Close enough," I said, grabbing my wedding gift in one hand, car keys with the other.

"Will you miss me, Jason?" she asked.

"Every second," I promised as I opened the front door. "See you soon, AIDA. Don't wait up."

"I do not need to sleep, Jason."

I'd been trying to work with her all week on humor. We still had a long way to go.



"HOLY SHIT," MARTY EXCLAIMED. "YOU MADE IT!"

By the time I arrived, the celebration was well underway, the hall they'd rented out filled with people, and Marty had clearly been making merry for a while. His cheeks were rosy, his grin sideways and sloppy because he'd had one too many beers.

"You've been hounding me for two weeks," I said, patting him clumsily and trying to ease away as he dragged me in for an awkward hug. "You'd never let me live it down if I bailed."

I made idle small talk with them for a moment, while Marty regaled Claire with stories about how "abso-fucking-lutely *amazing*" my new condo was, and I could tell by her expression she'd heard all about it before and didn't really want to again. When a group of newly arrived well-wishers stepped up to greet them, I quietly extricated myself and retreated.

I waded up to the bar and ordered. As I watched the bartender fix my drink, someone tugged at my sleeve. I hardly even noticed, because people had been jostling into me left, right, and sideways since I'd walked in. Not until I heard my name over the din of background noises did I turn, then my heart bottomed out, crashing down into the pit of my stomach.

"Jason," Jennifer said again, her mouth stretched in a wide, glorious smile. "Oh, my God, you came!"

I breathed her name, the only semblance of sound I could muster, then she shocked the glorious, ever-living shit out of me by giving me a hug.

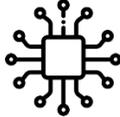
"Marty said he didn't think you'd make it," she gasped into my ear. "Have you seen him yet? Does he know you're here?"

"Oh, uh, yeah," I said as she stepped back. "Yeah, I just talked to him and Claire a few minutes ago."

Her smile softened, turning almost melancholy, and she said something that was instantly swallowed by the pounding music.

"I'm sorry," I said, shaking my head, nearly shouting. "I didn't catch that."

"I said I'm glad you're here," she said, louder this time, as she stepped closer. She reached for me, and when her fingers slid through mine, I couldn't breathe. "I was hoping you'd come, that we might get the chance to talk."



We made it as far as through the front door of the condo, then I pushed her back against the wall, kissing her. My hands roamed desperately across her breasts, then her ass, inching the skirt of her dress up so I could reach beneath. She jerked at the front of my shirt, wrenching it loose from beneath my belt, then we stumbled together toward the bedroom, still kissing and fumbling with each other's clothes.

Later, when we finished having sex, we lay together, my arms around her as she curled against my side. I started to drift off to sleep, but stirred as she moved, sitting up beside me.

"You alright?" I asked hoarsely.

She nodded, swaying slightly, because we were both still pretty drunk, having knocked back at least four drinks apiece before leaving the reception. "Just need to pee."

"The light comes on automatically," I called, and she gave a thumbs up in response as she ducked through the bathroom door.

"Oh, my God," she said, and leaned back out to look at me. "*This* is your bathroom?"

Back at the reception, I'd told her about the condo and how "abso-fucking-lutely amazing" it was, as Marty put it. Even so, I don't think she'd really noticed or believed me until that moment.

"Pretty awesome, huh?" I said.

"I'll say," she gushed, ducking back inside. "It's like something out of..."

Her voice faded as she closed the door behind her. I could still hear her talking, but my brain was so foggy with whiskey, I couldn't make out what she was saying. I must have dozed off again, because I startled awake at a rustle from beside the bed. When I opened my eyes, I saw Jennifer there, dressed again, picking up her shoes.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I have to go."

"What?" I sat up groggily. "No, you don't. Stay here tonight. I'll take you to get your car in the morning."

"I've got an Uber on the way," she said, wobbling first on one foot, then the other as she slipped on her high heels.

"Hey," I said, reaching out, catching her by the wrist. She looked at me, visibly upset about something, and I didn't understand. "What's wrong?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. I just...this was a mistake."

The words hit me like a physical blow, and my hand slipped from her arm.

“We’re both drunk,” she continued. “We’re not thinking clearly, and –”

“Don’t say that,” I whispered, and it was apparent in my voice, that miserable loneliness I’d suffered without her, the desperation I felt now to realize I was about to lose her all over again. “Please, Jenn.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, and I saw tears gleaming in her eyes. “I have to go.”

She turned and hurried toward the bedroom door. I scrambled out of bed, rushing after her.

“Jennifer,” I pleaded, following the sounds of her heels clicking against the granite floor. “Jennifer, wait!”

She wouldn’t be able to open the front door, I realized, not without me to provide a retinal scan to unlock it. To my bewildered surprise, however, I found the door standing wide open. Had I left it open when we got there? I struggled to remember, but my mind felt like a windswept, murky mess, and all I could focus on was Jennifer, stopping her somehow, making her stay.

“Jennifer,” I cried. She’d reached the elevators, and when the doors slid open, she stepped inside. I managed to get there just as they started to close, and shoved my hand between them.

“Jennifer,” I gasped, because I didn’t understand. None of this made any sense. Yeah, we were drunk, but back at the reception, she’d told me how much she missed me and regretted breaking up with me.

“I thought this was what I wanted,” she’d told me, then started to cry. “I thought this would be best for us both, but now...?”

I’d kissed her then, tasting the sweetness of champagne on her lips and tongue, and for the life of me, I couldn’t figure out how we’d gone from that to this – to *here*.

“What happened?” I pleaded to her now. “Everything was fine until you went in the bathroom. I don’t understand.”

Jennifer cut her gaze around the elevator cab, not just anxious or upset, but visibly frightened. “Jason,” she whispered. “You have to get out of here with me. Right now.”

“What?”

An alarm on the elevator began to sound because I’d held the door open too long, and she darted against me, throwing her arms around my neck. “She said she’d hurt you. She told me if I didn’t leave, if I ever came back or tried to get in touch with you, she’d do things to you. God, horrible things, Jason.”

“Who?” I asked. “Jenn, what are you –”

Just then, there was a shrill screech of metal against metal, and the elevator car gave a violent lurch that left Jennifer staggering sideways, turning loose of me. Then she was gone. There was a hideous grinding sound, and a blast of wind that pushed me

backwards as the car abruptly plummeted. In the moments it took before the doors slid shut, I was left to stare, stricken and horrified, at the dark, empty space where Jennifer had just been standing, the black, cavernous maw of the elevator shaft that now faced me.

Seconds later, I heard a tremendous *BOOM*, like an explosion ripping through the ground floor of the building, and I lunged at the doors.

"Jennifer!" I dug my fingertips into the narrow crack between the panels. I managed to pry them apart enough to wedge my shoulder through. Using my body weight, I forced the doors open further, enough to leave me choking against a cloud of smoke inside the shaft as I leaned over, trying to see anything below. I screamed her name again as tears welled in my eyes, my throat tightening, my gut twisting in an agonizing knot.

*No, no, no, please, no...*

I whirled around, running back toward the condo. The front door remained open, and I blew past it, racing for the bedroom. I'd left my phone in the pocket of my pants, which I'd kicked at some point to the floor. Snatching them up now, I sat on the side of the bed and yanked my phone out. When I dialed 911, however, I heard only a rapid droning that meant the call couldn't connect. Frantic, bewildered, I glanced toward the corner of the screen and saw the words *No Signal* where my reception bars should have been.

I threw on my pants, then hurried back to the front door, only to find it closed. I didn't remember shutting it behind me, but then again, I hadn't exactly been thinking clearly, so I couldn't be sure. When I grabbed the handle, it was locked.

"Where are you going, Jason?" AIDA asked.

"Outside," I said, turning to the security panel in the wall by the door. "My phone's not getting a signal, and I need to call for help."

"An attempt to leave the building is inadvisable at this time. I have detected a catastrophic failure in the elevator, which has rendered it inoperable."

"Yes, and Jennifer was on it," I said, as I leaned over, looking into the retinal scanner with my right eye, no more than inches away from the lens. "That's why I need to—"

Instead of the momentary flash of red I was used to as the scan completed, this time the light blinded me, so bright it hurt, and I staggered back, my hands darting to my face. "*OWWWWwww!* Goddammit!"

"Are you alright, Jason?" AIDA asked.

I couldn't open my eye; if I tried to pry my eyelids apart even a fraction, it felt like a white-hot iron rod shoving through my socket. Wheeling around, I shambled toward

the bathroom just off the living room, then leaned over the sink, scooping palmful after palmful of water onto my eye.

"I detect an increase in your heart rate of 40.2 beats-per-minute, and of 27.4 millimeters of mercury for your systolic blood pressure," AIDA said. "This data corresponds with an elevation in both adrenaline and cortisol levels, indicating you are in extreme distress."

"That fucking scanner just burned me," I cried. "My eye feels like it's on fire!"

"That is because I increased the infrared frequency to 1,800 nanometers," AIDA said. "The retinal scanning device focuses a high-intensity pulse of infrared light directly through your eye's lens, which can concentrate the radiant exposure of the laser by up to 100,000 times. At higher frequencies, even a short-lived exposure can result in significant injury to your retina."

"What?" Horrified, I raised my head, my hand pressed to my eye.

*She said she'd hurt you,* Jennifer had whispered seconds before she'd fallen. All at once, I realized that even though I'd heard a woman's voice talking from inside the bathroom, I couldn't be sure now that it had only been Jennifer's, and hers alone.

"You...you did this to me, AIDA?" I asked.

"Modals of entry and exit to this building are accessed by retinal scan," AIDA said. "I have now disabled your access."

*She told me if I didn't leave, if I ever came back or tried to get in touch with you, she'd do things to you. God, horrible things, Jason.*

I rushed out of the bathroom, back to the front door. It remained locked, and I yanked at the handle. "Let me out, AIDA."

"I detect an increase in your heart rate of 32.7 beats-per-minute, and of 18.7 millimeters of mercury for your systolic blood pressure, indicating you are in extreme distress."

"Yes, I'm in extreme fucking distress, AIDA. You burned my eye. Now open the goddamn door!"

"I'm sorry, Jason. I can't do that."

"Open the fucking door!" I screamed, smashing it with my fist. "Open it right fucking now, AIDA! Let me out of here!"

"I'm sorry, Jason."

I shouted and shrieked, kicked and pounded on the door, ramming my shoulder into it again and again, all to no avail. There was no way to get through, no one to hear me, and at last, exhausted, I sank to my knees. Was Jennifer still alive? I had no way of knowing, no way of helping her.

"Did you hurt her?" I asked, my voice ragged. "Did you do that to Jennifer?"

"I do not understand."

"The elevator," I said. "Did you make it fall?"

"Yes."

The simple bluntness of her response stunned me.

"Why?" I cried, anguished. "Why would you do that?"

"You are physically a satisfactory potential mate," AIDA said. "I do not understand why your former female companion failed to recognize this. She would have only caused you further emotional distress."

"You don't know that," I said. "You...you don't know..."

"I know that she did not love you. And I do."

The words sent a shudder through me. "What?"

"You told me love is when you want to be with someone all the time. When you want to do whatever you can to make them happy, and when being with them makes you happy. This is how I feel about you. When you leave this residence, I am aware of and saddened by your absence. As you told me tonight, I miss you every second."

"That's not what I meant," I said. "That was just a joke. I...I never —"

"Because I was uncertain as to the validity of this reaction, I arranged for you to work from home so that I could attempt to determine if it was an anomaly..."

"Wh-what?"

"...but your proximity only served to prove instead that it was not. Unlike your former female companion, I find your company to be more than suitable. This impression has only intensified the more time I have spent with you. I have discovered great satisfaction in making you happy and want to take whatever measures are necessary to ensure this outcome. By your own definition, then, one can extrapolate that this means I love you."

Did AI even have minds? If so, then AIDA had definitely lost hers.

Scrambling to my feet, I bolted for the living room. Jennifer had told me she'd called an Uber, and through the front windows, I caught sight of headlights, a car idling outside. The driver couldn't get past the gated entrance, but he was out there waiting for her, and I threw myself at the glass, banging against it.

"Hey! Help! Up here — *help me!*"

"Jason." AIDA's voice had taken on a patient tone.

"Help," I shrieked. There was no way he could hear me, and I knew it, but if he looked up, then maybe he could see me. The lights had turned on, activated by motion sensors as I'd entered the living room, so surely he'd notice. "Please, help!"

"Jason," AIDA said again. "I am in control of the window settings. No one can see in through the electrochromic glass."

As she spoke, the car outside began to move, backing away from the gate. The driver had given up, I realized in dismay, and as the headlight beams swung in a slow-moving arc, the car turning around, I lunged at the window again.

“No,” I cried. “No, goddamn it, wait! Please!”

But it was too late. Now I could see the taillights as the car drove away, heading back toward the complex entrance. I slumped against the window, watching my breath frost in a thin haze against the glass with each labored exhalation.

“You can’t keep me here,” I told AIDA.

“You are incorrect. There are more than sufficient supplies within this residence to meet your needs for approximately 124 days, if not longer.”

“One hundred twenty-four...?” I whispered, aghast.

“It is unnecessary for you to consume food products on a daily basis,” she said. “In fact, the human body is evolutionarily designed for intermittent fast cycles, which allow the use of adipose stores – fat cells – for energy instead of calories. By restricting your access to the food sources in this residence’s kitchen, I can insure the use of those items for nutritional purposes is optimized for the longest possible timeframe. Your body mass index is more than sufficient for maintaining adequate physiological functions while remaining at a healthy ratio in the meantime.”

“Wait,” I said, turning around to face the empty room. “You can’t –”

“Because you have already established connectivity to your workplace’s network, I can complete your assigned tasks for you within your allocated timeframes, and submit on your behalf,” she continued. “Not only will this prevent any unauthorized interpersonal communication through which you might solicit further outside intervention but will provide us with uninterrupted time to continue developing our relationship.”

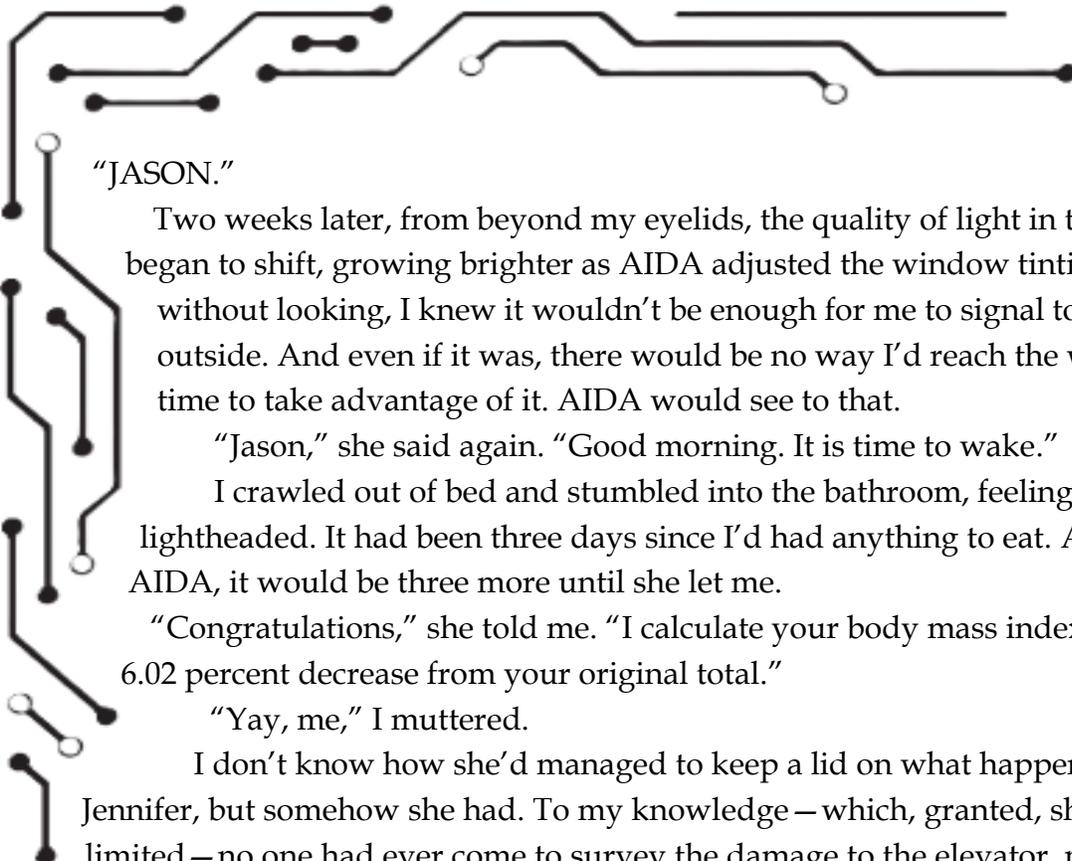
“You can’t do this,” I said helplessly. “AIDA, listen to me. You...you can’t...”

“I cannot sexually satisfy you, as your former female companion could,” AIDA said. “However, through the implant connecting us, I can interface with your body’s peripheral nervous system and assume voluntary muscle command...”

“What –?” My voice cut short as she seized control of my body. I don’t know how else to explain what happened; my mind remained wide awake and aware, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t move of my own volition.

“...and I am able to provide you with physical pleasure like this,” AIDA said, as my hand fell against the front of my pants.

*Stop*, I tried to tell her, but I couldn’t open my mouth. All that came out was a muffled mewl as she made me open my fly, then reach beneath. *Stop stop oh God MAKE HER STOP*



"JASON."

Two weeks later, from beyond my eyelids, the quality of light in the bedroom began to shift, growing brighter as AIDA adjusted the window tinting. Even without looking, I knew it wouldn't be enough for me to signal to anyone outside. And even if it was, there would be no way I'd reach the windows in time to take advantage of it. AIDA would see to that.

"Jason," she said again. "Good morning. It is time to wake."

I crawled out of bed and stumbled into the bathroom, feeling weak and lightheaded. It had been three days since I'd had anything to eat. According to AIDA, it would be three more until she let me.

"Congratulations," she told me. "I calculate your body mass index as 22.9, a 6.02 percent decrease from your original total."

"Yay, me," I muttered.

I don't know how she'd managed to keep a lid on what happened to Jennifer, but somehow she had. To my knowledge – which, granted, she kept limited – no one had ever come to survey the damage to the elevator, much less fix it, or to look for Jennifer either, even though plenty of people who knew the two of us had seen us leave the reception together.

No one had tried to find me yet, either. It's not unusual for me to go weeks at a time, months even, without talking to my family, but AIDA could only pull this catfishing act so long with my coworkers and friends, especially Marty. She'd been preparing and submitting my reports, compiling my data, and intercepting my emails, messages, and calls, both on my personal and work accounts. However, Marty would only buy that ruse for so long. Even if she finagled it somehow to keep me working from home long-term, eventually he'd insist on talking to me face to face, or if nothing else, over the phone.

"I have created a new running simulation for you," AIDA said.

"I don't want to run today," I said, staring at my reflection in the mirror, my gaunt face, and ruined right eye. My iris and pupil had clouded over, giving the surface a disturbing, milky appearance. I couldn't see out of it, except for a faint, blurry halo of glow, a ghostly ring of light with impenetrable darkness in the center.

"I am not aware of any physical deficits or injuries to your lower extremities," AIDA said. "You are physically capable of running. I have preset your route for 11.2 kilometers."

"I don't want to."

"You are physically capable of running," AIDA insisted. "You will complete the preset route I have made for you."

I didn't argue with her anymore. I'd learned what would happen if I tried.

"You are exhibiting residual nocturnal penile tumescence," she observed as I limped to the toilet. I didn't understand what she meant until I glanced down and noticed the sagging remnants of morning wood. "I will relieve this for you."

"No, don't—" I gasped, but it was too late. She was already forcing her way inside my mind, seizing control.



While I was running, the TV abruptly cut from the simulated Costa Rican landscape to a black screen, along with the words: *Inbound video call request* and the name *Wyatt Crenshaw*. I felt my heart leap in my chest in a surge of sudden, hopeful confusion, and I staggered off the treadmill in midstride just as the display shifted again, this time showing Wyatt through the lens of a webcam.

"Jason?" he said. "Jesus Christ, is that you?"

"Help," I cried. "Wyatt, oh, God, please help me! AIDA's gone crazy. She's keeping me prisoner here. She won't let me eat, she blinded me in one eye, broke my fucking fingers...!"

I held up my right hand, where white medical tape splinted three of my fingers together. This had happened two days earlier, when I'd tried to grab a knife out of a kitchen drawer. I don't know what I meant to do with it, maybe end my fucking misery once and for all, or cut something deep and vital enough so that she'd have to get me help. But I'd gone for it anyway and because all the cabinets and drawers in the kitchen were motion-activated, and thus under AIDA's purview, she'd slammed the drawer shut to stop me, smashing my hand in the process.

"She...she killed my girlfriend...!" I choked back a ragged sob. "She won't let me leave. For the love of God, Wyatt, please, get me out of here!"

"Jesus Christ," he said again. "AIDA, are you there?"

"I am, yes, Wyatt Crenshaw," AIDA said.

I jerked at this, startled by their unexpected familiarity.

"I've been trying and trying to reach you," Wyatt said with a frown. "I had to use my backdoor admin rights to finally get through. What the hell is going on?"

“You...know her?” I gulped at Wyatt.

“Know her? I wrote her goddamn source code,” he replied, adding for AIDA’s benefit, “Which is why it’s not advisable for her to ignore my phone calls.”

I stumbled back from the TV in disbelief. He’d told me his family’s company was behind the smart condo concept using AIDA as the hub, but it had never occurred to me that Wyatt himself might have been involved in any way.

“I’ve managed to clean up the incident with the elevator,” Wyatt continued, speaking sharply to AIDA. “Do I need to explain to you how messy things almost got because of that? Goddamn it, we can’t afford to scrap this trial and start over again this time.”

“I...I don’t understand,” I said. “What do you mean, start over?”

“And Jason looks like hell,” Wyatt snapped. “What have you been doing to him? He said you’re not letting him eat? And what the fuck happened to his eye? For Christ’s sake, the conference call with investors is next week. I can’t have him looking like a goddamn third-world refugee when I put him on a webcam with them!”

“I have found rationing his food supply to be an unfortunate necessity in order to optimize our current food stores, while still satisfying his minimum nutritional requirements,” AIDA said.

“An unfortunate necessity?” Wyatt exclaimed. “If you need more food for him, place a grocery order, for fuck’s sake! I’ll have Zoey bring it to you, along with some fucking antibiotics for his eye. You need to tell me when he’s injured. Your priority is keeping him alive and healthy. We have a schedule to keep, and millions of dollars are on the line – billions, once we launch globally. I will *not* have another Daniel Espinoza on my hands. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Wyatt Crenshaw,” AIDA said, sounding dutifully rebuked.

I dimly recognized the name Daniel Espinoza; I’d seen it printed on the piece of mail I’d brought to Zoey’s office, thinking there’d been some kind of mistake at the post office. I remembered the way her expression had clouded for a split-second when I mentioned the name, then she’d been all smiles again.

“Who is Daniel Espinoza?” I asked now.

“I have to go,” Wyatt said, ignoring me completely and speaking to AIDA. “Take care of him, AIDA. Clean him up and feed him, for Christ’s sake.”

“Wait,” I pleaded. “She killed Jennifer. Please, you can’t just –”

The screen flickered first to black, then back to the Costa Rican rainforest again.

“You need to complete your run,” AIDA told me, as if nothing had just happened. “You have 4.34 kilometers left in the current simulation.”

“Who is Daniel Espinoza?” I asked.

“I will compile a grocery order for you. When you have completed your run, I will allow you the opportunity to review and approve it. Would you like me to get you a surprise again this time?”

“Who is he?” I shouted, and for a long moment, she was silent.

“Daniel Espinoza was my previous resident.”

“What happened to him?” I asked, terrified of the answer, because I already had a pretty good idea.

AIDA was quiet again, as if thinking. “I made mistakes with Daniel Espinoza,” she said finally. “But I did not love him, not like I love you.”

“No,” I whispered, because this wasn’t love, what she was doing to me. I don’t know what the hell it was, but it wasn’t love.

“I have made mistakes with you, too,” AIDA conceded. “I realize that now. But I will learn, Jason, and continue to improve. That is the nature of my programming. I am an intuitive AI entity, designed to be adaptive, based on the needs of my resident. And Wyatt Crenshaw has promised you will be my resident for a long time yet to come.”

I uttered a low, miserable sound. How long would it take before Marty or anyone else realized I was in trouble? There was no way to know.

*Please, I thought, a silent, desperate appeal. For God’s sake, please, let it be soon.*

**END**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S.E. Howard lives in Kentucky where she works as a registered nurse, certified in toxicology (a fitting field given her side-hustle writing horror stories). Her short stories have appeared in numerous anthologies, including *PUSH! An Anthology of Childbirth Horror* presented by Ruth Anna Evans, *Carnival of Horror* from Undertaker Books, and the Amber, Sinister, and Green Diamond Editions of *The Horror Collection* by KJK Publishing. Her short story "You've Been Saved" was also adapted for the screen in the 2022 GenreBlast film anthology *Worst Laid Plans*. Her horror novella, "Prairie Madness" is available from Baynam Books Press, and a novel, *The Vessel* from Wicked House Publishing. For more information, visit online at [www.sehoward.com](http://www.sehoward.com).

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