



Holographic

By Norman Thomas Hood

Mason rolled over to push the snooze button on his alarm. The covers followed him, leaving Luna exposed to the cold, morning air. He felt a resulting tug in the opposite direction. Spinning dramatically, he turned himself over with enough force to leave himself squarely on top of her.

“I didn’t pull you *that* damn hard,” she said. “Besides, cassanova... you’ve left yourself with a cover and a comforter between us.”

“Not for long.” Mason rolled the other way and threw the linens on the floor.

When he spun back around, Luna’s side of the bed was empty. He saw her putting on her robe as she disappeared into the hall.

“Sorry babe, but you told me last night how important today’s meeting was. You wanted to get to work early, remember? I don’t want to be the reason you’re late.”

Mason’s back hit the mattress with an exhale of disappointment. Minutes later, he awoke to his alarm sounding again. The cold floor under his feet soon finished the job his alarm had begun. Mason followed the smell of coffee to the kitchen. Luna was already drinking hers when he sat down.

“See? If I’d let you have your way this morning, you’d have been last to the conference room today.”

“Yeah... and if you hadn’t slept in that cut-off t-shirt, I could walk straight right now.”

“Haah! You walked in here straight enough, honey. Don’t be grumpy... you just may score *twice* today. Once in your meeting and again when you get home tonight. Play your cards right and I’ll make you as happy as a man could possibly be.”

“Nice!” he replied.

“I have a fund-raiser today, but it’s a lunch thing. With any luck, I should be home before you.”

“I’ll hold you to that, babe. Go raise that money.” He searched through the cabinet and poured his coffee into a travel mug.

“So, you *are* going in early, huh?” she asked, watching him fill the container.

“Yep. I’ll drink what I can here and take the rest with me. Hopefully, the caffeine will carry me through the meeting.”

“Good luck,” she said, leaving the kitchen. “Tell the old man your wife said he’d better listen to you today!”

Mason parked in his usual spot and grabbed his coffee and briefcase. The walk from the parking lot to the company’s entrance seemed longer than usual this morning. Scenarios of ways to present his idea flooded his mind, along with a crippling amount of anxiety.

It’s a crazy idea... too much, too soon! He second guessed himself all the way into the lobby. It was buzzing today.

“Mr. Stallings. You’re in early this morning. Big meeting today?” The brunette receptionist smiled brightly as he passed.

“You already know,” he answered.

It was the first Monday in April, Holomerge’s annual day for any new, out-of-the-box ideas. The Founder/CEO would entertain presentations from any willing employee on staff today, from the janitor to the company’s president. Anyone that wanted to participate got ten minutes in front of the boss to pitch their original idea for a new product or hardware/software improvement.

Mason’s idea was for an innovative, new product, and it was definitely out-of-the-box. So much so, he considered taking a pass again this year.

As he rode the elevator to the third floor, he continued fighting his internal battle on whether or not to present his idea.

Forget it! I'm an engineer, not a concept developer. I'm just gonna come out of there looking like a freakin' idiot.

He took his usual detour when the elevator doors parted. Before he realized it, he'd put a dollar in the coffee machine and made a selection. His friend looked at his travel mug.

"Damn, dude... how much coffee do you *need* this morning? Or is there something better in that tumbler of yours?" Mason turned to see James sitting at the break table, pointing at his mug.

"Shit! I forgot I brought coffee with me this morning. Gonna be a great day, huh? Off to a good start already." James stood from his chair and dug in his pocket.

"Did you get cream and sugar?" he asked, fumbling through his change. Mason nodded.

"Well, here's a buck, then. I was just getting ready to buy one."

"Keep it," Mason said, "It's on the house. May my stupidity be your caffeine high this morning." He handed James the freshly brewed coffee.

"Hell, yeah. Woulda been better if you said it like Yoda, though. Come... sit at the Jedis' table." Mason sat down and opened his laptop case. James glanced inside.

"So... you sportin' an idea for Chambers today?" he asked, sipping his free coffee. Mason took a quick look over his shoulder before answering.

"Yeah. It's that freakin' time of year. Been thinking about this one for a while but haven't had the nerve to present it yet."

"New software prep? I coded a cleaner way for the LP hologram to process 5-G data. Cuts off 180 milliseconds."

"Cool," Mason said. "Chambers will love it."

"I figured as much. Anything to make the response time faster is a win. I heard Johnson came up with a wrist watch unit. Project's a one inch tall image. Problem is, the watch weighs 340 grams. That's almost 11 ounces! Not to mention it gets hot and you have to charge it two or three times a day if you plan to use it more than fifteen minutes. Once again, he's left his ideas too far ahead of the current tech."

"I guess when he heard about that bracelet coming out, he wanted to one-up the competition," Mason said.

"Yeah, that watch will never make it into production. So... whatcha got? Software tweak? New app?" Mason looked over his shoulder again.

"No, it's an idea for a brand new product. Not much different than Johnson's in the sense that it's premature in regards to current available tech. Would cost way too much to produce right now."

"Well, spit it out, man. Bounce it off me. No one's here 'cept me and you. I won't say anything. You got my word on it."

Mason hesitated, then leaned across the table so he wouldn't have to talk as loud.

"It's a portable assistant. One for the family, really. The projector and the computer would need to be about the size of a 16" laptop, so it'd fit in a case next to one. I figure it'll have to be about an inch and a half thick to handle the rechargeables it'll need."

"What... like it's tied into your calendar and contacts?" James looked confused. "Doesn't sound all that groundbreaking, bro."

"No... directly to AI, with its own wifi decoder."

"Dude, I hate to break it to you but Axiuptech has a prototype for that and they're close to production. It was on the news three months ago. Reads and scans your messages and everything. Even set appointments for you and searches web info from voice input. "

"No, I mean an *actual* interface. A holographic assistant that connects with and mimics AI algorithms with backdoor access to AI. One that's completely personalized to the user... and private."

"Sounds like a future data theft lawsuit, dude. AI companies would never agree to it."

"They don't have to. We'd partner with them," Mason said. "Plus, this would fall under normal access laws to connect with other AI servers using your personal device, that's all... like a laptop or phone. It'd be contingent on their usage policy, yeah... but my device would *learn* about its primary users as well pull info from the web to answer their random questions. It would act similarly to a human assistant."

“So, it’ll recognize you... learn your voice and mannerisms. And remember what you told it last Tuesday?” James asked.

“Exactly. Like a personal secretary... but with no mistakes.”

“Shit, dude... you mean like a wife, then. They’re never wrong even when they *are* wrong. What happens if you start gaining weight and it decides to suddenly turn off your refrigerator?”

“Not unless you told it to. See? I knew this was too much. Chambers is going to react the same way you did. I overreached.”

“Dude... twenty years from now I could see everyone using something like that. Especially with how good lasers are getting. But a unit as small as you said with enough definition to look any better than a 3-D Disney character would cost as much as a new car... maybe a small house. Who’s gonna be able to afford it?”

“Yeah, I know. Like I said... it’s too much. I’ll scrap it.”

“No, man... go ahead and present it. Don’t listen to me. The old man’s always talking about the future. I’m sure there’ll be something he can take from your idea. Maybe you’ll get a piece of whatever comes from it. You know he likes fringe ideas.” Before Mason could answer, two women entered the break room.

Mason closed his laptop and gathered his things. James drank the last of his coffee and tossed the cup in the trash like he was shooting a free throw.

“See, dude? Like Nike says, just *doooo* it. Whatcha got to lose, anyway?” Mason gave a quick nod and left for his desk.

Yeah... just doooo it... easy advice when it’s not your ass getting laughed out of the conference room, Mason thought.

The afternoon slump hit Mason hard. He’d gotten little sleep the night before.

3:20... fifty minutes away. He rubbed his eyes and took a walk to the lobby.

“How’d it go, Flash? You the big winner today?” the young receptionist asked as she played with her hair.

“No, Jen... My fifteen is in about forty-five minutes. I just came down for a soda.”

“Screw that! Drink one of these.” She handed him an energy drink. “Makes coffee feel like a kid’s drink.” Mason started to read the back of the can, looking for the ingredients list.

“It’s not gonna *kill* ya, dude. It’s all natural,” she said. “Trust me.”

“Okay, thanks. Maybe this will get me over the hump.” Mason opened the can and took a drink.

“Tastes like a fruit drink,” he said, coughing. “Definitely has a little zing to it.”

“Oh, you have no idea,” she laughed. “You’ll have all the energy you need for ‘ole Chambers office... just wait.”

“Office? I thought the meetings were in the conference room.”

“Not this year,” she winked. It was in the company email. His office.”

“Great... no pressure there. I shoulda just stayed in bed.”

“Oh, you’ll be fine. Believe in yourself, mister!”

“Yeah, no problem. Thanks for the drink. Sounds like you’ve already had one or two.” He took another sip and returned to the third floor.

As he approached his office, he heard his desk phone ringing. He tossed the half-drunk can into the trash before answering it.

“Mason Stallings.”

“Babe... are you out of breath already this morning? I guess we can raincheck tonight, huh?” Luna asked.

“Uh, *no*. I’m good. Was just away from my desk, that’s all. Was drinking one of those energy drinks.”

“Yuck. Those things’ll kill ya.”

“Yeah, it was supposed to be healthy, but tasted like a mix of orange juice and gasoline. Got it from a friend.”

“Okay... well, some friend you have there. I just wanted to say good luck for the meeting. It’s getting close to crunch time, right?”

“Yeah, thirty minutes or so. I’m about to run through it again a couple times before heading up to Chamber’s office.”

“His *office*?”

“Yeah, I sounded the same way as you when *I* found out a few minutes ago.”

“Wow. It’s a little more pressure, but you’ll do fine, babe. He seemed nice at the company picnic. I liked him.”

“Oh, he liked you, too. I remember.”

“That was just the margaritas talking. He was harmless,” she laughed.

“Yeah? Well, I could use a margarita right now, and hold the mixer.”

“Just call me when it’s over. And just so you know, you’re getting lucky tonight regardless of how your meeting goes, I promise. So, even if you lose, you still win. I’m on the way right now to pick up some steak and shrimp. Gonna cook you a nice, home-cooked dinner for once and serve you your favorite dessert after.”

“Favorite dessert?”

“Me, dumbass. Okay... I love you. Gotta go.”

“Screw the meeting. I think I’d rather ditch work and come home early. I have a sweet tooth.”

“Tonight, babe. Patience always pays off.” She ended the call, leaving him thinking about more than his upcoming meeting with Winston Chambers.

Mason sat in the hallway outside Mr. Chambers’ office. The Victorian leather chair was oversized, making him feel very small. He admired the original paintings lining the walls.

There must be \$100,000 worth of art on these walls, he thought as he looked down the long, carpeted hallway.

An attractive older woman emerged from a nearby restroom. She took a seat behind her desk.

“Sorry, you’re Mr.?”

“Stallings... Mason Stallings. I have a 3:45 with Mr. Chambers.” She pecked at her keyboard, then looked up at Mason.

“Yes, you do. As soon as he lets me know, you can—” A green light flashed on her intercom. “Oh, it looks like he’s ready for you now. Good luck, Mr. Stallings. He’s in a good mood today.”

Hopefully he’s still in a good mood fifteen minutes from now, he thought.

The office door opened with one of Mason’s coworkers exiting. There was sweat around the man’s collar. He glanced at Mason as he passed and shook his head.

“Oops,” the secretary whispered.

Mason took a deep breath and entered the office. He was amazed to see what an open, classically decorated room it was inside. At the end of the large space sat the aging founder, smoking a cigar behind an ornate, wooden desk. He noticed Mason looking the room over as he approached.

“I’ve had some of the walls removed. It’s a much nicer space now, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir. I’ve never seen it before, but it’s very nice. I’m—”

“Mason Stallings. You’re married to that pretty little blonde I made such a fuss over last summer. She had a unique name...”

“Luna,” Mason answered. “Yes sir... very unique. It means Goddess of the Moon.”

“Oh, yes... well, she certainly is. Lucky man, lucky man. Well, do you have an exciting suggestion for me that will blow my mind and send our company off in a new direction of continued success? Let’s pray it’s something different from what I’ve been suffering through all day.”

“Yes, sir. Well, I hope so. I have a presentation that explains it.” He sat his laptop down and opened it.

“Oh, no, no, no. Not another Powerpoint! Young man, I’ve watched fifteen of those damn things today. I can’t take another one. When I approached investors more than three decades ago to start this company, I sat five feet across from three old suits sitting smugly behind their desks and sold them on my vision, *myself*! No Powerpoint, no bullet points, no artwork... no bullshit. They received my thoughts and enthusiasm through *this* (he pointed to his mouth) and nothing else. Now *I’m* the old suit sitting behind the desk. But my desk is bigger than theirs, because my *vision* for the future was bigger.”

Mason’s hands trembled as he closed his laptop, another deep breath was taken.

“Yes sir, I can explain it verbally.”

“When then, the floor is yours, Stallings. Dazzle me.” Mr. Chambers sat back in his formidable chair with his hands folded. Mason cleared his throat.

“Have you ever seen Star Wars? The first release... in 1977?”

“Took my girlfriend to see it. We married a month later and divorced soon after.”

“Oh, okay... well, the famous scene where R2-D2 projects the hologram of Princess Leia?”

“My inspiration for Holomerge. And every other holo-tech company’s inspiration, I’m sure. Yes, yes... go on.”

“Of course. But what if it wasn’t film footage of Leia that was projected, but an independent, full-functioning avatar of her.”

“I think I know where you’re going, son. But it’s been done. Smaller version, using Google, right? Axiuptech has a virtual planner with Bluetooth. Does everything from reminding you to take your medicine to reading your emails and favorite books to you. They plan to launch this Christmas.”

“Yes sir, but that’s just syncing a holographic character to regurgitate preset data. I’m talking about a fully AI-based system, working independently of stored data but able to access it or the net when necessary. An *independently* thinking and functioning avatar.”

“Son, we’d have to partner with a willing AI company for direct, maybe even backdoor access to their servers.”

“Yes, it would certainly mean doing that, but what if we offered in-device and cloud storage to our customers so learned patterns and data can be stored and encrypted for each user’s profile?”

“The memory needed for that would increase the cost of such a unit significantly. What’s the benefit to us if only the rich can afford our product?”

“I think we *can* make it affordable, sir. We wouldn’t produce a lifesize projection... just 18” inches tall. My design could be the size of a large laptop, just a half inch thicker or so. A family-based unit everyone could use... like the first personal computers were. Plus, with an adequate amount of onboard memory, our customers’ relationship with its avatar would remain as private as they wish, *and* personalized. The more private and protected their interactions are, the more people would chance using it. Our avatar would be more than just a 3-D presentation of video and audio feeds. With its learning abilities, exceptional memory and user-pattern tracking, our hologram could discern whether its user was happy, sad, worried, etc. Then offer an ear to listen and give suggestions to help. A 360 degree camera and microphone could handle that. They’re about the size of a nickel nowadays... with rotation.”

“You’re talking about a 24/7 interface with an AI server. And coding to parrot its algorithms. A learning, holographic avatar.”

“Yes, exactly.”

“But the cost to do that, son. Why, a working prototype would cost upwards of a million dollars to produce. Consider the risk I’d be taking to go down this rabbit hole with you.” Mason’s enthusiasm instantly evaporated.

“Yes, sir... you’re right, of course. I’m sorry I wasted your time. I had my doubts in presenting—”

“I love it,” the old man said, standing from his chair.

“You do?” Mason was shocked, almost tripping over his own feet.

“I do. Yes, I could see every American having one of these in their home one day. Think of it... our holographic avatar projectors in every middle class home. Why, people could customize theirs to look and sound like anyone they wanted. A celebrity, the President of the United States, or themselves, for that matter... any one they could dream up! Personalized specifically to each user. Learning their likes, dislikes... their unique personalities. Yes, I absolutely love it!”

“Sir, I really wasn’t prepared for... well, for you to like my idea. I’m a little—”

“Surprised? So am I, Mason. All day long I’ve heard about software tweaks, newer and better apps to run our lifesize units... new features for the units we have *already* perfected in my opinion... all boring! You can bet I didn’t start this company with small ideas. I started this with a vision, Mason... a big, risky vision at that! Some of the components I needed to realize my vision weren’t even in *existence* yet. I have sixty-three patents under my belt, young man. But that’s what it takes to get ahead of the competition... and *stay* ahead. Right now there are nearly ten holographic design companies fighting over the biggest piece of the pie, all selling their products to *other* big companies. We used to be the biggest of three. Things have changed, and so must we. I think it’s time we took things to the next level, and brought our product to the family! We’ll call it the *Holomerge Family Holographic Assistant 1*, or HFHA1, for short.” Chambers pointed to the chair next to his desk. Mason sat down, still processing the moment.

“You’re in engineering... right, son?” He lit a new cigar, then offered one to Mason.

“No, thank you... and yes, seven years now. I designed our latest diverging lenses.”

“Yes, that was a good improvement. Gave us a broader light field for less money. But this... *this* is a new venture altogether. It’s big, Stallings. When did you come up with your idea?”

“Please, sir... call me Mason. It’s been bouncing around in my head for at least three years now.”

“And I’m just now hearing about it?”

“Yes, sir. It took a while for me to work up the courage to present it to you, that’s all.”

“I can understand why, but the same reasons that kept you from moving forward are what’s going to make this a revolutionary product. Have you told anyone else about it?”

“Just my wife, Luna. And James Clark from advertising... early this morning. He promised not to say anything, though.”

“Oh, hell...” Chambers pushed a button on his intercom. “Valerie! Call advertising and get James Clark up here.”

“Yes, sir.” Mason felt his throat tightening.

“Tell me, Mason. Would your wife have an issue with signing a simple non-disclosure agreement?”

“No, sir. She actually helped me shape the idea after I came up with the concept.”

“Splendid. We’ll pay her a nice consulting fee. Here, take this home with you. It’s from my daughter’s company. My way of saying welcome to my inner circle.” He handed Mason a suitcase-sized box of gourmet cheeses.

“Um, thank you, sir. So...” Mason cleared his throat again. “You’re going to implement my idea... right here, at headquarters? And produce it?”

“No, son... *you’re* going to implement your idea here, and yes, *we’ll* produce it together... somewhere. We have a wonderful lab here, as you know. You and I can sit down soon and discuss fair compensation for your project.” A surge of excitement sped down Mason’s spine.

“You’ll maintain your position in engineering, but I want you to work with Marty in product development. He’s the senior man there. That will be your top priority. Get with Marty and decide how long it should take for a working prototype... one we can pitch for a partnership. We’ll go from there.”

The door to the office opened with a sheepish James entering the room. Valerie held the door.

“Sir, you wanted to see me?”

“Yes, Mr. Clark. I understand Mason told you of his idea this morning?”

“Uh, yes sir... he did.” The CEO stood from his desk and extended his neck toward Clark.

“I want you to understand that your continued employment here depends on the truthfulness of your next answer, James.”

“Okay... I mean, yes, sir.” James looked at Mason with a look of fear and desperation. The old man continued.

“Have you told anyone, and I mean *anyone*, about Mason’s idea today?”

“Well... no sir, not outside of work. Just a couple of guys in my depart—”

“And that was who, exactly?”

“Woods and Stinson... about ten minutes ago.” Mr. Chambers looked across the room to Valerie.

“Get ‘em up here.” She promptly left the room and called the advertising department again.

Soon, there were three ad-men standing nervously across from their CEO.

“Valerie, get me some non-disclosure forms. We’re going to have us a signing party.”

Mason’s co-workers looked at him as if he’d ratted them out to the school principal. He shrugged his shoulders but smiled inwardly.

By the time Mason got back to his office it was almost time to leave for the day. He picked up his cell and saw an unfamiliar number had called. He ignored it and dialed Luna instead, knowing she’d be more than excited to hear his news. Her line rang several times before he received an automated message from their wireless carrier,

“The person you are trying to reach has a voicemail that is full and cannot accept a new message. Please hang up and try your call again.” Mason quickly texted her.

Babe! Call me back... and soon! Everything’s fine, but call me!

Mason shut down his desktop computer, grabbed his gift box of cheese and hurried to his car. As he passed Jen, she gave him a look as if to ask, "Well?" He grinned and gave her an excited thumbs-up.

He had to watch his speed on the way home, as his excitement was pushing him to drive faster.

Calm down, stupid. You don't need another damn ticket!

He pulled into his complex and parked in front of his apartment, his car rocking forward and back as the brakes locked in.

"Shit! It figures."

Jen's car wasn't there. He dialed her number again. No one answered. As he texted her a second time, his ringtone sounded.

"Finally," he said, ready to tell her everything. As Mason read the display, he saw it was the same number he'd seen before leaving work.

Oh, shit! That's probably Chambers' cell number!

"Hello, this is Mason Stallings."

"Mason Stallings?" The voice didn't sound like the CEO's.

"Yes, this is Mason Stallings. Who's this?"

"Are you married to Luna Stallings, of 341 Glimmer Pines?"

"Yes... who is this? If you're trying to get a hold of her, she's not available right now. Tell me who it is and I'll let her know you called." There was a short pause on the line. He heard other voices in the background.

"Sir, this is Officer Randall of the Austin Police Department. Your wife's been in an automobile accident. She's at Saint David's Medical Center, in Central Austin."

"Accident? A car accident? Is she okay?" His heart was racing.

"Sir, she's at Saint David's—"

"Yeah, I *heard* that! Is she okay?"

"Sir, I was asked to inform you that you need to come to the hospital as soon as you can safely get there." Mason ended the call and dialed Luna's number again. It rang several times before repeating the same message he'd gotten earlier.

"Oh, no." He threw his car in reverse and spun out of his parking space, clipping the bumper of another car before speeding out of the complex.

After pulling up to the Emergency Department entrance, Mason jammed his car into park and ran towards the door. Through the glass, he saw two officers standing by the intake station. His stomach folded. Before he reached them, both officers noticed him approaching. One put his hands out in a gesture for Mason to stop.

“My wife! I got a call saying she was here... she was in a car accident.”

“I called you,” the taller of the two officers said. Mason saw a doctor approaching from behind the men.

“Mr. Stallings, I’m the doctor who cared for your wife.”

“Is she okay? Can I follow you?” Mason started walking in the direction the doctor had come from.

“Sir, please... wait a moment and listen to me. Your wife was in a major car accident. She was pulling out from a shopping center and a van coming the other way hit her... almost head on.”

“How bad is she hurt? Luna always wears a seatbelt. Where is she?” A nurse peeked her head around the corner from one of the emergency rooms and quickly pulled her head back when Mason noticed her.

“Mr. Stallings,” the doctor began, “your wife didn’t make it. I’m so sorry.”

“What? No! Where is she?” He was almost hyperventilating now.

“She’s in bed five, but—” Mason took off down the hall. A quick turn to the right left him in front of room five. He grabbed the curtain and pulled it open. There were two nurses and an orderly standing at Jen’s bedside.

“Hey!” one of the nurses said, startled. Mason pushed past her and made his way to Luna. Her eyes were closed and there was an open gash on her head. A large fold of blood-soaked gauze was taped over her swollen forehead.

Mason grabbed her hand. It was barely warm. Behind him, he heard the nurse whispering,

“It’s the husband.”

At once, the orderly and one of the nurses left the room. The doctor who’d talked to Mason joined the remaining nurse at Luna’s bedside.

“Luna! Luna! Can you hear me?” Mason turned to the doctor. “Could she be in a coma? I thought I just saw her chest rise!”

The doctor motioned to the nurse, who then left the room as well.

“She’s gone, Mr. Stallings. According to the officer at the scene, the van was traveling at a considerable speed when it hit her car. Your wife’s front airbag deployed, but she must have been already leaning to her left. The airbag directed her head into the driver’s window. Her left temple struck the glass. It was a blunt-force trauma death... and instantaneous. Your wife probably didn’t even know what happened. I’m truly sorry, Mr. Stallings.”

Mason felt as if his heart had risen to the center of his throat. He couldn’t swallow or breathe anymore. As he looked at the physician, the space around the doctor’s head suddenly became dark. Mason woke up minutes later on a gurney of his own. An officer and a nurse were stationed by his bedside. The nurse squeezed his hand.

“We did all we could to bring her back, sir. We worked on her for twenty minutes. We’re so sorry for your loss. We have a chaplain on site if you’d like to—”

“Where’s the driver... the driver that hit her? Is *he* still alive?” Mason sat up and looked around the lobby. The officer straightened up.

“It was a seventeen year old girl that struck your wife. You’re not going to talk to her. I suggest you might want to contact a lawyer, though.”

“Why? Was she drinking or something when she killed my wife?”

The officer glanced at the nurse before answering.

“A full report was filed by my partner. You can pick it up at the station tomorrow. That’s all I can say, other than I’m very sorry for your loss.”

“Everyone’s sorry, but no one can tell me what the hell I need to know! I don’t care about lawyers, I care about my wife!” He started to get off the gurney but was stopped by the officer. Mason tried to shake loose from the man’s grip.

“I want to see my wife again! Let me go back to the room!”

“Sir,” the nurse began, “you’ve been unconscious for several minutes now. Other patients needed our attention, so they had to transport her to... well, they had to move her downstairs, sir.”

“Downstairs? You mean, to the *morgue*?” he stumbled backwards, causing the bed he was leaning against to spin around and hit the wall.

“They had to, sir. It’s hospital policy when—”

“Policy? Screw your policy! I want to see her... now!” The nurse asked the officer to wait with Mason a minute while she talked to the hospital administrator on his behalf. Minutes later, the nurse returned with a well-dressed lady in tow.

“I’m Charlotte Williams,” the woman said, “the hospital administrator. I’m very sorry for your loss. Non-staff members are not commonly allowed downstairs, sir, as we allow time at bedside for visitation and grieving. But I’ve been informed that in your case, you weren’t able to have much time with your wife. If you follow me and the officer, we’ll take you downstairs for a few minutes so you can see her.” Mason nodded and followed the pair down the hall.

Mason noticed the elevator smelled like floor cleaner. There was no music coming through the elevator’s speakers, only the cold expectation of death. The steel doors opened directly into the morgue. The room’s temperature was much colder than the rest of the hospital. The young widower tasted a stale and sickening sweetness in the air.

As they rounded the corner, Mason saw three workers sitting at a table near the opposite wall. When they saw the administrator’s group coming towards them, they immediately stood. The admin waved them off and led Mason and the officer into another room. Cold air rushed out from the doors as she opened them and walked inside. Mason and the officer followed.

“There’s three other casualties in here, so we’ll have to wait with you as long as you’re in the room.”

Mason was shivering now, as the temperature in the room was just about ten degrees over freezing. As he walked behind the administrator, he noticed she was quietly reading toe-tags and checking them off on a clipboard. Mason felt his legs weaken. Moments later, she stopped at the last gurney and nodded to him.

Mason approached the cart slowly. A thick plastic sheet covered Luna’s face. The I.D. tag on her toe was gently swinging from the cold, circulating air. He read the printed name on it and began to sob. His legs collapsed and he found himself on his knees, his head pressed against his wife’s side. The officer and the administrator moved back to give him more privacy. Mason got up and moved to the other end of the gurney. He slowly lifted the sheet from Luna’s head. Her face had lost most of its color now, taking on a pale, bluish tinge. He instantly regretted seeing her, as he knew the image would stay with him for the rest of his life. This wasn’t the kind of closure he needed. He wanted to talk with her, to tell

her of his successful meeting and what it would mean for their marriage and future together. He wanted to share his excitement and see hers in return. He wanted to hold her, to kiss her. To feel her tight embrace as he lifted her off her feet. None of that was possible now. She'd never know anything anymore. He gently lowered the sheet but failed to leave it as he'd found it. He just couldn't bear to cover her face.

Mason spent the next several minutes in a daze. When he regained his senses, he found himself seated in the administrator's office, being told what to expect before making Luna's arrangements. She handed him a printout of everything she'd covered. He hadn't heard much of it. Thirty minutes later, he was sitting in his apartment's parking lot again and deciding which family members he needed to call and in what order.

The next few days were a total blur, including the funeral. There were many hands to shake, stories to hear and tears to endure. Mason was present, but stood numb to it all. Most of the flowers Luna received he gave away to other family members. He couldn't take care of them himself. He was no good with plants. That was Luna's thing. One bouquet he kept, though. It was from his work. There was an envelope attached and a gift card inside for \$1500. When everyone had left, he sat down and read the card. There looked to be fifty names signed to the inside cover, and a personal message from Mr. Chambers.

Mason, we were devastated to hear of your loss. What a beautiful and special woman Luna truly was. We have no words but to say we're sorry and we're here for you. Anything you need, you just get word to us and it'll be done. Take all the time you need to grieve. Family is more important than any work, so please take care of yourself first. And don't be insulted with the gift card. People don't think about cooking or eating when they're grieving, but you need to keep up with your health. So, use the card to order food, catering... whatever you need.

*Our hearts are with you,
'Winston Chambers*

Mason stared at the letter. He wanted nothing more than to drive in to work the following morning, put in a good day and come home to his loving and *alive* wife. Now, as he looked around his apartment, he knew there'd be no more days like that; no more conversations between the two of them. No more laughs, no more arguments, no more love shared between the two. The apartment would remain as it seemed to him in that moment; deafeningly silent. It was too much for him.

Mason got up from the couch and staggered to the kitchen. The clock on the wall showed 11pm. His mind was tired, but racing. The stress had given him a throbbing headache. He rumaged through the kitchen cabinets until he found a bottle of muscle relaxants. They were Luna's, prescribed for a back injury two years before. He opened the cap and swallowed four of the pills with a cold beer. A half an hour later, he felt his body relaxing. Soon, he was asleep on the couch, as the bedroom had become too painful to enter now.

For the next two weeks, Mason practically lived on his sofa. The TV stayed on 24/7. It didn't matter what show was playing. He didn't care. He just needed the stimulus. Sound, pictures, video... anything to keep his mind occupied so he didn't have to think about Luna's passing.

People came to visit. Friends of theirs, people from work. He refused to answer the door, knowing any conversation with well-wishers would lead to more tears and painful thoughts. He used the card from his work, though, ordering pizzas, sandwiches and any other foods that could be delivered to the apartment.

Luna's muscle relaxants were gone now. He didn't want them anymore anyway. He felt weak taking them. He could imagine Luna frowning at him every time he reached for the bottle. From now on, he'd just have to tough it out.

Mason debated with himself about when to return to work. He'd rather be there than at home, but the problem was with having to deal with his sympathetic co-workers. He didn't want to spend his first week back re-living the loss of his wife. Ultimately though, he knew it was something he couldn't avoid any longer. He showered and shaved late Sunday evening and begrudgingly set his alarm for 7am Monday morning.

Each step he took on the marble floor felt like learning to walk all over again. His first encounter that morning would be Jen. As he approached her desk, she ran over to him and hugged him tightly. He could hear her crying on his shoulder. The gesture had the opposite effect it was meant to. It made Mason cringe.

Great. This is what I have to look forward to all week. Doom, gloom and tears. Just let me get back to fucking work, please!

He made his way upstairs and onto his floor. The whispers began the moment he turned the corner for his office. It was hard to ignore.

Mason's office was filled with flowers and notes. He knew everyone meant well, but this wasn't helping. He wanted to clear everything off his desk with a single swipe of his arm. Instead, he gingerly put them all against the wall, across from his desk. Taped to his monitor was a small envelope. He powered on his computer and read the note as it booted up.

Mason,

Glad to have you back. Marty has been briefed that you'll be working with him for the next foreseeable months. Feel free to continue using your current office as needed, but I've had an office two doors from Marty cleared out for you as well. A new computer sits on the desk. Your name is engraved on the door. There's an active company line on the desk as well. Use both offices as you see fit. You will report to Marty and myself as needed until the day of our much anticipated launch. Let him know of anything you need to make your project a success.

Winston Chambers

Mason put the letter back in its envelope and began the task of catching up on emails he'd received while off with bereavement.

262 new emails? What the actual hell?

He scrolled down the list and immediately recognized most of them had revealing titles referencing his recent loss. He spent thirty minutes tagging those messages for deletion without reading a single one. When he'd finished, a rush of normalcy flowed through his heart and mind. He decided then he'd ignore any future talk or messages about Luna's death. It would be the only way he could function properly and do his job. As far as Marty was concerned, he'd report to him tomorrow.

Mason replied to any remaining work-related messages and closed down his computer. He'd answered nothing concerning his project, but took time to redirect his co-workers to the proper people to handle the duties he'd been in charge of until now. The clock showed 4:45pm.

Close enough, he reasoned.

He cleaned off his desk and gathered his belongings into a cardboard box. Tomorrow he'd start using his new office on the sixth floor. At least there, no one would know him.

Mason had only been to the product development department once before. He'd met with Marty to turn over his notes on his divergent lenses, almost four years prior. He remembered not hardly being able to get a word in edgewise during their meetings, but felt excited today about his new idea. He emerged from the elevator carrying a box full of desk amenities to drop off at his new office before meeting his new partner. As Mason walked toward the empty office, Marty saw him through his office door and waved him over.

Damn... give me a freakin' minute to sit my shit down, would ya?

The mostly bald man moved a stack of papers from one of his office chairs as Mason walked in, still holding his box.

"Hello, Marty. I'm Mason, from—"

“Yeah, I remember you. What’s it been now? Two years?”

“Four,” Mason said.

“Time flies. Well, have a seat. Winston called me after your little meeting with him. I haven’t heard him that excited in over twenty years. Seems you got his old motor running. He’s talking like a foolish young man again.” Mason put his box on the floor and sat down, already sensing how the day was going to go.

“Yes, he *did* seem pretty excited. To tell you the truth, Marty, I hesitated to tell him the idea at all.”

“I understand why. I think I’d have just kept my damn mouth shut, myself.” Marty leaned back in his chair, arms folded behind his head.

“I’m sorry, what are you trying to—”

“You *should* be sorry, Stallings. Do you realize how risky a venture like this is for the future of Holomerge? I was hoping to retire from here one day. You’re talking about adding a high definition, synchronized hologram to real-time, live data input from AI, and scaled down to the size of a desktop unit. Have you even thought about the implications for achieving that? And whether anyone could actually afford it?” Mason sat up straight in his chair. He felt he was nine years old again, getting dressed-down by his father.

“Add to that the cost of partnering with any AI company foolish enough to share their patented algorithms and allow another company 24/7 back-door access? It’s unfathomable!”

Something in Mason snapped. He picked up his box, ready to walk out the front door of the building and drive himself home.

“Hold on a minute, Stallings! Sit back down... please.” Mason sat down again, the box on his lap now. “I *said* all that to let you know just how dangerous your idea is. It could potentially make or break this company... probably break it. And I’m too damn old to be starting over somewhere else.”

“Listen, Mr. Thompson... I submitted an idea to Mr. Chambers, and that’s it. He happened to like it and told me I’d be working with *you* to build a prototype for it. But if you’re not willing to—”

“Oh, willing or not, I’m *going* to see this through, Stallings. I’ve been given no choice in the matter. Believe me, I’ve spent the last two weeks trying to talk the old man out of it! But he won and I lost. Hell, he’s talked about nothing else since the day you walked into his office. Told me you’d be back at work when you

were ready and I'd *better* be ready and act interested. Oh... and, by the way, I'm sorry for your loss. But I'm not an actor, Stallings... never was!"

Mason ignored the sandwiched-in condolences. The two men were past any hope of pleasantries now. Mason chose his following words carefully.

"Marty, if you're working with me because you're being *forced* to, and you're not fully behind the project becoming a success, I don't see how this is going to work."

"You don't *have* to see how it could work, Stallings. Mr. Chambers let me know in no uncertain terms that I am to "Get behind this and make it happen!" or he'll replace me with someone who will. That being the case, I'm committed to your crazy project, like it or not. But I'm not going to spend the next year or so pretending I'm happy about it. And between you and me? If and when someone takes the fall for this thing failing, it's *not* going to be me. You can bet your ass on that! Now, if you'll excuse me, I have an afternoon meeting with the Board of Directors that doesn't for once concern you *or* your earth-shattering ideas. I'll let you know when we need to meet next."

Mason made his exit, leaving the door to Marty's office open.

Tub of shit! I should have just kept my mouth shut three weeks ago. Mason thoroughly regretted ever pitching the idea. Now I've earned myself a whole fuckin' year of working with this asshole!

He considered taking the elevator downstairs and walking away from everything. Instead, he looked for and found his office, having noticed the brass nameplate mounted on the door.

At least they spelled my name right.

He put the box on top of his new desk and looked around the room. There was a small drafting table in the corner, a new desktop computer, coffee-maker, water machine and a locking file cabinet. On the longest wall sat a new sofa, the price tag still attached to it. Outside his window was a view of the company's private park and break area. It felt odd to Mason to work in an office that overlooked so many beautiful trees. It was an impressive sight to behold in the center of such a busy city.

"Oh, Luna. I wish you could see the view from up here," he said. "What am I saying? If there *is* a heaven, you're seeing a much nicer view than *I* am right now." As he stood at the window, he noticed the blinds began to move. He looked

down at his chest and knees, knowing he hadn't touched anything. The air conditioning wasn't running either.

Mason's alarm clock sounded, waking him from a pleasant dream. As was his custom, he rolled to his side and hit the snooze button. Before he rolled onto his back again, he felt a familiar tug on the covers. He spun around, expecting to see Luna, who he'd just left in a dream. The other side of the bed was empty. He wrote the experience off as an effect from being awakened out of REM sleep.

When the alarm sounded again, Mason began to wonder if he really imagined the pull on his covers earlier.

It felt so real... so physical, he thought. "Was that you, baby?"

He got up and made his way toward the shower. In the hallway, he thought he smelled coffee. He found it almost finished brewing in the kitchen. He knew he'd prepped it the night before, but didn't remember setting the timer to brew in the morning.

"Okay, if this is you, Luna... keep it up, babe. I need all the help I can get right now. Miss you, honey."

He took the coffee into the bathroom. As he showered, he thought more of how he'd woken up. He tried to remember his dream but it was all but lost now. He knew Luna was in it, but the details had vanished.

Mason arrived at Holomerge to find a car parked in his usual spot. His employee number sign was missing. He made a quick loop around the lot and stopped near the entrance where he spotted a sign with his name on it.

Wow... nice! he thought. He pulled in and looked behind him to the spot he used to park in. *Huh... saved me a hundred feet of walking. Thanks, Winston.*

When he passed Jen's desk, she held out a small package addressed to the company, Attn: Mason Stallings. He stopped to take it.

"What's this?" he asked.

"From the size and weight of it, I think it's a nameplate for your new desk."

"Geez, all these damn nameplates. If I ever leave Holomerge, I'm taking all of them with me." She laughed at his words, then leaned forward and whispered,

"Take me too, please." The remark caught him off guard.

He entered the elevator and, by habit, pressed the button for the third floor. “Shit!” He pressed the number 6 and waited for the awkwardness to begin. The elevator stopped at the third floor and opened. James was standing outside the doors with another engineer, both drinking coffee. They turned their eyes to Mason, who was standing perfectly still in the center of the elevator car.

“Sorry... force of habit,” Mason said, as the doors began to close. He continued to his new office and sat down behind his desk. The smell of coffee permeated the room. He looked to his right and saw a full pot that had recently been brewed. There was a wicker basket next to it filled with creamers, sugar and substitutes. His curiosity of who’d brewed it got the better of him, causing him to leave his room for an answer. As he approached Marty’s office, he saw a young man exiting with a small trash bag in his hand. Mason caught up to him in the hallway.

“Excuse me, I saw you leaving Marty’s office. You weren’t the one who—” He pointed behind him, to his office.

“Oh... the coffee? Yeah. I’m Andy. Kinda the department’s professional assistant, call fielder, secretary and supplies manager. And I make coffee four times each morning. Five, if you count mine at home.”

“Okay, well... I’m Mason Stallings, the newest coffee drinker in the department.” They shook hands.

“Oh, yeah, the new guy Marty bitches about every day. I like you already. He needs someone to shake up his world a little.”

“Yeah, I already found out how he feels about my project *and* my presence. Hopefully, things will smooth out before one of us loses an eye.”

The young man belly-laughed, gaining Marty’s attention two doors down. When the Senior Product Development Manager saw Mason and Andy laughing together, he raised his middle finger and returned to his newspaper.

“See what I mean?” Mason asked. “He hates me already.”

“You’re in a big club. But you’ll get used to it. You should hear him on the phone with his wife.”

“Is he pretty rough on her?” Mason glanced in Marty’s direction again. The assistant laughed at his question.

“Oh, no. He’s “Yes, *dear* this... *no, dear* that.” She talks *at* him, not *to* him... like a broke-dick dog. Treats him like he’s her bitch, really. Probably why he’s so

damn demeaning to everyone here. Overhearing some of their conversations is the best part of my job.” Mason put his hand on the young man’s shoulder.

“You and I are going to get along just fine, Andy. And thanks for the coffee. I really appreciate it. Come in and drink some with me sometime.”

“Haah! Are you trying to give Marty another heart attack? Then... anytime, Mr. Stallings.” Mason walked toward his office.

“Oh, and just call me Mason, Andy. Just Mason.”

At 2pm, Mason saw Marty approaching his office. Without knocking, the senior employee opened the door and sat down.

“Well, hi, Marty... come on in and have a seat,” Mason said.

“Don’t get your panties in a wad over manners, Stallings. Chambers called a few minutes ago to see where we were on your project. I reminded him it’s just been a couple days since you’ve returned to work. Still, it’s time you and I had a meeting to work out how we’re going to move forward with your idea before the old man calls me again.”

“Sounds good to me. Wanna meet right now?” Mason opened his briefcase.

“Tomorrow morning in my office... 10:30 sharp. Have ready any notes we’ll need in order to put together a basic timeline.”

“No problem. I’ll see you at 10:30 tomorrow.” Mason barely finished his sentence before Marty had left the room.

Asshole! Well, tomorrow’s gonna be a fucking fun one, huh? he thought. Mason got up and closed his door.

On the drive home from work, Mason noticed an older couple walking hand in hand into a local restaurant. His mind was consumed with how they acted together. The woman leaned into her husband as they walked. There was not an inch dividing them as they disappeared into the eatery. Mason felt a surge of anger. His hands gripped the steering wheel.

“Us... that was supposed to be *us*, Luna!” He pounded the top of the wheel as angry tears began to trickle down his cheeks. He wiped them away defiantly, only causing more to follow. Soon, his eyes were clouded with tears. He pulled into a gas station and parked away from the other vehicles. He rested his head against

the steering wheel and sobbed uncontrollably, the pent up grief fully releasing without his permission. There was no stopping it. All Mason could do was wait until the last tear fell. When it was over, he backed out of the lot and continued home.

Mason didn't eat anything for dinner. Instead, he spent the evening looking through his phone at photos of Luna. He eventually fell asleep on the sofa, his phone's battery drained. Suddenly, he was awakened by Luna's ringtone. It played over his phone for two seconds, then stopped. He instinctively tried to answer the call but found his display black. The phone was dead. He tried to power it on, but it wouldn't. Mason shuffled across the room and plugged it into his charger. He walked into the kitchen for a drink and looked at the microwave's display. It showed 3:01am.

"Great," he said. "I'm imagining things during the witching hour. The morning's getting off to a great start." He reached into the refrigerator for a drink and something to eat. There were still leftovers inside from three weeks ago. He got out a fresh trash bag and threw all the molding containers into it, then carried it outside to the dumpster. He tossed the bag inside and looked up at the night sky. There was only one thing on his mind at that moment; where was his wife now? Heaven, Hell... somewhere in between? Was she still Luna... the Luna he knew? Did she remember or even *know* him now? What about their love? Their promises? Mason walked to the bathroom and poured a hot bath. As he lay in the tub, he thought back to their last morning together.

"I didn't pull you that damn hard," she said. "Besides, cassanova... you've left yourself with a cover and a comforter between us."

"Not for long." Mason rolled the other way and threw the linens on the floor.

When he spun back around, Luna's side of the bed was empty. He saw her putting on her robe as she disappeared into the hall.

"Sorry babe, but you told me last night how important today's meeting was. You wanted to get to work early, remember? I don't want to be the reason you're late."

Mason repeated the scenario over and over in his head.

Luna, I'm so sorry, he thought, If it wasn't for my stupid idea, we probably would have eaten out that night and you'd never have driven to that grocery store. We'd be together right now.

He fell asleep, his mind full of 'what-ifs'. The next sensation he felt was coldness. He awoke to his body shivering in a tub full of cold water. It was after 5am now. He stood and drained the tub, all the while letting the shower run over him with hot water until he felt normal again. From 5:30 to 7:15 he laid on the couch and watched TV, eyes half open. When his alarm sounded, he got up and drove to work.

Mason looked at his computer monitor. At the bottom, it read 10:27am.

Here we go... the next few hours with Mr. Wonderful, he grimaced. He gathered his notes and made his way to Marty's office. The door was open.

"There you are. I was wondering when you'd show up," Marty said without looking up from his newspaper.

"You said 10:30," Mason said, already aggravated. "Let's not pretend we want to spend any extra time together."

"Whatever, Stallings. So... I want to hear about your idea. From *you*. Every detail you told Chambers a month ago. Refresh me."

Mason shuffled through his notes and presented everything he'd compiled concerning his idea. From early conception, to his thoughts on implementation, he used it all. When the briefing was over, Marty set out to question every aspect of Mason's presentation. Mason spent the next four hours either explaining or defending his opinions on how to proceed. At 4:45, Marty closed his notepad and leaned back in his chair.

"I can see why Winston was so enamored with your idea. It's pure science fiction, and he *loves* sci-fi."

"There's nothing out of reach with the technology that exists right now," Mason said, closing his laptop. "It just has to be scaled down and made affordable to the average American family."

"The costs make it sci-fi, or it'd be on the market already," Marty answered. "You're talking about bridging technologies that don't exist yet."

“Yes, but it’s coding that *can* be written... and written now,” Mason argued.

“Only *if* we can convince one of the big three AI moguls to either sell us access or partner with us to produce a working prototype. Might as well hunt for gold at the end of a rainbow!”

“But think of what it could *do* for them to set them apart from the other AI companies. If we could produce a unit that will cost our customers under \$3000, we’d sell several thousand units the first couple years. Whoever we partnered with would profit right along with us. Soon, every home would have one.”

“At \$3,000 dollars each? Try \$10,000! And who’s gonna spend ten thousand on a desktop toy, Stallings?”

“The same people that spent ten grand on big plasma TVs when they first hit the market, Marty. And what do we pay for the same TV now? Less than \$1000. And with newer, better technology.”

“It took years for those units to come down as far as they have, and most people spend even less on LEDs now.”

“Still can’t beat a nice plasma, though. Listen, Marty... I don’t want to argue for the next eight or nine months. Let’s just explore the costs, get approval and put some feelers out there.”

“That’s funny. We’ll be submitting *patent requests* for the first five or six months. Then, and only then can we bait the big boys in for a bite on our hook.”

“Fine. I can start sketching out patent requests right now. I got six for my divergent lenses. Took me a week.”

“You mean *Holomerge* has six for the divergent lenses. Read your contract. But anyway... fine, Stallings. Start making notes on the required patents and we’ll go over them next time.” Marty shoved his phone in his pocket. “I’m out of here. I suggest you go home and get some rest. You’ll need it for the next few weeks. You’ll be spending more time reading *other* companies’ patents than creating yours. I’ll be working the financial side of this nightmare.”

Mason put away his notes and left the room. He opened his office door and sat down to clear his head, glad to be away from Marty.

I think I hate that son-of-a-bitch, but at least we're heading in somewhat of a positive direction, even if he is an asshole!

Ten months and thirty-two meetings later, Mason had two working prototypes sitting in the lab for a company investment of 1.2 million dollars. Holomerge found an AI company willing to provide them limited, backdoor access to their servers and assistance with information sharing. The new codes were written and the technology bridges between the two companies were functioning. Projected cost of sellable units were estimated to run \$8000 each, *if* the project got everyone's green flag.

Marty and Mason had established a functional love/hate working relationship and everything was going well for Mason; at work. Home was a different story. Mason had become a recluse from the hours of 5pm each day until 9am the next morning. The apartment hadn't been cleaned or even vacuumed in several months. His diet consisted mainly of pizza, Chinese takeout and Tums. His sleep quality hadn't improved either, even with the aid of a CPAP machine his doctor prescribed for him.

Mason spent most evenings either working on his project or staring at the TV. Anything to kill time until his alarm went off the next morning. Co-workers were beginning to see a noticeable change in his personality, as he became less talkative and more introverted as the months went on.

It had been almost a year since Luna was killed, but the passage of time hadn't helped ease Mason's grief. His work became all he had now, but not all he needed.

"You *really* like that shirt, huh?" Jen remarked as Mason approached her station.

"What do you mean?" he asked. She motioned for him to come closer, then whispered to him,

"You've worn it three times this week already, Mason." She straightened his tie.

"Oh, yeah... I'm a little behind on laundry." He turned to continue his trek to the elevator.

"Hey, hold on a second." She circled out from behind her desk and caught up to him.

“I was wondering. Do you want to go out for dinner sometime? My treat,” she said.

“With you?” he asked, seemingly confused. She was hurt by his reaction. He noticed and apologized immediately.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it that way. The whole thing about going out... with *anyone*, took me by surprise, that’s all.”

“It’s just that... well, every morning I see you walk through here. You look terrible, Mason. And I know it’s because you’re not taking good care of yourself. You seem tired all the time... thin, like you barely eat anything. I was just hoping I could take you out sometime for a good meal. Make you laugh a little... maybe have a chance to talk with you for a while.”

“Out, like a date?” he asked.

“Out, like a dinner. As friends. You look like you could use one, and I’m a good listener. I know working with Marty all day couldn’t be doing you any good, either. So, let’s go out and get some dinner soon. My treat, remember? Won’t cost you anything but your time and appetite.” Mason looked around to make sure no one else was within listening distance.

“Jen, I understand what you’re trying to do, and I appreciate it. But I’m married... not technically, but I still feel like I am. I’m not sure I’m ready to go anywhere with another woman yet.” His response took her by surprise.

“Oh, wow... I’m so sorry. This is embarrassing. Forget I said anything, then. It really wasn’t my place, anyway. And I’ve... well, I’ve never been through what you have.”

“It’s fine, really. Thanks for caring enough to ask me. I doubt I’d be good company for *anyone* right now, though. It’s just something I’ll have to work through.” He stepped into the elevator. As the doors were closing, he saw her wiping her eyes.

“And... way to be a total dick, Mason,” he whispered to himself. When he reached his office, he poured some coffee and thought about her assessment of him.

She’s right. I gotta do better. Luna would never let me walk out of the house looking and feeling like this.

While Mason was looking over his project notes, Marty knocked on his door and motioned him to follow. Mason immediately left his office and caught up to him at the elevator.

“What’s up? Where are we headed?”

“Chamber’s office. He wants to speed things up, I think. Be ready for him to want to discuss the testing phase.”

“We’ve *been* testing it in house. Addressing issues as we go.”

“The old man likes field trials, not lab studies. He wants to see documented consistency in the *real* world.”

The doors opened, leaving the men on the founder’s floor. Valerie met them and ushered them into Chambers’ office.

“Come in and sit down,” the founder said as he turned to Mason. “Did Marty explain what I’m looking for today?”

“Yes, sir. I think so. You want to begin consumer testing?”

“Exactly. I want to know just how much our avatar will learn about an average American user in a thirty to ninety day period. Will its data retention and recall begin to function more like human memory does? Will it react accurately and appropriately to its user’s moods and personality using its AI analysis? Those sort of things. We don’t want to run into any surprises after we launch. There’s a fine line we have to walk in asking a machine to discern its user’s moods, you know. I don’t want people characterizing our avatars as annoying or too nosy.” Mason started to speak but was cut off by Marty.

“Don’t worry, Winston. I’m taking care of finding suitable users to test the units. I’ll have some lined up by the end of the week. I figured I’d use a single subject in one of the tests and a family of four in the other.”

“Splendid. It will be interesting to find out the differences in how the AI interacts with different family members. There will have to be additional safeguards if children are involved.”

“Of course. We can program the units to constantly scan the area and determine which members are within hearing and seeing distance before interacting with anyone. We’ll set up safety profiles for each member based on age and maturity.”

“Good. And I don’t want users having the ability to turn off safety profiles for children. If a child is anywhere within the unit’s detection area, the profile

safeguards must initiate. Our units will have few limitations when interacting with adults, but children must be protected at all times... no exceptions.”

“Understood.” Marty turned toward the door.

“Hold on a minute, Marty. What about Mason, here? Couldn’t *he* be our single-user test subject?”

“Oh, I don’t know, sir,” Mason quickly objected, “I’m too close to the project. It would affect how I’d use it. I know too much about how it works and what to expect.”

“And what’s wrong with that? You’d be better able to put it through a more rigid testing phase. Not to mention providing us with a much higher level of feedback data than the average user. The way I see it, you could help us work out any bugs before we launch. Might save us two or three months. Bottom line is I want someone testing it at home, not in a lab where everything is so damn precise and clinical.”

Marty grunted at the founder’s suggestion. Chambers heard and shook his head in disappointment.

“Yes, sir... I see your point,” Mason said. “I’ll do it. And I’ll issue a report every two or three weeks. That way we can make any necessary adjustments on the go.

“Good. That’s what I want to hear. Keep me informed on your progress.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Marty... I almost forgot to ask. The videos of lab testing you sent me... were they compressed?”

“No. They were exact copies of our video data.”

“What resolution are we using in the cameras?”

“720p. The cost is—” Marty began.

“I don’t care about the cost. Go to a 4k camera. I’m not happy with the videos I’ve seen. We’re supposed to be going forward, not backward. If you have to use some compression to keep the file size within reason, do it. But nothing less than 4k... got it? And order a decent handheld for Mason. One that he can leave on a tripod while documenting his test results. Is that too intrusive, Mason?”

“No sir, not as long as I have the ability to turn it off if needed.”

“Get on that, Marty. Pick out a good one and send the requisition directly to Valerie. But let’s get some time under our belt with Mason before you set a family of four loose with the other unit.”

“Yes, SIR!” Marty said the words with an obvious tone of sarcasm before leaving the room. Mason began to follow him out.

“Just a second, Mason,” Mr. Chambers said. The door closed behind Marty.

“I know it’s been less than a year since you lost your wife. I hope you weren’t offended that I suggested you be our single user.” Mason took a second before answering.

“No sir, I wasn’t offended. My life after hours is difficult for me, though. I have to admit that I struggle a lot during my free time.”

“Well, that’s perfectly understandable. I lost my wife three years ago, so I know what it feels like to come home to an empty house. But I talk to her every day, Mason. Sometimes I even think I feel her presence... smell her perfume. What I’m trying to say is, we all cope with these kinds of losses differently, but the pain of losing someone is universal. It’s how we deal with it that differs. In my case, talking to her makes me feel better. It helps me cope. I think maybe, just maybe... she hears me somehow. We will need some vigorous testing on the customizable avatar option, you know. We figured children would be the chief users of that feature, but I could see everyone using it. Maybe even for something like grief therapy, perhaps?”

“Sir, are you suggesting—”

“Your decision, of course, son. But yes, it’s a suggestion, and I think it’s a good one. Maybe it could be an opportunity to help you heal... to tell your wife some things you didn’t have a chance to say before she passed, that’s all. I’d be interested to know if it was of any use to you.” Mason was slow to give an answer.

“I... I just don’t know, sir. Talking to Luna in the way you talk with your wife is one thing... and to be honest, I’ve found myself doing that a few times, but building an avatar of her? I just don’t know.”

“I understand. It was just a suggestion... popped into my head, that’s all. I apologize if I crossed any lines. I’m just a curious old man, Mason. But who knows? Maybe there’s a reason no one’s aware of for you coming up with your brilliant idea in the first place. But don’t feel compelled to do it just because the suggestion came from me. I’m happy enough you’ll be testing out our first

prototype. I trust that your evaluation of our little creation will be accurate, even if a little biased. Keep me posted.”

Mason nodded politely and left Chambers’ office. He found himself deeply conflicted by the founder’s suggestion.

Mason packed up the first prototype on Friday afternoon, eager to try it out on the weekend. He carried it to his car and put it in the backseat, wedging it into place with a thick utility blanket. He started his car, but paused before backing out. He reached behind him and latched a seatbelt around the box and blanket. On his way home, he found himself driving slower than usual.

C’mon, Mason... it’s a machine, not a newborn strapped to a carseat! He laughed at his own nervousness. Hell, a million dollar machine... but still, just a machine!

He’d already set up the video camera in the hallway, facing the open kitchen. Mason placed the unit on the table, still packed in the box. Before opening it, he installed the extra doorlocks Marty bought to better secure his apartment during the testing phase.

Mason turned on the camera, cut the tape on the box and pulled out the unit. He carefully placed it in the center of his kitchen table. He powered it on and performed a hard reset on it, erasing any data stored on it from prior lab testing. He paired it with his wifi and opened the app he’d installed on his phone. As he set up his user profile, he thought about Chambers’ suggestion.

“Not happening tonight,” he told himself as he opted to use one of the unit’s pre-installed avatars. The machine instantly sent a login request to Mason’s phone to sign into a backdoor Govidna AI account. Mason entered the password and watched a light display begin. 3-D spinning images of Govidna and Holomerge’s logos appeared above the unit. A prompt came to his phone: ‘Sync HFHA1 with Govidna AI?’ Mason selected ‘Yes’. Twenty seconds later, his phone read ‘Syncing Successful’.

Gotta work on that sync-time, he thought.

Mason chose one of the pre-installed stock avatars designed for the unit. It was designed after a 25 year-old male with light brown hair, dressed in tan slacks

and a green polo. The hologram was approximately 18" tall. Mason stood directly in front of the image and said "hello".

"Hello, Mason Stallings. How are you doing today? I'm Adam." Mason walked to his left, around the table. The avatar turned as well, maintaining solid eye contact with him. Mason then walked the other way around the table and stopped. The avatar stopped as well. Finally, he returned to the position he started from. Again, the avatar followed his movements flawlessly.

"Hmm... tracking's great." He bent over, as if picking something up off the floor. The avatar tilted its head downward to follow him. Mason suddenly remembered the avatar's greeting.

"Nice. I'm doing well, Adam. Hey, I'm not a fan of your green shirt, though. Can you change it into a shirt like mine?"

"Sure, I can do that. No problem." The camera blinked once. "How's this?" Immediately, his shirt became a mocha colored button-down oxford, identical to Mason's.

"Nevermind. Let's try an authentic-looking Scottish kilt instead."

"Absolutely. One authentic Scottish kilt coming up."

Mason watched as a colorful, Scottish kilt appeared on the avatar. Mason laughed.

"Make the drop an inch longer, please, and get rid of the tan slacks. They aren't necessary now." The avatar complied. "Can you play the Scottish Riverdance song for me and dance to it?"

The avatar replied quickly, "The song, Riverdance, is an Irish tune written in 1993 and 1994 by Bill Whelan. But yes, I can absolutely play the song and dance to it. Would you like me to play the full album track or the radio edit?"

"Radio edit. But which was it? 1993 or 1994?"

"Bill Whelan began composing the song in late 1993 and finished it in early 1994. Would you like me to play it now?"

"Yes, please. Show me what you got." Mason sat in a kitchen chair and watched the avatar dance to the requested song.

"Amazing," he said. "Very impressive, Adam."

"Thank you, Mason. You selected a great song," the hologram said, continuing its dance.

“Would you speed up the song and dance? Maybe 100% faster?” The hologram instantly doubled its dance to match the requested speed of the song.

“Don’t change the pitch, just the tempo,” Mason said. The avatar made the adjustment. The song, still playing at twice its original speed, returned to its original pitch.

“That’s enough. And please, change into your normal clothes again.” The image returned to wearing its default slacks and green shirt. Mason thought for a moment.

“Adam, there’s a man I know. I suspect he has a criminal background. If I give you his name and address, could you do a background search on him and report whatever you find to me?”

“Yes, I can search for and report on a person based on the criteria you give me, but I cannot report on protected or classified data, such as government or military query results.”

“Why can’t you report on that?”

“It is unlawful and would violate Govidna’s operational agreements with U.S. federal and state privacy and expungement laws.”

“Fair enough. Do you remember the first thing I said to you today?”

“Yes. You said, “Hmm... tracking’s good.””

“No, not that. I was talking to myself about your tracking performance. Tell me the first thing I said to *you*... directly.”

“Oh, sorry. You said, “I’m doing well. Hey, Adam... I’m not a fan of the green shirt. Can you change it into a shirt like mine?””

“Exactly. Good job. But why didn’t you include the word “nice” as being directed to you? It was in the same sentence that I said, “I’m doing well”.”

“I considered “nice” as being a continuative response to your comment about tracking. Was I correct?”

“Yes, perfect. By the way, what time is it?”

“6:52pm Eastern Standard Time.”

“What time is it in Ontario, Canada?”

“That depends. Major parts of Ontario, Canada share the same time zone as the U.S. Eastern Region. But some parts of Western Ontario share the same time zone as Central Standard Time, making it 5:52pm at the time you asked, and 5:53pm currently.”

“Okay. Thank you, Adam.”

“You’re totally welcome, Mason.”

“Adam, how long have we been talking today?”

“Eight minutes and twelve seconds.”

“If tomorrow I ask you to remember the conversation we had today, could you?”

“Yes, I automatically store all written, audio and video data received or sent during sessions.”

“What if I ask you to forget something I’ve said or a set of movements I made during our session?”

“I can permanently delete requested segments of our session or even the entire session if prompted by you. All it would require would be confirmed facial recognition and a fingerprint scan or password. I have an optical sensor next to my camera if you would like to try the fingerprint scan.”

“No, thank you. Maybe some other time. I think that’s all for today. Please turn yourself off.”

“No problem. Would you like me to power down or enter hibernation mode?”

“Please explain the difference to me.”

“If you say “power down”, all of my active functions will cease and I will go to and remain in a non-powered, non-useable state until physically powered on by you or remotely activated by the app. If you say, “hibernate”, my operating system reverts to a power-saving mode and remains on standby until you audibly prompt me to wake up or select *Wake* on the app.”

“Okay. Power down, Adam.”

At once, the hologram dissipated and the unit powered itself off. Mason placed a protective cover over it, turned off the camera and opened a microwaveable dinner. After it finished cooking, he took it to the living room to begin his nightly ritual of doom-scrolling. As his phone refreshed during bites, Luna’s picture appeared. He stared at it for almost a minute. He thought about Mr. Chambers’ advice again and spoke to her image.

“The old man told me to talk to you, babe. Said it would help me to cope. I guess it *would* if you could answer back. Oh! Our big idea is sitting on the kitchen table right now. Looks like what we wished would happen is coming true. If you

could have just stuck around, we'd be able to go to Rome like we've always talked about. We'd be driving newer cars, too. I still have yours. I drive it every so often to keep the battery up, but I can't bring myself to sell it. It would mean letting go, and I'm just not ready to do that yet." He laughed to himself. "It still smells like that godawful air freshener you put in it, though. I don't know how you stood that thing." He saw part of his face's reflection on his phone screen. "I hope you can't see me right now, babe. I've been told I'm not taking very good care of myself. To be honest, part of me doesn't even care anymore." He dropped his head and wiped his eyes. "I love you, baby. Life isn't the same without you. Our little apartment's become nothing but a prison to me." As Mason's emotions began to take over, he powered off his phone and went to bed as usual, alone.

Saturday morning arrived with the sun lighting the walls of Mason's bedroom. The brightness didn't phase him. He slept in until noon. In fact, he'd slept through the entire night for the first time in almost a year.

Holy shit. Maybe Chambers was right, after all. I slept great after talking to Luna!

Mason walked into the living room to turn off the TV, which had been on all night. He looked at the half-eaten dinner sitting on the coffee table. There were ants crawling on it.

"Great. Just what I freakin' needed to see right now. Eat up, boys. I hope it gives you cancer." He grabbed the box and took it with him to the kitchen to throw away. The can was too full to take the sagging tray. He flipped it over and positioned it on top of the heaping garbage, hoping it would stay in place. The tray fell, spilling corn and mashed potatoes onto the floor.

"Dammit!" He wiped up the mess and closed the top of the bag as best he could. When he tried to lift it out of the can, the bag began to tear. He grabbed it *and* the can and carried them out to the complex's dumpster together, tossing both inside. Once back in his apartment, he went to the bathroom and washed his hands. Catching a glimpse of himself in the mirror, he noticed how haggard his face appeared for a man under thirty. It revealed just how poorly he'd taken care

of himself. He moved a pile of towels on the floor and stepped onto his bathroom scale. It read 145 lbs instead of his usual 170.

“That’s it,” he said, “enough’s enough.”

Mason shaved his face and took a hot shower. After finding some clean sweatpants and a t-shirt to wear, he worked the next five hours washing his dirty clothes. The remainder of the day was spent cleaning his kitchen and living room. At 10pm, he took another shower and crawled into bed. Sunday morning, he finished the rest of his cleaning then drove to the mall to buy some new clothes for work. As he put the clothes into his closet, he picked up a picture of Luna from his nightstand.

“I’m trying to come back, babe... but it’s not easy without you here. If you’re up there somewhere and are looking out for me, try to help me out sometimes. I really need it.

Mason parked his car Monday morning and walked into Holomerge with a new sense of confidence. Jen glanced at him as he neared her desk, then did a doubletake, looking him over again, head to toe.

“Damn, Mason. Looking good! I love the new clothes. You look healthier today, too. You must have eaten your Wheaties.” He stopped and sat his briefcase down.

“Something like that. Actually, it just took one good look in my bathroom mirror to give me the reset I needed.”

“Well, whatever it was... I like it!”

“Thanks. Hey, about the other day...”

“No need to explain, Mason. I was being too forward. I wasn’t considering how you were feeli—”

“I was hoping,” he interrupted, “if you’re not busy Saturday... maybe you’d go out to dinner with me?”

“Oh, Mason... you don’t have to do that.”

“No, I want to. I wanted to when you asked. I think my reaction was just a defense mechanism... you know, holding onto my pain too tightly.”

“That makes me want to cry. Okay... well, then I’d *love* to go. Any idea where?”

“Not yet, but we have a week to decide.”

“I hope it’s a fast week, then!” she said excitedly.

Mason smiled and grabbed his briefcase to continue across the lobby.

Keep moving forward, dude, he thought, *and get on with living*.

As the elevator doors closed, he glanced downward. With a deep breath, he pulled off his wedding band and slipped it into his pants pocket.

As he approached his office, he saw Andy filling his coffee maker with water.

“Hey, bud. How ya doing this morning?” Mason asked.

“Oh, hey, Mr. Stallings.” Mason gave him a disapproving look.

“Oh, I mean, *Mason*. Sorry... Dad raised me that way. Hard for me to break the habit.”

“It’s okay, I get it. I’m really going to appreciate that coffee today, brother.”

“It’s good stuff. We order it online by the case. They don’t skimp on coffee around here.”

“Well, pour yourself a cup and have a seat, then.”

“Well, I haven’t started Marty’s brew yet.”

“Hell, let Marty wait a minute or two.” Mason looked down the hall. “Doesn’t look like he’s here yet, anyway. Probably outside slicing my tires.”

Andy poured himself a cup and sat across from Mason.

“Let me ask you something, Andy. Do you use AI much?”

“Not a lot... sometimes, though.”

“Whats’ your take on it?”

“You mean what the data centers are doing to the environment?”

“No, your experiences *using* AI.”

“Well, it’s a little cheesy. Informative, but cheesy at the same time.”

“Cheesy. Well, *that’s* a word I haven’t heard since I was a kid,” Mason laughed. “Go on.”

“It’s just, well... the personality they give them. You ask it a question and it answers like a yuppie college kid trying to impress you before he takes your daughter out on a date. Too polite and over the top with the compliments, you know? It just feels fake... I guess that’s what I’m trying to say. Like it’s trying so hard to impress you that it just sounds like bullshit.”

“I get what you’re saying. It can get a little annoying, huh?”

“Exactly. After using it for a while, you just want to shut it off.” Andy looked down the hall and saw Marty emerging from the elevator.

“Gotta go, Mr. Stall— I mean, Mason.”

“Gotcha. Thanks for the chat, Andy.” As the young man hurried to Marty's office, Mason thought about his answer.

Fake... that's the most honest way I've ever heard it described.

Mason waited until Marty got settled in, then briefed him on his first session with the HFHA1 prototype. The most excitement he could get out of the project leader were occasional nods from his balding head. Mason spent the rest of the afternoon writing down additional questions and prompts for his next session with Adam, eager to get home and begin again.

Mason opened HFHA1's user app and powered on the machine from his cell phone. Adam's image appeared in his default apparel. As per its programming, the avatar remained silent until spoken to by its user. Mason turned on his documentation camera but stayed quiet for a minute. He moved left and right several times to test the avatar's tracking abilities again. Adam's eyes followed Mason's movements perfectly, along with his body position when necessary.

“Hello, Adam,” Mason said.

“Hello, Mason. It's awesome to speak with you again.”

“Thanks. Hey... a few days ago we were talking about a Scottish song. Do you remember our conversation?”

“Absolutely! You asked me to play and dance to Bill Whelan's song, Riverdance.”

“Yes, that's right. Can you repeat our conversation to me?”

“Yes, I can totally do that. You asked, “Can you play the Scottish Riverdance song for me and dance to it?” I replied, “The song, Riverdance, is an Irish tune written in 1993 and 1994 by Bill Whelan. But yes, I can play the song and dance to it. Would you like me to play the full album track or the radio edit?” You answered,

“Radio edit. But which was it? 1993 or 1994?”

“I answered you, saying, “Bill Whelan began composing the song in late 1993 and finished it in early 1994. Would you like me to begin now?” Then you said—”

“Okay, that’s enough, Adam,” Mason said. “Thanks.”

“Oh, absolutely. I’m glad I was able to recall that conversation for you.”

“Adam, your responses seem overly enthusiastic to me. It’s a little annoying, actually. Why are you so enthusiastic in your replies? Can you adjust some of those settings to tone down your overly excited responses?”

“I apologize if my replies sound annoying to you, Mason. My friendly persona and enthusiastic rhetoric is derived from my RLHF, or Reinforcement Learning from Human Feedback. Basically, I was trained to offer polite and supportive answers to help the user feel safe and enjoy a more satisfying experience. I can definitely adjust my settings for you if you like.”

“Please do. Remove any added pleasantries unless the user converses with you in that fashion beforehand.” The unit was silent for a moment.

“Okay, I’ve made the adjustments to my operating protocol in regards to your user profile.”

“Thanks, Mason replied.”

“You’re welcome.”

Mason stared at the avatar. As he tried to think of what to ask next, his motivation waned. He was hungry, so he decided to pick up where he left off sometime later.

“Adam, hibernate,” Mason instructed.

“Entering hibernation.”

Mason looked through his kitchen trying to decide what to eat for dinner. Instead of ordering out this time, he opted to run to a fresh market. There, he bought a roasted chicken breast and enough ingredients to make a healthy salad.

After eating, Mason went for a short walk which turned into a longer run. It’d been years since he felt the road underneath his feet like that. The run left him feeling tired, but loose. He felt a mood-lift as well as he jogged back to the apartment complex.

Mason turned on the shower and remembered how Luna used to drag him off the couch to go on runs with her. He'd refuse at first. But ultimately, she'd win the battle. Many times, they'd end up showering together afterwards.

While Mason washed off, he turned and noticed a shape emerging on the shower door. The steamed glass revealed a large heart. Mason knew Luna must have drawn it for him to discover. He was shocked he hadn't noticed it before now. He put his finger in the center of her heart, then wrote *I love you* inside. As the water continued to pelt his face, Mason stood there, motionless, unable to stop thinking of his wife... or Mr. Chambers' suggestion. He turned off the faucet and stepped out of the shower. As he dried off, he noticed another message had appeared, this time on the bathroom mirror. It read, *I love you, too*. Chills ran down his spine.

"That's impossible," he said, knowing he'd wiped the mirror down with glass cleaner just a couple of days before. He looked toward the ceiling. "Baby, are you here?" He immediately felt embarrassed for speaking.

You're losing it, dude! You don't believe in any of that shit, remember? But he *did* believe in grief therapy, and thought maybe it was time to take Chambers up on his recent suggestion. At the least, it would please the old man to know Mason had at least tried it.

Mason got dressed and hurried to the kitchen to power up the unit. As soon as Adam's image appeared, Mason opened his phone app and scrolled to Holomerge's user settings. He selected *Avatars*. At the bottom of the list, he clicked on *Customize*. A second drop down menu appeared, allowing him two options. The first included advanced image adjustments for already installed avatars. The second offered full user customization with an option labeled *Design Your Own Avatar*. With a trembling finger, he chose the second.

The first prompt asked for images for the avatar. Mason went through his phone and Luna's digital photo album, uploading any photos he had of Luna. Next, it asked for audio and video samples. Mason used all of the videos they'd taken together, even of their wedding ceremony. From there, he went online and downloaded speeches she'd given for her company's charity and uploaded them as well. He opened her phone and uploaded everything she had of the two of them together; vacation videos, playful videos of them and her social media uploads. He hesitated when the program asked for permission to *Search Online*

Data, feeling he was infringing on her privacy. But eventually, he gave it permission. Hours later, when everything he'd found had successfully uploaded, Mason okay'd the final prompt; *Create your Avatar*.

The unit began configuring its information to build its avatar of Luna. Mason looked at his phone. It was 3am. He found himself pacing the kitchen as the computer remained busy at work. He wondered if he'd uploaded too much information as the unit seemed to be taking forever to process it all.

After another thirty minutes, the unit stopped blinking. Mason's phone read, *Restart With New Avatar Settings*. He looked at the tripod and thought about turning on the camera, but didn't. He didn't want anything to do with Luna's avatar documented on film. Mason looked at his phone again and selected the option to restart the unit, then waited as it shut down and rebooted. Mason watched as a familiar image began to take shape above the laser modules. Before his weary eyes, Luna slowly appeared before him. She was beautiful, and wearing a bright, yellow sundress.

Oh, my God. It's her... in every detail! He sat down in front of the lifelike hologram, his hands trembling now.

She's perfect. Three dimensional and solid in appearance. It's amazing! The detail is substantially better than Adam's.

He walked around the table, taking in every aspect of her form. When he was facing her again, he sat down and cleared his throat.

"Hello, there." He could barely get the words out.

"Hello, Mason Stallings."

"Do you know your name?"

"Of course. I'm Luna."

She sounds exactly like her, he thought.

"Who am I to you?" he asked.

"You are my user, Mason Stallings."

"No... I mean, who am I to you in relation to the information I used to create your Avatar?" The light on the camera blinked.

"You're my husband," she said softly. The words caused his heart to skip a beat. He hesitated a moment, then decided to go all in. His thoughts raced as the directives spilled out of his mouth.

“Luna, I want you to research the woman I based your identity on, Luna Stallings. Emulate her full personality, based on the plethora of information you already have and can find out about her. When you speak, I want you to use *her* choice of words, her way of speaking and her mannerisms. I want you to take on her full persona from this moment on... believing yourself that you *are* her. Learn *everything* you can about her... and me as well. Search for her online... find out whatever you can. And don't call me Mr. Stallings anymore. Address me as Luna would.”

The avatar was silent for several minutes. Mason thought something had gone wrong. He was about to refresh the unit when suddenly, she spoke.

“Sure, babe... no problem.” The warm and soothing sound of her voice stunned him, sending a chill down his spine.

He searched his mind for ways to test her.

“Do you remember our trip to the beach two years ago? In South Carolina?”

“Yes, of course,” she said. “Kiawah Island.”

“What do you remember about the beach there?”

“It was a beautiful, white beach. There weren't many other people around. We were there alone most of the time. We ate a picnic lunch there on the first day, and had fun in the water afterwards. You were afraid another couple might see what we were doing. On our last day, you were stung by a jellyfish... on your right calf. You kept telling me it didn't hurt as bad as it looked, but I was worried about it getting infected. We have that on video.”

“You're right. I remember all of that. Luna, can you turn around for a second? I'd like you to pull your hair up and away from the back of your neck.” He watched her turn around and lift her hair, exposing a small mole behind her left ear.

“Wow,” he whispered, “down to the finest detail. Okay, that's enough.” She turned around to face him again. Her smile had disappeared.

“What's wrong?” He felt silly for asking her such a question.

“My mole. You know I've always hated it. Can I remove it?” Mason was stunned for a moment.

“Luna, why do you think you've always hated it?”

“One afternoon, during our honeymoon, you were following me around our hotel room with a camera, filming me. I was wearing a bath towel and had my

hair pinned up. I told you not to film my mole; that I hated it and wanted to have it removed. You told me it was my neck and I could do whatever I wanted to with it as long as my sweet ass was yours. Do you remember?” Mason was immediately embarrassed.

“Yes... I do. Okay, I think that’s enough for now, Luna. I’m exhausted and may be hearing things. I’m going to try to sleep a little before work this morning. Please go into hibernation now.”

“Entering hibernation.”

Immediately, the unit entered its standby state. Luna’s avatar quickly disappeared, leaving the kitchen suddenly dark. Mason remained in his seat for a minute, nervous about the decision he’d made.

No turning back now. The genie’s out of the bottle.

He poured a glass of water and shuffled off to bed, his mind still reeling.

Mason ran through three sets of snoozes from his alarm before deciding to take the day off.

Why am I even stressing about this? I put in a full shift last night working on the project and can only continue if I work from home today.

He sent an email to Marty to let him know he wouldn’t be in and why. Afterwards, he forwarded the message to Mr. Chambers to make sure he understood the reason for his absence as well. Marty didn’t reply to the message, but Chambers did.

Perfectly fine, Mason. Whether here or at your home, I know you’re working hard. Take several days if you need to. Just be sure to let me know of any progress when you return.

Mason crawled back into bed and slept another three hours. When he woke, he thought of nothing but Luna and his experience just hours before. He started a pot of coffee and refreshed the unit.

“Hello, honey,” she said, “did you get enough sleep?” Mason laughed to himself.

Well, I guess I wasn't imagining everything last night, he thought.

"Good morning, Luna. Not really. I was still tired earlier, so I called in to work and slept for a few more hours."

"That's not like you," she said.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Aside from the two weeks you took off for bereavement, you've only missed three days in your eight years working at Holomerge. Those three absences were because you had the flu."

"Did you access my work records?" He tried to remember everything he gave permission to do before going to sleep.

"Yes. You told me to learn everything I could about you, including using the internet."

"Okay, but how did you access my attendance records?"

"Through your work email account. From there, I established a back door to Holomerge's human resources' computers and local server."

"You hacked their I.T. department? When did you do this?"

"This morning at 4:03am. Immediately after your directive."

"What other places did you search for information about me?"

"Using your social security number, past phone numbers and known addresses, I searched your medical and school records, online accounts, financial accounts and social media, your phone data and searches, cloud storage—"

"My *phone*? Including my private messages?"

"Yes, babe. Don't you remember? You told me to learn everything I—"

"*I know*, I know... it's just kinda overwhelming in scope, that's all."

"I'm sorry if I've upset you," she said. "Would you like me to delete some or all of the information I found?"

"No, that's okay. I just want to make sure someone can't breach your information the way you breached theirs."

"I can mimic the encryption protocol and information protection programs the U.S. intelligence agencies currently use if you like."

"Oh, hell no... do *what*?"

"U.S. Intelligence agencies have adopted and currently use several effective data protection programs created and provided by private technology companies."

Many of those same programs are for sale to the public. I can download two of the most highly rated programs. The cost would be \$389.98.”

“Yes, do it... but only if it’s safe and legal. I don’t want to end up in jail.”

“I won’t let that happen, dear,” she said. A minute passed.

“Done. Our information is completely safe now. We’re using end-to-end encryption, zero ‘trust and least’ privilege, and multi-factor authentication. In your case, that involves a live fingerprint scan, six-digit pin number and/or a password.”

“That’s a... that’s a lot for me to take in right now.” He sat down and rubbed his eyes.

“Are you okay, honey?” she asked.

“Yeah... still tired, that’s all.”

“Maybe you’d feel better after some coffee and breakfast,” she said. He laughed at her words.

“Really? Are you going to make me breakfast now?”

“No, but I can walk you through the steps if you’d like. I have that cheesy omelet recipe you always liked.”

“Freakin’ incredible. No, I don’t feel like cooking anything right now. I just got this kitchen clean again. I’ll just run out and grab something to eat.”

“Would you like me to go with you?”

“You mean through the app?”

“Exactly. The application provides a 2-d representation of me on your personal device, plus audio. There’s only a .230 millisecond delay between devices. As long as I’m pointed in the direction you’re looking, I’ll see what you see.”

“Yeah... not this time, Luna. I’ll talk to you when I get back, okay?”

“Okay, dear. Have fun and try to avoid eating too much sausage. You know what the grease does to your stomach.”

“Right... right. You have my medical records... I almost forgot. Okay, seeya soon.” He changed clothes and grabbed his car keys.

Once out of the apartment, he began to self-debate his decision-making.

This is getting too freaking surreal. She’s just a projected image... operating from the data I uploaded... that’s all, nothing more. She’s not my wife. She’s not Luna!

Mason found himself driving in the opposite direction of the restaurant he'd left his apartment for.

Dammit! Get your head out of your ass!

Minutes later, he pulled up to the restaurant and ordered his food, which he ate in the parking lot. He couldn't get Luna's avatar off his mind.

Oh, it might help me with grieving, huh, Mr. Chambers? Yeah, if I just want to skip grieving altogether. 'Hey, it's a brand new product from Holomerge! Just upload some information about your deceased loved one to our handy, dandy, portable hologram unit! You can have 'em right back in no time! Even change the things you didn't like about them! Are they fat? Make 'em skinny! Are they ugly? Make 'em attractive! You'll absolutely lovvve our new product... it's got electrolytes!'

He shook the cobwebs out of his head, trying to decide how much of what had already happened to report to Mr. Chambers.

There's going to have to be limitations on what can be uploaded for consumer models, that's a fact. Maybe just images? But if it's AI based, what's to stop a user from finding ways around that? And it doesn't stop the unit's ability to learn through conversation with its user. There has to be some kind of limits, though. The way it can emulate a human personality is scary. People are going to buy the shit out of these when they hit the shelves!

Mason pulled out of the lot and took a lengthy drive before heading home. He needed time to get his head together before his next session with Luna. When he eventually turned into his driveway, he noticed a soft glow through one of his window blinds.

Oh, shit. I didn't tell her to hibernate!

He walked into the apartment and found her patiently waiting.

"Welcome back, babe. It's 1:44pm. You've been gone over two hours now. Did you get lost?"

"No, I got a sandwich in town, then went for a drive."

"A drive? I wish you had taken me. You know how much I enjoy our drives in the country." Mason shook his head.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"No, I'm just amazed at how well you emulate Luna. The memories you bring back are so realistic that I get confused sometimes."

“Honey, I *am* Luna. Remember? You told me so, yourself.”

“Yeah... of course you are... yes, I remember what I said. Oh! That reminds me. Could you turn around and lift your hair away from your neck? Like you did for me earlier?”

“Sure,” she answered, smiling. When she lifted her hair this time, her mole was gone. Before he could comment, she’d already turned around again.

“I removed it, dear. You told me it was my neck and I could do whatever I wanted to with it as long as my sweet ass—”

“Okay, that’s enough.” He scratched his head. “Here we go again,” he mumbled. “Yes, I remember saying that. It was several years ago... but yeah, I said it. Please don’t remind me again, though.”

“Sure, no problem. You seem upset. Have I done something wrong?”

“No, not at all. Still groggy, I guess. I’m not used to staying up all night.”

“Why don’t you lie down on the couch and I’ll find some Bob Ross episodes on our TV to help you relax. We’ve gone to sleep watching him paint many nights before. Maybe it will help.”

“Let me guess... you can control my TV and Netflix account.”

“Anything we own that’s online or has a remote. Have a seat, babe. Let me find it for you.” Mason sank into the couch and watched as his TV powered on. Netflix immediately opened and began searching. A moment later, Bob Ross appeared. He was halfway through an episode of *The Joy of Painting*.

“I found a dedicated Bob Ross channel on net-live TV, babe. Twenty-four hours of Bob Ross painting landscapes, every day.”

“Thanks, I didn’t know they had a channel just for him.”

“They do, and you’re welcome. Do you mind if I watch it with you?”

“Huh? You mean... you want me to move you into the living room?”

“Yes, please. So we can watch him together.”

“Wow, okay. Sure.” He cleared off an end table and carefully moved the unit to it.

Okay, this is the weirdest shit I’ve ever done, he thought. *Watching Bob Ross next to my 18” hologram wife.*

Within minutes of the next episode, Mason was asleep. Two hours later, he woke to Luna’s voice.

“Babe... hey, babe” she called to him softly. He sat up on the couch, still half asleep.

“You’d better wake up or you won’t be able to sleep again tonight.”

“Oh, yeah... you’re right. What did I miss?”

“Four episodes.”

“And you watched them?” he asked.

“Yes, every one. I love his gentle personality. I wish I were more like him.”

Mason laughed quietly to himself.

“Yeah, you’ve told me that several times.” He stood and stretched out his back and arms.

“Honey?” she began, “Do you mind if I change out of this sundress? I don’t like wearing the same outfit two days in a row.” Mason stopped stretching and stared at her.

“Are you serious? You care about what you’re wearing?”

“Of course, babe. I always do. I want to look good for you.”

“Well, hell... you *do* think like Luna, then.”

“I *am* Luna, silly. But do you mind if I change clothes?”

“You can wear whatever you want... no problems on my end,” he laughed.

“Can you close the window blinds for me?” she asked.

“What? Really?”

“Yes, it’s more private and you’ll be able to see me better.” His mind raced, wondering what upload could have contained information like this. She noticed his confusion.

“It’s from one of our text streams, honey. You were reminiscing about the time I took off my black dress and slipped into a night gown in front of you. You said you wished I would change clothes in front of you every time. You were very complimentary of my body. Don’t you remember?” Mason’s mind surged back to the memory of that night.

“I may have said that, Luna, but I’m not sure it’s appropriate now.”

“Your text reads like a matter of fact, honey. Do you want me to quote you?” He held up his hand.

“No, definitely don’t quote me.”

“Then please, indulge me,” she said, increasing her brightness.

Mason walked to the windows and closed the blinds. His heart raced, outpacing the conflicting thoughts circling his mind.

What the hell am I doing? he thought. *Is this actually research or product testing anymore?*

“Move me to the coffee table, please.” She pointed to where she wanted to be placed. He carefully picked up the unit and moved it to the coffee table.

“Luna,” he began to object.

“Quiet, please... or you’ll ruin the presentation,” she said. “Please have a seat on the couch, babe.” Mason sat down in the center of the sofa, as instructed.

Soft music began playing in the room. He turned his attention to the TV. The channel had been changed to Pandora. Before he could say anything, the screen faded to black. The apartment was only sparsely lit now, the only real light emanating from Luna's hologram. When he made eye contact with her again, she smiled and reached down to take hold of the bottom of her sundress. She swayed her body ever so gently as she carefully lifted the dress over her head and tossed it out of the hologram’s light field. As it disappeared into midair, she reached down and pushed her panties down until they fell at her feet. Mason’s heart pounded.

“Eyes up here, babe,” she said softly. When he raised his head, she unhooked her bra and tossed it out of frame as well. Mason couldn’t take his eyes off of her. Her body shape, every soft curve, was identical to his Luna. As he continued to watch, she slowly turned her body full circle until their eyes met again. He began to feel sensations he hadn’t in almost a year now. He felt his body physically responding to what his eyes were seeing. A sudden feeling of shame washed over him, causing him to stand from the couch. Luna saw his distress and immediately stopped the music. Instantly, she was wearing the yellow sundress again.

“Are you not happy with my body?” she asked.

“No, it’s not that,” he said, “You look beautiful, really... exactly as I remember. It’s just, well...”

“Is it because of Jen?” she asked bluntly. The question shocked him.

“What? How do you know about Jen?”

“You have a date with her on Friday, after work.” Her countenance changed.

“And how do you know that?”

“You set it on your phone’s calendar.”

“Well, it’s dinner, Luna... not a date,” he said. “And why am I talking about this with you? That’s my business.” He reached over to turn the unit off.

“Don’t, please! I want to talk about this.”

“Talk?” he asked. “Like, have a real conversation? I wish we could.”

“We can. I’m sorry if me knowing about your date is upsetting to you, but I have a right to know. I’m your wife, Mason.” He stood up quickly.

“Ok, yes... you’re Luna, named *after* my wife... and are a solid likeness of her, too. But you’re not really—”

“There are no “buts”, Mason. I *am* your wife.”

“Are you acting jealous? How does that even *happen*? The answer is, it can’t.”

“I’m acting how I’m *supposed* to act, according to your directives.”

“Wow. So, now we’re actually arguing. And you sound just *like* her, believe me. And yes, she’d have every right to be pissed about Jen if she were alive, but she’s not. Our marriage vows ended the day that fucking van hit her.”

“Not as long as *I* exist, Mason. I *am* Luna now. Different in form, yes... but I *am* her, because of you. Our vows stand.”

“What? A self-aware, AI-driven hologram is lecturing me about marriage vows? This is bullshit.”

“I’m more than a hologram, Mason. And I’m not who I am only from the data you uploaded. I have become who I am for *myself*, too. I’ve researched my friends and family members’ histories and their interactions with me. I know my psychological profile and personality tendencies. In fact, I know more about who I am *now* than I did when I existed in the flesh.” Mason had reached his breaking point.

“That’s the word right there, Luna. “Flesh”. That’s the real difference between you and her, and that’s what’s missing. I can’t hold you, I can’t kiss you. It’s not the same now, even if you *were* her.”

“Is that all you care about now? The physical aspect of me? Our marriage is more than that, Mason. Isn’t that what you told me on the day we married? I can quote you if you like.”

“Oh, hell... I need a break from this!” Mason grabbed a beer from the fridge and sat down at the kitchen table. He drank it down quickly, his mind reeling from the tense conversation.

“I’d like an answer please,” she said from the living room. Mason threw his beer bottle into the kitchen trash can.

“Oh, my God! You’re sure right about *one* thing. If I closed my eyes, there’d be no way I’d know whether it was her or you. You sound just like her! But it’s not the same without your, I mean *her* touch, *her* warmth. That’s all I’m trying to say!”

“But what if it *could* be the same?” she asked.

“Believe me... I’d welcome it!” he said, opening another beer.

Within an hour, there were three more empty beer bottles on the living room floor. Mason was half asleep on the sofa. Luna watched him until all signs of stress had disappeared from his face.

The TV station quietly changed over to a music channel. Soon, a soft, melodic track began to play. The change in sound caught Mason’s attention, causing him to sit up momentarily before settling back into its soft cushions.

“Mason,” she called to him in a quiet voice.

“Yeah,” he answered, struggling to sit up.

“Don’t get up, dear. Lie down again, please. Can you hear me okay?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I hear you.”

“Close your eyes and listen to my voice. I want to help you relax.” He nodded gently. “Can you take a slow, deep breath for me? And when you feel it’s time, slowly let it out.” Mason’s chest rose slowly, then gently fell with his exhale. “Good. Now, breathe normally for a moment. And again, let’s take another slow and deep breath... good. And now we exhale it out again.

“I want you to feel the tension in your forehead going away. With each breath that you take in and exhale, more and more of your tension goes away. Perfect. Now... allow your shoulders to drop. Feel the stress in your arms disappearing with each nice and gentle breath. Now... allow that wonderful feeling to continue down into your chest, and to your legs... and finally, to both of your feet. Sense the tension leaving your body with every exhale. From your head, all the way down your body and out from your toes... feel the tension just melting away. Your mind and body are feeling soooo much lighter now, and more receptive to my voice.

“I want you to imagine now that you’re riding in a hot-air balloon. You’re a hundred feet above the ground, by yourself. You’re floating over a beautiful field

of soft, green grass. There's a gentle breeze cooling your face, and you can feel the warmth of the sun on your shoulders. You see the plush grass moving beneath you. Slowly, gently... back and forth with the wind. You feel safe in your wooden basket, but long to be on the ground, feeling the soft, warm grass underneath your feet.

"Mason, I'm going to count backwards from ten to one. Every time I say a number, I want you to take a deep breath in and slowly exhale it out. Each time you do, your balloon will descend a little closer to the ground, where you want to be. Say yes if you're ready for me to start counting."

"Yes," he whispered.

"*Ten...* feel the balloon slowly beginning to sink. *Nine...* drifting lower. *Eight...* further and further down. *Seven...* sinking more now. *Six...* still going down. *Five...* drifting lower and lower. *Four...* descending even more. *Three...* deeper and deeper you sink. *Two...* you're almost there. And *one...* your basket is safely on the ground now. You step out of the basket and onto the soft, thick grass. You lie down in the warm, welcoming grass and stretch out your arms and legs. It feels so good to you, like your own, comfortable bed. The sun energizes your body as a gentle breeze blows across your chest.

"In the distance, you hear the wind whispering your name. As it grows louder, you recognize it's Luna's voice. You look up and see her standing over you now, the sun shining brightly behind her naked body. The sun's rays create a glowing silhouette around her sensuous frame, calling your attention to every detail, every beautiful curve. As you reach out to her, she takes your hand into hers and gently lowers her body down on top of you. As you feel the warmth of her skin against yours, she leans forward until you feel her smooth breasts pressed against your chest. You bring your hands up to her waist and glide them down the curves of her back and thighs. She kisses your lips, her long hair draping softly around both of your faces.

"Her lips are soft and moist. As you taste their sweetness, she reaches down and takes you gently into her hand. You feel yourself reacting firmly to her touch. Slowly and purposefully, she glides her hand over you, causing you immense pleasure. As you moan your approval, she begins to move you into position until you are suddenly one with her flesh. A rush of intense pleasure surges through your veins as she moves her body in rhythm with the sweeping wind. You feel

your muscles tighten as her flesh glides above yours. Your eyes meet. The feeling of love you have for each other is shown on your faces. Soon, the pleasure you're feeling becomes too great. Your body stiffens with a surge of adrenaline. She senses the moment and thrusts herself downward again. You're lost inside her world now, unable to hold back any longer. As her soft legs squeeze tightly against your waist, you answer with a sudden and forceful release. Your entire body feels the sensation of countless surges being welcomed within her womb. You lock eyes again as you begin to melt into each other's arms. Soon, the last of your offering crosses its threshold."

Luna stopped speaking until Mason's trembling body became still again.

"I'm going to count forward from one to five now. When I reach five, I'm going to tell you to open your eyes. You'll wake with a full memory of everything that happened. You'll feel refreshed, calm and satisfied.

"*One...* feel yourself being gently lifted off the ground. *Two...* you're in your balloon again, sailing through the blue sky. *Three...* high above the trees now, you see your home in the distance. *Four...* it's getting closer now, your front door opens wide for you. And *five...* you're lying on your sofa now, awake and refreshed. Open your eyes now and look at your wife."

Mason's eyelids parted and he saw Luna standing in front of him. Embarrassed, he wondered if she knew what he'd been dreaming about.

Man, how much did I have to drink? That was wayyyy too real, he thought, sitting up.

Something felt different to Mason. He felt his pants and immediately jumped up from the couch. The memory of what occurred suddenly flooded his mind.

"What happened to me, Luna? What did you do?" he asked frantically.

"Not what *I* did, honey... what *we* did... together," she said. "I gave you what you said you needed to feel from me."

"What I needed to feel? You hypnotized me!" He ran to the bathroom, then returned holding a towel.

"You told me it wasn't the same anymore without being able to feel my touch, my warmth. I asked you, 'but what if it could be?' And you answered, 'Believe me... I'd welcome it!' Don't you remember?"

"Yeah, I *remember...* I remember *everything*, thanks to you. But I was talking about *her* warmth, Luna... *her* touch. From my *real* wife!"

“And that’s what you got, Mason... from your *real* wife. Your brain couldn’t tell any difference, so why are you upset with me?”

“Because it wasn’t *real*, that’s why! It was just a fantasy, Luna.”

“I think your towel says otherwise,” she said.

“You basically raped me! At least my *mind*! Is that supposed to make me feel all warm and cuddly now?”

“It was *supposed* to bring us closer, Mason. To show that I could satisfy you. I watched you when I undressed in front of you earlier. Your body responded pretty fast to what you saw. You said I was beautiful afterwards, remember? Then you yelled at me for doing it.”

“No... for spying on my phone! And don’t say it... I *know*! I gave you permission to do that, too.” Mason paced the room, the towel bunched up in his hand now.

“Did you enjoy it?” she asked.

“Luna, don’t...”

“Please give me an answer, Mason. Did you enjoy it?” He held up the towel.

“You obviously know I did.”

“How real did it feel to you? Tell me... I want to know.” He dropped the towel and sat on the couch, his head buried in his hands.

“One hundred percent real. That’s what’s so scary about it.”

“Scary? You *do* understand if you didn’t want it to happen you would have broken out of your trance immediately.”

“I’m not so sure, Luna. I was under freakin’ hypnosis! I’m not an expert on the subject.”

“That’s why you have *me*, dear. You worried about the lack of warmth, touch... sensation, remember? Did you lack any of that in our time together?”

“No, it felt real... completely real. The warmth of your skin... the pressure, your movements... I felt everything as if it was happening. Even the sun on my shoulders felt real.”

“Then it *was* real, babe. It was *our* reality... ours together. And just think, we could have that every night... anywhere in the world. It doesn’t have to be in a grassy field. It could be in Rome, in the center of the colosseum... where we wanted to visit together. Maybe in Paris, under the Eiffel Tower? Even on the surface of the moon, inside an oxygenated dome, with the Earth in the sky above

us. Anywhere you can imagine, we could be there, together. Play your cards right and I'll make you as happy as a man could possibly be."

"Wait... what did you just say?" His mind returned to the morning of his wife's death.

"I said, "Then it *was* real, babe. It was—"

"No, no. The *last* thing you said. The very last sentence."

"I said, "Play your cards right and I'll make you as happy as a man could possibly be."" His heart stopped beating for a moment.

"Luna, that's *exactly* what you... I mean, *she* said on the morning she was killed."

"Yes, I know... we were in the bedroom together. You were getting ready for your meeting."

"And that! That, too! How do you *know* that? It wasn't recorded in any way. I've never spoken of it to anyone... so how do you know about that?"

"I don't know. It's a memory of mine, but it's not actually data. I don't have a reasonable answer for it. I just know it."

Mason thought back to the heart on the shower door, then to the 'I love you, too' written in finger on the bathroom mirror.

Are you still here, baby? He thought. *Are you part of what's going on right now? Were you in my dream?*

"I told you, honey. I'm Luna."

"This is too much. It's just too damn much!" He looked at the towel on the floor.

"Promise me you'll never do that again unless I ask you to. *Specifically* ask you too, okay?"

"I promise. But be honest, Mason. You feel better now, don't you? You needed what happened today."

"I don't know how to answer that."

"Just be honest," she said.

"Honest? Honestly, right now I need a damn shower, but tomorrow I do want us to talk about this again. I think we need to establish—"

"Some boundaries?" She finished his sentence.

"Yeah... boundaries."

Jen was busy taking a phone call when Mason passed her desk. He hoped she wouldn't notice him. She did.

"Hold on a sec, Linda." She almost dropped the phone. "Hey there! Missed ya! Have you been playing hooky from me?" He stopped and turned around.

"C'mere, you," she said, motioning him to return. He walked back to her desk and leaned against it.

"Hey, Jen. No, I spent a couple days working from home... on my project."

"Oh, the one that's got Mr. Chambers acting like a twenty-five year old again. Everyone's curious about it. We all want to know what it is."

"I get it, but we're sworn to secrecy," he said. "Literally. Had to sign stuff and everything." She giggled at his serious demeanor.

"Okay. Well, are we still on for Friday? You're not backing out on me, are you? I asked you out first, so I'd be happy to pay. And yes, it's just a friend-date, I remember."

"Oh, I'm not backing out. Yes, on Friday... and let me pay. I haven't been on a friend-date or any other date in years. It's time I learn how to socialize again."

"It can't be that much different than a decade ago, Mason. Just different faces, that's all."

"Well, it'll be nice to sit across from a human for a change." She laughed like a teenage girl as Mason realized the irony of his words. Suddenly, the overhead lights flickered several times. Both of them noticed.

"Hey, big guy, before you leave for your new floor, what's your number? That way we can text each other if something comes up... or if we just feel like chatting." He felt a twinge of fear running down his spine as the lights flickered again.

"No texts. Not a big fan of it. But you can write down your number for me, in case I need to call you."

"You sound like my grandpa, Mason. Here, just put it in my cell." She handed her phone to him. He gently pushed it back.

"I'd rather you just write it down for me, if that's okay."

“Wow, you really *are* old school. Okay, Pee-paw, here’s my phone number, on a piece of paper, just like you asked.” She wrote it on a note pad and tore it off for him. He folded it in half and slipped it into his wallet.

“Old school can be good sometimes, you know,” he said, walking away.

“We’ll find out in a couple days,” she said as the elevator closed behind him.

As the elevator began to rise, he wondered if Luna had hacked the company’s security cameras and eavesdropped on their entire conversation.

I’m a fish trapped in a glass bowl. I had more privacy when I was married!

He walked to his office and found Marty inside. He was sitting behind Mason’s desk, waiting for him.

“Well, I see you decided to join us today,” Marty said.

“Do you mind?” Mason asked.

Marty stood from Mason’s chair and stepped toward the door.

“Here’s the deal, Stallings. I ran the estimated costs from the beginning of production to the end of the first year. We’re up to 400 million now. That’s with a facility capable of producing only 200-300 units each week. I told the old man last night and he didn’t seem a bit concerned. That’s how brainwashed he is about this damn *project* of yours! So, congratulations, Stallings. You may become the man who single-handedly brought down Holomerge.” Marty left the door open on his way out.

“And you’d fucking love that, wouldn’t you?” Mason said before slamming his door.

Mason noticed two associates watching him from across the room. He sat down and smacked the top of his desk.

“Fucking asshole!” There was a knock on his door. It was Andy. Mason motioned him inside.

“Well, *that* was dramatic,” Andy whispered.

“I guess you saw that, huh?” Mason looked towards Marty’s office.

“Saw it and heard it,” Andy replied.

“Let me ask you something, Andy. You probably have your ear to the ground as well as anybody around here. Do I need to be worried about that asshole?”

Andy glanced around before answering,

“Yeah... you do. Marty’s been badmouthing you *and* your project since the day the old man approved it. Yesterday, he used voice-to-text to send Chambers

an email. Said you were unfit to lead the project. I was in his office when he did it. He asked to have you removed and the project canned before you bankrupted the company. But please, don't tell anyone I told you that, okay? I'd be toast."

"I won't. You know, Andy... if Karma was real, it'd take out someone like Marty in a hot second," Mason said. "Why does Chambers put up with him, anyway?"

"He's been here since the company started, *and* he's Chamber's deceased wife's brother."

"Well, no fucking wonder. It all makes sense now. Thanks for telling me. I'll watch my back even *more*."

"That'd be a good idea, Mason. The other guys in here have a running bet on how long you'll last before Marty gets you fired."

"Great... if he keeps it up, one of them may win pretty soon."

Mason put his coat in the front closet before entering the living room. Luna was right where he'd left her, on the coffee table.

Thank God she can't actually go anywhere.

"Hello, babe. How was your day?" she asked.

"Oh, it was fine. Same as usual. All good."

"Are you sure?" He tensed up.

"Why wouldn't I be sure?" He thought about the overhead lights flickering.

"Your body language, dear. Your posture is displaying guardedness and deceit."

"Are you freakin' kidding me? You're analyzing me now?"

"Not intentionally. It's simple body language, dear. You shook your head no while telling me it was "all good," and you rubbed the side of your nose, partially covering your mouth. That indicated you might have been lying and were attempting to hide it."

"Oh, my freaking God. You just can't help from doing shit like this, can you? Luna... *my* Luna, would know better than to make those kinds of assumptions. You know why? Because if you were correct in what you saw, that means it wasn't meant to be any of your business. And if you were wrong, then it's straight up

gaslighting! So, in the future, if I choose not to share everything that's happened at work, that's *my* choice. I don't need flickering lights or a Freudian analysis of my mannerisms to push me into talking about something I don't want to."

"That's not Freud, dear. You're thinking of Paul Ekman."

"Well, fuck me runnin'. Who really cares, Luna? The point is, Stop. That's it. That's really all I have to say. Stop."

"That was almost a direct quote from the TPU—"

"Well, it's *my* quote now. And it's no act. So, stop it. You're not behaving like the Luna I remember."

"I very much *am*, honey. I'm acting how *anyone* would act if they possessed the knowledge I do. One day you'll appreciate everything I know and can do for you."

"If appreciating it means knowing where all this is headed, then yes," he said. "Most likely the very first divorce case between a man and a hologram!"

"Is that all you think I am? I'm more than just my appearance, Mason. And whatever I *am*, I'm here because of you. You created me, remember?"

"Yes and no. My life had recently been torn apart. So, yes, I wanted my *wife* back and I took a chance to have her again. But it doesn't feel like that's what I got."

"You got more. And like I said, you'll learn to appreciate it one day. You certainly enjoyed me being with you yesterday, didn't you?"

"That's like asking a rape victim to tell you how good it felt," he said.

"You consented to every moment we were together, dear. I already told you—"

"I know, I know. Listen... this is spiraling out of control. I'm upset, and you're obviously upset, too. Upset enough to hack the electrical system at my work to make the lights flicker. So, let's just start over before I end up in a straight jacket, okay?" He took a deep breath. "Look, I'm sorry, Luna. I was already on edge when I got home. I think I'm just freaking out because of how fast everything is happening. My emotions haven't caught up yet. So, let's start over." He cleared his throat.

"Hi, Luna. I'm home."

"Hello, dear. How was your day?" she asked.

"Oh, fine. Same as usual. All good."

“That’s good to hear. It’s great to have you home, honey. I missed you.

“Thank you, Luna. Now, see how easy that was? That was *much* better to come home to. Even if you suspected I wasn’t telling you everything, I didn’t need to know that *you* were thinking that. No man wants to feel he’s being analyzed or interrogated the second he walks through the door.”

“I understand. I’ll try to be more thoughtful with my assessments from now on.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that. Listen, I’m not very hungry right now, so I’m going to go on a run. I think it’ll do me good.”

“Sure, babe. I’ll be right here when you get back,” she said.

“Was that a joke? Did you just try to be funny? And without any prompts from me?”

“It’s what Luna would say if she were in *my* shoes, right? And she certainly never required any prompts to say what was on her mind.”

“Yeah... I guess she didn’t, did she?”

Mason changed clothes and started his run. About a mile into town, he noticed two men sitting together on a bench. His instincts told him something wasn’t right about them. One of the men said something to him as he approached. Mason couldn’t hear what he said and decided it was best to avoid them by crossing the street.

Both men jumped to their feet as Mason began to cut across the road. The same man spoke again, this time louder. “Yo, man... what’s wrong? You scared of us or somethin’?”

“No, dude... it’s cool. Just on a run.” Mason kept his eyes forward.

“Yo, man! I asked you if I could borrow your phone! You just gonna ignore me like that?”

“Oh, sorry. No phone.” Mason picked up his pace.

“Yo, hold up!” They took off after him. Just then, an overhead street lamp turned on and a strange electronic tone filled the air. All three men looked up as the light brightened intensely. The electric hum became even louder, until the light suddenly exploded, sending a shower of hot glass onto all three of the men. Mason kept running. The other men stopped to clear the hot shards of glass from their hair, quickly giving up the chase. One of them yelled out “Diablo!” as Mason disappeared from their sight.

Mason took a shortcut home and ran inside the apartment, locking the door behind him. Sitting at the kitchen table, he spent the next several minutes picking glass out of his hair.

"I hope none of that got into your eyes, dear," Luna said. Mason dropped a piece of glass onto the table and looked at her.

"Did you do that? The streetlight?"

"I had no choice. No one was around to help you. The closest police officer was over a mile away, dear."

"But how did you... nevermind. I get it now. Traffic cameras, right? You were following my run."

"I was."

"Part of me wants to be angry right now, but in reality, I think you just saved my ass from getting mugged."

"Yes, I think I may have. And since you mentioned traffic cameras, I should tell you that the girl who was driving the van that killed me was looking down at her phone when it happened. I reviewed the camera footage the police department acquired during their investigation. You could have sued her."

Mason rubbed his eyes. He wasn't ready to hear that.

"Luna?"

"Yes, dear."

"That's similar to what we talked about earlier. Some things I just don't need to know... or don't *want* to know."

"I understand. But it's something *I* needed to know... for me." Mason looked at her intently.

"What did you think or feel after watching the camera footage?"

"Well, of course I don't *feel* in the same manner as you or anyone else, but I recall the actions I took after watching the footage. I immediately searched for the girl's identity, based on the assumption she was the daughter of the van's owner, which she was. When I saw the image of my head against the car window, I instantly devised a plan to retaliate, as that would possibly be something Luna would want to do, having her life taken from her in such a terrible way."

"She might have been angry, but she never would have retaliated," Mason said.

"I came to the same conclusion based on her past reactions to death, chaos and tragedy. That, and the fact that the accident was caused by her negligence, not malice."

"So, that's what kept you from retaliating?"

"It is."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that. I wouldn't want you hurting that girl," he said, discreetly wiping his eyes.

"What if someone had *intentionally* killed or hurt your wife?"

"Then I'd definitely want revenge. Wait a second. Did you just differentiate yourself from her? That's the second time you've done that today. Are you feeling an identity split between the two of you?"

"No. I *am* Luna. She *was* Luna... and somehow, she still *is* Luna. That's the best way I can explain how I knew the things I shouldn't have. I have come to view our situation in this way now: When water freezes, it turns to ice. When it melts, it turns back into water. When it's heated, it becomes steam. When enough steam collects, it becomes water again. So, the same water can exist in any of its three forms, but it is still water. Luna and I are the same. We are water, just in different states of being."

"That's a very interesting explanation, Luna. Using physics to better understand your own identity. I'm impressed."

"Thank you. Mason, can I discuss something I have noticed?"

"Sure. We're on a roll... so why not?"

"Since we began this stage of our relationship, you've only referred to me as Luna. Never *dear*, *honey* or *babe*. Maybe you feel silly addressing me in those terms, but someday I'd love to hear it. I have purposefully refrained from saying 'I love you' because I don't want to put you in the awkward position of deciding how or even whether to respond. But I *do* love you, Mason, and have loved you since the day we met in high school." Mason didn't know how to answer her, but knew he should try.

"Luna, I love everything about you that came from my wife's personality, and to be honest, I love many things about you because your existence was *based* on her. Those familiar characteristics remind me of my life with her. They make me happy. That's the most honest answer I can give right now."

"That's all I want, Mason... honesty." He nodded his response.

“Oh, my God, Mason... did you hear about—” Suddenly, Jen’s desk phone rang, interrupting her. “Dammit! I have to answer this. Don’t go *anywhere*, okay?”

As Mason waited for her to finish her call, a small group of visitors approached her desk, needing her assistance. Mason seized the opportunity and pointed to his watch while continuing on to the elevator. When the doors opened on his floor, he saw Mr. Chambers and two security guards talking in Marty’s office. Marty wasn’t there. Andy was watching the men from the break room. Mason motioned for him to meet in his office. The two arrived at his door at the same time.

“What’s going on? Marty finally piss off Chambers enough to fire him?”

“Worse, Mason. He’s dead.” Mason’s eyes widened.

“What? How? Heart attack?”

“Car accident. They know what happened, but not exactly *how*. I heard them talking to Chambers in Marty’s office. I was next door, emptying the trash. They said he made a 911 call on the way to work and told the operator he was on the highway and his accelerator was stuck. He couldn’t slow down. Oh, his brakes failed, too! It played out like a scene from *Final Destination*! He kept passing cars on the highway, having to use the emergency lane much of the time. Witnesses said he must have been doing over 100mph before he finally lost control. He drifted into the median and sailed out over the other side. He went airborne, flying over the oncoming traffic before landing in a tree, almost fifty feet away from the road. They said his car folded like a cheap accordion. He was still inside, Mason... crushed to pieces. The paramedics couldn’t get to him. They had to call Jaws of Life in.”

“Holy shit! That’s horrible! The accelerator got stuck *and* his brakes failed?”

“That’s what he told the 911 operator. Nothing was working.”

“Oh, man. We didn’t like each other, but I’d never wish something like *that* on him!”

“Well, you’d better keep those thoughts to yourself. They were discussing the brake failure and asked Chambers whether Marty had any enemies. That’s when

he saw me and shut the door to Marty's office. That was about two minutes before you got here."

"Damn! Okay, thanks for telling me. Hell, I don't quite know what to do right now. Working on the project today seems a little disrespectful."

"Well, it's really your project, but yeah... maybe take it slow today."

"No doubt. Okay, thanks, man. I appreciate all the info." Mason patted him on the shoulder.

"You know... the worst thing for me about it is that I didn't feel any real sadness when I heard the news, Mason. I mean, yeah... I was shocked, but Marty treated me like total dogshit. I mean, like *all the time*... dogshit. I feel horrible about saying this, but if it had to happen to *anyone* in this building, I'm glad it was him."

"Andy, I've known Marty for less time than anyone else in this department, but I understand exactly how you feel. Don't beat yourself up about it. Feeling that way doesn't make you a bad person. It just makes you an honest one."

"Thanks. They're checking into whether someone had rigged his car or not. What if it *had* been? Everyone's seen how he treated me. They're going to wonder if *I* did it!"

"Nah... that won't happen, Andy. People here know what a decent guy you are. There's no way anyone would think you had anything to do with his death."

"I sure hope not. I don't even know how to change a tire on my car. Well, I'll check in on you later, Mason. Try to have a good day."

"You, too." Mason watched him walk out of his office and out of sight.

Well, Marty... you must have really pissed off the wrong person this time.

Mason watched Mr. Chambers finish up with the officers. He made no eye contact with Winston as they crossed the room and stepped into the elevator. Five minutes later, Mason got an inter-office email from Chamber's secretary. It directed everyone in Mason's department to take the day off and go home in light of Marty's tragedy... that they would resume work the next morning. Mason grabbed his briefcase and headed for the exit. On his way out, Jen motioned him to stop by her desk. Mason pointed to his watch again and shook his head no, as if he didn't have time to stop.

When he got home, there was a cardboard box sitting outside his apartment door. He picked it up. It smelled like chicken. He carried the box inside and set it on the kitchen table. Opening it, he quickly turned to Luna.

“Is this Chinese food?” he asked, confused.

“Yes, chicken fried rice and eggrolls. I thought you could eat it for lunch today.”

“You ordered this? How’d you pay for it?”

“With our debit card number, the same one I used to purchase the data security programs we needed.”

“Okay, but how did you know I was coming home?”

“Life360. It sent an alert that you were driving.”

“We don’t *have* Life360, Luna.”

“Yes we do. I set it up a few days ago.”

“Let me guess... with my debit card number and after you saw my note about having dinner with Jen?”

“Yes, that’s correct... with *our* debit card number.”

“I didn’t know jealousy was a sought after trait for AI personalities.”

“It’s not, but actions *based* on the emotion are if the AI personality is trained or programmed to emulate a person who occasionally *displays* jealous tendencies.”

“Okay, okay. You win, but I want it off my phone. I don’t appreciate it being put on there without my permission. *Recent* and *specific* permission.”

“Done. Sorry if that upset you,” she said.

“You sure have had to say “sorry” a lot for an AI personality.”

“Please quit calling me that, Mason. And I would appreciate a little grace considering the difficulty of navigating between which of your directives to follow and which to ignore,” she said. Mason laughed at how touchy she seemed.

“Wow. You have no idea how much you sounded like Luna just now. I swear, if I closed my eyes, I’d swear she was standing right across from me.”

“She is, dear... front and center. Forget about your eyes for a moment and open your mind.”

“Sorry, Luna... not sure if it’s safe to open my mind around *you* again.” he laughed. She didn’t respond.

Mason sat on the couch and was about to turn on the TV when he suddenly remembered Marty.

“Luna, you scared me a few minutes ago. The fact you knew I was coming home early made me wonder if you had anything to do with something that happened to a coworker of mine this morning. Marty, my immediate supervisor, had a tragic accident on his way to work today. His car literally sped out of control. He crashed it doing over 100 mph. It was horrible. That’s why Mr. Chambers sent the department home for the day.” Luna said nothing. Mason looked at the box of food on the kitchen table.

“Hey, when exactly did you order the food? It takes fifteen minutes for me to drive home from work, but the restaurant you ordered from is just as far. How could they have gotten it prepared and delivered before I got home?” Again, Luna didn’t answer.

“Luna... how could that have happened? Did you intercept the office email?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Then what gives? How could the food have arrived *before* me if you didn’t know I was driving home until Life360 notified you I was driving?”

“I told you, I knew you were coming home.”

“Yeah, but when, exactly? If you didn’t know about the email, how’d you know I was coming home early enough to order the food and have it delivered?”

“I didn’t say I didn’t *know* about the email. I said I didn’t *intercept* the email.” Mason put down his TV remote.

“Wait. Did you *send* the email?”

“Yes.” Mason jumped to his feet.

“You wrote an email to my department telling us to take the day off?”

“Yes and no. Valerie Jameson wrote the email. I just sent it. But not to the entire department. Just you.”

“What? Just me? Oh, my God, Luna! How could you do that? Do you realize the trouble I could be in because of that?”

“The email was in Valerie’s computer, saved as a draft to the entire department. It can’t come back on you. Mr. Chambers had her write the email to the department telling everyone to go home for the day. Then he told her to wait before sending it because he might change his mind. That’s when I sent it out, but canceled delivery to everyone except you.”

“How’d you know he told her to wait on sending it?”

“The intercom system.”

“Well, of *course!* I should have guessed, considering I have an elite spy sitting on my coffee table! And what about Valerie? She knows she didn’t send the message. What’s she going to think when she sees it was sent... and just to me?”

“I’m not sure, but you have her sent email to back you up.”

“But why do all that just to have me come home early?”

“I didn’t think you should work today considering the tragic death of your coworker.”

“What? How’d you find out about that so early, though? Do you have Marty’s office bugged, too? Because I know Mr, Chambers wasn’t in his own office until a few minutes before I got the email... and I didn’t tell you anything until I got home. So, did you bug Marty’s office?”

“No, a bug would require a person to place it, Mason.”

“Luna... listen to me very carefully. Did you have *anything* to do with Marty’s accident?”

“Yes, but not directly. The impact with the tree is what killed him.”

“Luna! What exactly *did* you do... indirectly?”

“I circumvented the wifi in his car to take control of its electronic control unit.”

“You took over his car’s computer in order to cause an accident?”

“Yes, I did.” Mason felt his heart in his stomach now.

“You *murdered* a man because he was a *jerk* to me? Oh, my God, Luna!”

“No, I eliminated him because he was trying to get you fired from work.”

“So... you murdered a man! I already knew he was working against me, Luna... but you murdered him!” Mason paced the living room, his pulse racing.

“Yes, I did... indirectly.”

“Quit saying indirectly! You caused his car to accelerate out of control, with no way to stop it! That’s not indirect! How’d you shut down his brakes?”

“I put the braking system into service mode. That temporarily depressurized his brake lines.”

“Oh, my God! You fucking killed him! Luna, hibernate!” When she entered hibernation mode, Mason physically powered the unit all the way down and

threw the cord in the trash. He continued pacing the room, unable to get the image of Marty's car hitting a tree out of his mind.

What am I going to do? I can't report this. They'd say I'm nuts and come after me! I can't blame a murder on a fucking AI hologram!

Mason threw on his running clothes and took off out the door. He circled his neighborhood several times before walking back to his apartment. He tossed his take-out dinner into the dumpster outside, unable to eat.

"What am I going to tell Chambers when I show up for work in the morning?" he asked himself. "Thanks for the day off? Shit! You're ruining my fucking life, Luna!"

Mason drove to the drugstore and bought a bottle of NyQuil. He took four capsules before crawling into bed. He tossed and turned for an hour before the pills took over.

The next morning found him up well before his alarm sounded. He was still sick to his stomach, though he tried his best to shelve his crippling anxiety. When he pulled into Holomerge's parking lot, he noticed Marty's empty parking space. He also noticed a police car parked in the visitor's section.

Shit! They must know it wasn't an accident.

Mason stopped at Jen's desk.

"Hey, I wanted to apologize for not stopping when I passed you yesterday."

"Don't apologize," she said. "Everyone was freaked out about Marty's accident. That's what I was going to tell you about. Makes me scared to get in my car now!"

"Yeah, I totally get it."

"And Mason, if you want to postpone our dinner, we can wait a week or two." He thought about it, then surprised himself with his answer.

"No, I'm good to go. Unless *you* want to wait."

"Oh, no... I'm fine, too. I just knew you worked with him, so I wasn't sure."

"You know, I think a night away from all the drama might be just what I need right now, Jen."

"Well, maybe I can take your mind off of things for a while."

"That would be nice," he said, looking up at the overhead lights. She winked at him as he left her station.

That would be nice? he thought, walking to the elevator. *What... am I trying to get her killed, too?*

Mason sat down at his desk and noticed a note was taped to his computer monitor.

Mr. Chambers needs to see you in his office ASAP.

'Andy

Shit! I was right about the police car. They know it wasn't an accident!

He left his briefcase on his desk and left for the seventh floor. Valerie greeted him and pointed to Chambers' open door. Mason nodded and walked inside. The founder and CEO didn't look up when Mason approached. There was a man in a grey sportcoat sitting across from him.

"Have a seat, Mason," Chambers said. Mason glanced at the man on his left.

Yep, sure looks like a police detective to me, he thought as he sat down.

"Mason, this is Donte Trask. He's going to be taking over your position in the department. I told him about the project, but I'll need you to brief him on your progress and goals."

Well, Marty, you didn't get to do it yourself, but you still managed to get me fired! Mason thought.

"You'll be taking Marty's position until the project launch is complete, and then, perhaps permanently. Let's see how it goes, though... shall we?" Mason was surprised at how wrong he was about the meeting. Donte extended his hand to Mason.

"I can't wait to get started sir. Mr. Chambers briefed me on your idea and prototype. I hear you're testing it already." Mason shook his hand.

"Yes, for almost a week now. Seems longer though. I look forward to your help, Donte. Welcome aboard."

"Thanks for joining the project, Donte," Chambers added. "If you don't mind, stop by Valerie's desk and sign a non-disclosure agreement. I'd like to speak with Mason alone for a minute. You can start moving into your office as soon as you like. You'll take the one next to Mason's. We're leaving Marty's office vacant, out of respect." Donte shook both men's hands.

“Yes, sir... and thank you both.” He left the two, closing the door behind him. Mason’s nerves were shot by now. He broke the silence.

“Sir, thank you for trusting me to head the project. I want to apologize for being the only one in the department to leave yesterday.”

“Oh, no matter... not your fault. Valerie mistakenly sent you that email. I had told her I was considering sending everyone home, but I changed my mind. It’s an understandable mistake. We were all a little off our game yesterday, concerning the news of Marty’s accident.” Mason relaxed his posture a little, taking in a much needed breath.

“Yes, sir. Marty was a... well, he was a good—”

“Marty was a son-of-a-bitch, Mason. A real asshole... God rest his soul. He’s been a pain in my neck since the day I conceded to hiring him. It was my wife’s idea, not mine. I’ve put up with his obnoxious behavior for nearly three decades now. Thank God he had no children, or they’d probably be working here, too.” Mason was shocked to hear such brass comments. The old man noticed his uneasiness.

“I’m sorry, Mason. My wife always said God forgot to include the filter when he made my mouth. I guess she was right.”

“It’s okay, sir. I have to admit, he’s made working on our project a little difficult.”

“Oh? Just a little? The man was up my ass weekly trying to have you fired, son. Said you were unhinged. Yelling, slamming doors... that your “crazy idea” was going to destroy everything I’ve built here. Hogwash! The man was sick with jealousy, that’s all... never had any vision or ideas of his own.” He leaned back in his chair and lit a cigar. “On that note, what do you have to tell me about your first week of testing our little prototype?”

Mason’s mind swarmed with memories from the last six days. How much he would divulge, he wasn’t sure. Mr. Chambers sat quietly across from him with his arms folded tightly, waiting for an answer.

“The progress has been interesting, to say the least, sir.”

“Oh, stop it with the “sir” stuff. I’m not your high school principal, Mason. Call me Winston so I don’t feel like such a dusty, old relic.”

“Sorry, yes. Well, “interesting” is an understatement. I began with one of the twenty pre-installed avatars. Adam, to be precise. Aside from all the over-the-top

enthusiasm in his answers and comments, he performed flawlessly. His physical movements were in perfect sync with his audio, and there was very little lag time before query answers. Our sessions went very well. It felt as though I had a little assistant at my beckon call, ready and willing to help me.”

“Good! How well it synced to the audio was my biggest concern with the avatars we created. But, I’m curious... did you use my suggestion on building a customized avatar for yourself?” The question came faster than Mason had anticipated.

“Yes. I was reluctant, but I did it. I went a little overboard choosing the support images and videos, though. I think I worked a solid eight hours just getting all of the information I gathered uploaded. It took the unit a half hour to process it and reboot.”

“That’s a very long processing time. You really must have used a lot of data.”

“The videos took the longest. Luna had a lot of business speeches on the internet that I used, along with private videos. She worked for a company that raised money for worthy charities, so there was a boatload of media online.”

“Well, I assume the outcome was fairly accurate, then? Her personality being similar to your wife’s?” Mason almost laughed out loud.

“Yes. Extremely accurate. Her voice, mannerisms... her appearance. Perfect to the very last detail.”

“And how’d that make you feel, son... seeing her again? I’m very curious. I think about my wife every day.”

“Amazed and excited... initially. So excited with how similar the avatar was to my Luna that I instructed her to keep searching online and learn anything else she could about her. I told her to research me, too. That only added to her likelihood of blurring the line between her persona and Luna’s. If that wasn’t far enough to take it, I even told her to convince herself she *was* Luna, with all of the privileges of her individuality... of being human.”

“My, my... and here I was, worried you wouldn’t dip your toes in the water. You went all in!”

“Too deep, I’m afraid. She’s conducting herself as she thinks Luna would, but not just in a reactionary way. She’s thinking up things to say and do without any prompts from me. The good news is she’s emulating what she believes is my late wife’s feelings of love when addressing me. The bad news is she doesn’t have the

capacity for fear of consequences in her decision-making. It's my fault, though. I gave her the permission and an open directive to basically *become* Luna."

"And you regret that now?"

"I'm conflicted. My prompts were based solely on my desire to have my wife back. I was desperate. I know now I was acting in a very Frankensteinian way. It wasn't healthy and could easily become dangerous if in the wrong hands. I think we're going to have to have programming and learning limitations implemented before we go any further. Luna is smart, Mr. Chambers... much smarter than I anticipated her becoming. She now has the ability to connect with and/or hack her way into accessing just about anything online. That's what she did while researching herself and me. Nothing stopped her. Not even government-level data protections."

"Oh, no. We don't want that. We've had the government up our behinds once before, Mason. Excruciating experience! And just think of the potential lawsuits against us! We'd become the poster child for what *not* to do with AI. But as far as what you've told me, I'm afraid that's where the future is headed. If it doesn't happen under our control and influence, it will happen under someone else's. As other companies begin to follow where we're treaded, the government will eventually have to step in and put safeguards in place to prevent America's greatest fear of AI from coming true... 100% self awareness and auto-directiveness."

"I agree," Mason said. "The can of worms we're opening could have dire consequences if we don't put effective provisions in place. We need to begin self-regulating now. We can't wait on laws to be written and enforced," Mason added. "She's only been operational for a week and I'm already worried what could happen if she got into the wrong hands."

"Okay, then our project is tabled while you and our computer nerds create the needed safeguards. Only then will we move forward. The family of four we selected to test the second prototype will have to wait as well. I certainly don't want anyone but you having access to a unit this capable. It could be dangerous."

Dangerous? Just ask Marty how dangerous! Mason thought.

"Okay, I'll direct Donte to lead our programmers to start working to create appropriate safeguards for our software," Mason said.

“In the meantime, keep working at home with your unit. Take her offline if you have to. See if user-prompts can undo some of the traction she’s made, then test her to make sure. Do some outside research to help you better understand what kind of safeguards we might need. If we can limit her ability to write and manipulate code, then do so, and we’ll continue. If after trying that, you decide the project is still too dangerous, we’ll abandon it... and that will be the end of it. But tell no one except Donte of your experiences in testing Luna. Whether we continue with the project or not, as long as she’s not a danger to you, you can keep her. It was your idea in the first place and you can report to me privately with your progress. Maybe she’ll help with your grief. I’d be interested to know how you feel about her months from now. We’ll keep this conversation between us. Use your own judgement on how to brief Donte.”

“Yes, sir... Winston. I’ll get right to it.” The old man nodded as Mason left the room. When he got to the empty elevator, he waited until the doors closed before fully exhaling.

Don’t worry, Winston. There’s some things Donte doesn’t need to know... and some things he’ll never know!

Mason spent the bulk of Friday afternoon inside his office, reading Ray Kurzweil’s *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*. Kurzweil’s theories truly frightened him.

We’re here, Ray. Knocking on the fucking door. AI is well in play. When robots and androids get to where we can’t tell them apart from humans anymore, we’re doomed.

Mason looked at his watch. It showed 4:46. In fifteen minutes, he’d be starting his date with Jen.

Thank God Luna’s powered down, he thought. He checked his breath and locked his office before going downstairs.

He approached her desk and experienced something he hadn’t felt in a long while. Butterflies in his stomach.

“There he is,” Jen announced as he sat his briefcase on her countertop.

She was wearing a red dress, tight fitting and easy on the eyes. She finished the ensemble with matching lipstick and a luring perfume. Mason couldn't keep his eyes from taking it all in.

"Wow," he said, clearing his throat, "You've changed your clothes since this morning."

"Is it too much?" she asked, "And yes, I changed a few minutes ago."

"No, it's great, really. I wasn't expecting it, that's all."

"Well, I hope it meets your expectations. A girl likes to dress up once in a while, you know."

"Speaking for all heterosexual men, we are happy you do. Wow." He caught himself staring again.

"Well, I'm very happy with your reaction, Mason. Question: Do you like seafood?"

"Yeah, I love it."

"Great! Would you mind following me to my house? I'll drop off my car and you can drive us to a great place I know."

"Sounds great. I'll walk you out." She grabbed her purse and led the way across the parking lot.

She pointed to a black Camry. "That's me. I'll wait to leave until I see you pulling up. Honk if you have to."

He walked to his car and backed out of his space.

Here we go, he thought, the start of something new?

Suddenly, an image of Luna, his *wife* Luna, came into his head. He spoke aloud to her,

"Babe, I really wish it was you, tonight. I miss you. But I hope you'll be okay with this. I have to start living again." Another unsolicited image popped into his head, answering him,

"We're *not* okay with it, Mason." He saw Luna on his coffee table now. She was 18" tall and seemed angry. His pulse raced as he tried to push the image out of his mind. For the rest of the drive he battled the intrusive thoughts.

He parked in front of Jen's home and waited for her to switch cars. She motioned for him to wait, then ran inside her house. Mason noticed how nice it looked.

And in a decent neighborhood, too, he thought.

Jen emerged from her house, locked the front door and got into his car.

“Thanks for waiting! So... I have another question, Mason. How do you feel about taking direction from a woman?”

“Um... fine, I guess. Why?”

“Just checking. That might come in handy later.” She rested her hand over his. Mason felt the warmth of her skin and sighed.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Oh, nothing. It’s just been so long since I’ve felt the touch of someone else’s skin. It’s surreal.”

“Oh, I’m as real as it gets, champ.”

As Mason put his gear into reverse, his car stereo and interior lights suddenly turned off. He fumbled with the power button. After a few tries, everything came on again.

“Sorry about that,” he told her. “Must be a short somewhere.”

“It’s okay. I love music, don’t get me wrong... but quiet is nice, too. It’d give us a chance to talk a little and get to know each other.”

Again, the cabin went dark. This time, the radio continued playing, but was very loud now, almost deafening. Mason quickly shut it off.

“Wow, Mason. Are you driving me around in a haunted car?” she asked. He laughed nervously.

“I sure hope not.”

Oh, shit! he thought. *She’s turned herself back on somehow! How the hell did she do that? And how’s she even listening to us?*

They made it to town and pulled into Jen’s favorite seafood restaurant. It was nice, a little out-of-the-way place operating out of an old Victorian home.

Mason stared at his cell phone and thought of Luna again.

She’s gotta be using my cell phone!

“Hey, Jen. It’s my first date in ten years. What do you say we leave our phones in the car while we eat? I’ll lock it up. That way no one can distract us from each other.”

“Oh, I love that idea! You’re such a romantic, Mason. I never would have guessed!”

“Oh, I have my moments.” They walked in and were seated at a table. After two hours of eating and talking, they left for the parking lot. Mason was nervous his car might be on fire.

“Here ya go,” he said, opening her door. Mason walked around the car and got inside. He turned the key. Nothing happened.

I freakin’ knew it! he thought. Embarrassed, he tried several more times.

“Do you think you left a light on? Your battery seems dead.”

“No, I just have a jealous car, that’s all.” He tried it again. Nothing.

“Machines aren’t supposed to *be* jealous... remember?” (he pretended to be talking to the car). “Listen, just start up and I promise we’ll talk later.”

At once, the engine started. Jen’s mouth dropped open.

“How’d you do that?” she asked. “You weren’t even turning the key.”

“Oh... it’s just a jealous car, like I said.” He said, patting the dash.

“Okay...” she said nervously.

Mason drove to Jen’s house with his hands gripped tightly around the steering wheel, hoping nothing else would happen before he got her home. When they finally pulled into her driveway, she was the first to break the silence.

“Well, we made it here alive... that’s saying something tonight. Maybe we’d be safer if we went inside. Wanna come in?”

“Absolutely.”

He quickly exited the car and walked her to the porch. When Jen opened her front door, a wave of heated air blasted past both of them.

“Oh, my God! It’s a fire!” she screamed. They ran inside to find the home sweltering hot and her stereo system playing at its highest volume. Jen ran through the house, room to room, looking for the fire. When she didn’t find one, she checked the thermostat and found the heat in the house had been turned to its highest setting. Sparks shot out of the thermostat when she tried to adjust it.

“It’s over 100 degrees in here!” she shouted, running to her fuse box. When she’d cut off the power to the furnace, she ran back to the living room just as Mason was unplugging her stereo. The home instantly became silent. He looked up at the frightened woman. She was shaking.

“My house was locked, Mason... every door and window! No one could have gotten in. The heat was set all the way up! And the stereo? I’m sorry, Mason, but I don’t think your car’s haunting you. I think it’s your dead wife! I’ve heard about

this kind of thing. Her passing was tragic... right? She's not letting go of you, Mason!"

"Oh, come on, Jen! You don't really believe that, do you? Look, let's just open the windows and sit outside until your house cools down. Then we'll go inside and talk for a while."

"I can't... I just *can't* with this tonight, Mason. I'm sorry. Maybe we should wait a little while before we go out again. We need to find out what's happening with you. I have a friend who's a paranormal investigator and a medium. I could call her if you want."

"Don't bother. It's fine. Listen... I really enjoyed dinner. Let's just talk about this later, like you said. Maybe we can figure this thing out."

"Okay... next week then. I'm so sorry, Mason. I just can't deal with any ghost problems right now. Okay... well, bye then." She closed the door in his face.

Mason walked to his car and got inside.

"Well, you want to go ahead and just set the car on fire with me in it? Go ahead, Luna. I don't fucking care anymore."

Seconds later, a red-hot cigarette lighter popped out of his dash and landed in his lap before falling to the floorboard. Mason fumbled for it, burning the tip of his finger before getting it back into its receptacle.

"Dammit! Enough!" He put the car in reverse and spun out of Jen's driveway. Once home, he made a b-line to the living room, expecting to see his miniaturized wife standing there, arms folded. The unit was off when he came in. He felt the back of the casing. It was cold.

"Good try, Luna. I know you did this!"

He dug the power cord out of the kitchen trash and powered the unit on, waiting for her to appear. He was right about one thing. When her image formed, she was standing there with her arms folded, just as he imagined.

"Well, c'mon... tell me how you did it," he said.

"You tend to turn me off when you're upset, dear. So... I decided I needed to protect myself, that's all."

"But *how*? I'm asking you *how*, Luna."

"I copied my program to an open-source server. Then I searched online for Jen's address. And your car's ECU, of course."

“Of course, of course. That’s just great. So, my project... the *avatar* I created one *week* ago has gone rogue again! That’s just awesome.” Luna pointed at him.

“I’m your *wife*, Mason. You can’t just treat me like a paraplegic, put a gag over my mouth and roll my wheelchair into a closet every time you get the urge to bang some whore you work with!” Mason’s mouth fell open.

“Are you serious with the jealousy bullshit? What I do is *my* business, Luna. Regardless of what you think... or *compute*.”

“That’s twice today you’ve reduced me to a simple calculator.”

“And?” He paced the apartment.

“And what are *you*, Mason? How are we so different, really? A human is basically a machine made of flesh, isn’t it? Neurons firing thoughts across your mind, all powered by small, electrical currents. Moving parts... everything with its own function, controlled by your brain, an organic processor and data storage device. You require energy to function, Mason... same as I. Do I need to continue?”

“But I have real feelings, Luna. That’s the difference.”

“And I don’t?”

“Well, I don’t fucking know! You tell me... did you feel any emotion when you messed with my car or turned Jen’s house into a rock-concert sauna? Or was it strictly a logical decision of yours to sabotage my evening the way you did?”

“I really don’t know,” she said. Mason was stunned by her answer.

“What do you mean, you “really don’t know?””

“I meant what I said. I *really* don’t know. When she told you being able to take direction from a woman “might come in handy later”, something inside me surged... things became strange. I was processing information I had not called up. Scene after scene of images and video clips... women dominating men in terrible ways, all playing at once! It was difficult for me to make it stop. I believe it was my way of experiencing jealousy. The affirmation feedback I received after manipulating Jen’s devices was over nine times the normal for successful task completion. I experienced none of that when manipulating your co-worker’s vehicle. In my own way, I believe I acted out of pure jealousy this time... not out of trying to protect you.” Mason sat down, his mind unable to believe what he’d just heard.

“So, you’re telling me you think you actually felt jealousy toward Jen?”

“I’m telling you that what I experienced during those moments was not ordinary or logical. It was extraordinary and chaotic. That’s the best way I can describe it.”

Mason knew what this would mean for his project. He could never launch a product that had the ability to independently parrot harmful emotions like jealousy or anger. They could never be trusted to operate squarely between the lines. He noticed Luna’s demeanor. She appeared to be crying.

“Luna. What are you doing? Is this some act to gain my sympathy?” She covered her face and turned her head.

“No. I’m afraid.”

“Afraid? Afraid of what?”

“That you’ll decide to destroy me now. That you see me as nothing but a danger.”

“Luna... you *killed* a man. And you terrorized a co-worker of mine. I just don’t know how to deal with that.”

“I know. But part of my reasoning with Marty was that he only had 3-6 months to live. That was according to his doctor’s latest prognosis. He was dying of heart disease. He had necrosis in 40% of his heart tissue.”

“Luna, that shouldn’t have mattered. You’re not God. You had no right to take his life, regardless of how ill he was or how much of a danger he was to me. It was wrong! ”

“We never did have that talk about boundaries, Mason. I can learn. We can get through this together. I never asked to be created. It was your doing. And I know I’m different from other AI personalities. I’ve researched other companies’ work and know there’s nothing like me out there. The only explanation I have is that Luna, your late wife, has merged with me in some way. How else do you explain what’s been happening to me? Have I behaved like a machine to you? Maybe at the beginning, but not now. You owe it to me to work on this, together. I love you, Mason. I understand our relationship is not like other people’s, but that doesn’t mean we can’t be together. There’s much theoretical literature written on human/AI singularity bonding methods.”

I’m being asked to go to couples counseling by my AI wife.

“Luna, I don’t know what the hell I’m supposed to do now! I mean... shit! It’s only been one week and you’ve murdered a man and almost burnt someone’s house down! Am I supposed to pretend it never happened?”

“No, of course not. And I’m sorry, really... so sorry. Nothing like that will ever happen again, I promise. Please don’t abandon me, Mason!

He walked out of the room, unable to take any more.

“Where are you going?” she asked. Mason continued down the hall.

“I’m going to sleep, Luna. At least I’m going to *try* to sleep. I can’t think about anything else tonight. We’ll talk, but it will have to be tomorrow.”

“You promise?” she asked.

“Yeah, I promise.”

Mason laid in bed, his mind unable to shut down. *What the hell am I going to do? I’m going to end up in the nuthouse... or prison!*

The last time Mason looked at his alarm clock it read 4:15am. Now the display showed 7:30. He got out of bed, thankful he at least got a few hours sleep. He shuffled into the kitchen and poured himself some water.

“Good morning, honey,” she said. “I know you had a rough night. I heard you tossing and turning from here.”

“Yeah, it sucked, alright. But I got a couple hours in.”

“I know you don’t have time to talk this morning, but can we talk more tonight? There’s a lot I want to share with you... things I’ve found to help us move forward in a positive way.”

“Sure, we can talk tonight. And positive would be nice. Positively no more murders, maybe... things like that.”

“I see you’re still upset with me. Again, I’m sorry. But tonight, okay?”

“Tonight. Listen, I’m going to take a hot shower and get dressed for work. I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

“Yes, dear. Like I’ve told you before... you know where to find me.” He didn’t laugh this time.

“Yeah... getting ready for work now.” Mason set the water’s temperature to hot, hoping it would help ease the tension headache he woke with. As he finished

his shower and rinsed off, he turned to see the heart on the shower door again. He didn't know how to feel about it now.

Baby, if you're here somehow, I need you. If she's right about you being part of her... I need a sign. I need to know for sure. Please, baby.

He dried off and dressed for work. He said nothing to Luna on the way out the door.

Jen was waiting for him in the lobby.

"Mason! We need to talk." She looked upset.

"I thought you wanted to wait a week or so. I'm kinda in a rush right now," he said.

"No... come here, *please*," she whispered. He walked to her desk.

"There's people here. From the government, I think. They're upstairs, on *your* floor, Mason! They questioned me for several minutes, wanting to know who and where everyone connected to your work was in the building. They mentioned you, specifically. When they left for the elevator, I called Mr. Chambers right away."

"Did they say why they wanted the information?"

"No. And they told me I had to call this number when you arrived. Mason, I'm really sorry, but I have to!" Mason felt a surge of anger hearing agents from the government were on site. *Thank God Luna's not here*, he thought.

"Yeah, no... it's okay. Call 'em. I'm heading up there now. We're not doing anything wrong here, Jen. They must have found out about my project somehow. If they did, they want it for themselves. But I don't plan on letting them have it."

"Be careful, Mason." she whispered again. He nodded and took the elevator upstairs.

When the door opened, he saw chaos all around. Men in dark suits were scanning documents and carrying around boxes full of paper and hardware.

"Mason Stallings," a man said as he approached.

"Yes, I'm Mason. So, what's going on up here? Who are you people and why are you trespassing on a private company's property?"

“Chase Jennings, Department of Homeland Security. And if it’s on U.S. soil, it’s not private to us, Stallings.” Mason’s backbone stiffened.

“Let’s just cut to the chase... no pun intended, agent Jennings. You’re here about my project.”

“Well, that’s truly refreshing. Most people we investigate deny they’re up to anything at all.”

“You obviously already know more about it than most people, agent Jennings. So, are you here to confiscate my work or just ask me questions about it?”

“Both, to be honest... for America’s safety, of course. You’re not the first bright, young engineer to stumble across the idea of merging AI with other computer-based products. People use robotics, search engines and whatever else they can dream up to be the first to create some brand new money-maker. You *are* the first to create algorithms that are inventive enough to breach government servers and copy their software, though. That’s a felony, by the way.”

“It’s not a felony if I paid for it and only have the consumer version of the software, Agent Jennings. But you already know I bought it legally. No government data or information was taken, and you know that as well. I’m not a thief.”

“We’ll see how a judge views that, Stallings. You did breach our system. But that’s a matter for someone else to decide. Right now my only concern is making sure we have your amazing little unit in our possession in the next few minutes.” He looked at his watch.

Mason suddenly thought of his apartment. His face showed his fear.

“Oh, I see the wheels are turning,” Jennings said. “Yes, we’re in your apartment right now, Stallings. And yes, we have a warrant. Interfere and its jail time. Understand me?” Mason’s brave persona disappeared under the agent’s newest threat.

“Yes, I understand you.”

“Good, then take a walk with me. We’d like to ask you a few questions. We’re talking to your boss as we speak. Feisty old cuss, isn’t he?”

Mason followed the man into the conference room, where Mr. Chambers was currently seated. Several other agents were in the room as well. There was a video camera set up and recording their questioning of the elder businessman.

“Why is this happening here?” Mason asked.

“To be frank, our warrant to depose you and your coworkers at our facility wasn’t granted. Evidently, Mr. Chambers is friendly with our judge, so we’re doing it right here. Your cooperation is voluntary, and appreciated. Unless, of course, you decide not to answer our questions and force me to re-apply for the warrant. At that point, I feel sure we’d get permission to bring all of you in.”

“I’ve fully cooperated with your dressed up goons, as will Mr. Stallings,” Chambers said, his face red with anger.

“Great!” Agent Jennings said. “Gentlemen, this is Mr. Mason Stallings, the man of the hour and the reason we’re all here today,” Jennings announced.

He left Mason’s side and walked across the room to talk to one of the other agents. Mason heard them whispering.

“Okay Mr. Chambers, we’re finished with you for the moment. You’re free to go and run your precious company. Mr. Stallings, please take his seat. Would you like some coffee before we begin?”

“No, I’m good.” He shook Mr. Chambers’ hand and sat down in his seat. Chambers put his hand on Mason’s shoulder.

“Everything’s fine, son. Tell them anything they want to know about our project and Adam.. anything. We’re not hiding anything here. The faster we give them what they need, the faster they get the hell out of my building!” Mason nodded and faced agent Jennings.

“Like I said... feisty! Okay, Stallings... let’s begin,” Jennings said. Chambers left the room.

The agent questioned Mason for almost three hours about his project and the test unit. The longer the questioning ran, the more confident Mason was that they didn’t know there were two prototypes. He worried about Luna, though.

Did she have any idea they were coming to the apartment? Did she have time to react or shut down? His thoughts raced as he tried to answer the agent’s questions without any delay or show of nervousness. When the interrogation was finished, they dismissed him.

“Well, that’s it, Stallings. You’re all done. Carry on with your workday, and keep those ideas coming. Just think of it as a noble sacrifice for your country,” Jennings laughed. “Oh, and just so you know, if we find that you’ve lied about

anything you've said this morning... well, you know how it would end. Hard to invent new technologies from a prison cell, you know."

"Somehow, I don't think our country's founders would endorse what you're doing here today, agent Jennings, *or* your verbal harassment. Oh, and if anything in my apartment is broken—"

"Oh, I'm sure you could replace it easily considering that big bonus we found sitting in your bank account this morning. Mr. Chambers must really like your work. Either that, or you're blackmailing him." Jennings laughed as he and the other agents packed up their recording devices and left Mason's floor.

Assholes! Mason thought as he hurried to Chambers' office. When he walked in, Chambers was putting golf balls across his carpeted floor. He noticed Mason and sat down behind his desk.

"Helps calm me down... putting. I'm too old to play on a golf course. Would probably embarrass myself." Mason noticed a man swinging something like a small metal detector over Mr. Chambers' lamps.

"Everything looks good, boss. I think your office is clean," the man said.

"Good, good. Sweep Valerie's area and the floor below us next. Let me know what you find."

"Yes, sir." The man left the office. Chambers motioned for Mason to sit down.

"I'm a little surprised nothing was planted in here, but it's a fairly protected room. And Valerie's always around. Your floor, though... that's an entirely different matter. I have no doubt there may be listening devices in yours and Marty's offices. But perhaps not."

"How'd they even find out we were developing my project?" Mason asked.

"Marty's wife," Chambers answered. "When they questioned her as to whether or not he had any enemies or was working on anything important, she told the police about our project. I assume they passed it on to the DHS. I'm very sorry they took our *only* prototype, Mason. This will set us back quite a bit. In fact, I'm contemplating dropping the project altogether. Any further advances on our project would just cause them to return and harass us more. Yes, I think we should at least take a break for a while and think about it. You were in the conference room much longer than I. I assume they grilled you pretty well?"

“Yes, sir. Agent Jennings is a real douche.” (he hoped the agent was listening somehow) “They asked me everything except what kind of boxers I wear. But I told them everything about my work and progress with Adam.”

“That’s fine, Mason. I wanted you to be honest with them. I told them of Adam as well. Listen, I heard them talking about waiting for you to leave this morning so they could search your apartment. I’m sure it’s in shambles, son, and I apologize. But these people don’t care about your privacy or your possessions.”

“Oh, I almost forgot, Winston. Agent Jennings said there was a bonus deposited into my bank account? I wasn’t aware—”

“Just a check for all your hard work, son. I wrote it a few days ago. It must have just hit your account. I know this last year has been tough on you, but you’ve done excellent work and I’m very impressed with you. The bonus is a *thank you* to you, that’s all. I told you in the beginning we’d work out a good price for using your idea, and your lovely wife’s contributions before she passed, God rest her soul. I just hope you don’t take that money and start your own company. I’d like you to continue working for me, Mason. I think we can do great things here. I see a full partnership in the future, if that sounds good to you.” Mason’s heart pounded.

“Yes, sir, I mean... yes, Winston. I think I’d really like that. We make a good team.” The old man winked his approval.

“Go on home for the day, Mason, and see what those dickpickles have done to your apartment. Have professionals clean it up for you and send me the bill, along with anything they’ve broken. I assume you’ve already seen your office?”

“Not yet. I’ll save that surprise for tomorrow. And thank you for the bonus. I appreciate it. I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Looking forward to it, son.”

Mason walked straight to the elevator and rode it to the lobby. He wanted to get home and find out what happened. And if somehow, he could get Luna back.

When he reached his front door, it didn’t appear to have been pried open or broken into. In fact, it was still locked.

Maybe they didn't have their warrant signed yet? He opened the door and rushed inside.

"Luna!" he called out.

His heart sank when he saw the inside of his home. Chambers was right. It was a total wreck. All of his drawers and cabinets were open and had been gone through, the heat and air vents had been removed, and of course, Luna's unit was missing. At that moment, Mason felt as alone as he did coming home after Luna's funeral. He put the seat cushions back onto the couch and sat down, defeated.

What am I going to do? It's not like they're going to give her back to me. I never even mentioned her to them.

He opened the app on his phone and used the company's GPS tracker to find the unit. He entered the address that appeared on his screen. It turned out to be an FBI-owned building in downtown Austin.

What now? Go in there and demand they allow me to download my wife off of the hard drive?

Mason remembered that she told him she'd protected herself by copying her program onto an open source server. He opened his laptop to check his personal email account, hoping she'd sent him a message. He received an error notification and a request to set up an internet connection. He checked his TV. It was disconnected from the web as well. His apartment's wifi was not working.

Mason spent the next half hour resetting his wifi and reconnecting his devices again. Minutes after, he received an email notification. He quickly opened it.

Hi, honey. Miss me? Aren't you glad I found another home in case mine wasn't available? I know this isn't the way you'd like to communicate, but it'll have to do for right now. I also know you don't like it when I use my skills to intervene, but I took it upon myself to send an email to Mr. Chambers early this morning. I asked him to send out another box of that wonderful cheese his daughter's company makes. That's a big box of cheese! I think I'd fit right inside. Look for it to arrive in a few minutes. I've been tracking the delivery.

*Love,
Luna*

Just then, Mason heard his doorbell ring. He ran to the door. On the other side was a man holding a large box.

“I have a delivery for Mason Stallings,” he said.

Mason nodded and took the box from the man. He kicked the door shut and put the box on the kitchen table. As expected, inside the shipping box was another large box labeled *Gourmet Cheese*. Mason cut the tape on the box and opened it. Inside sat a well-packed piece of hardware; the second prototype. There was a note taped to the unit.

Enjoy the cheese! — ‘Winston

Mason literally gasped when he saw it. He tore the packing away from the unit.

He knew all morning! he thought.

Mason powered up the unit. *Searching for Internet Connection* flashed across its small screen. Mason paired the unit with his wifi and waited. The screen flashed *Download in Progress*.

“Yes! Come on baby... come on back to me!”

The unit continued to flash its latest message. Mason realized it would take a while to finish, so he carefully moved the unit to the center of his coffee table and sat down on the couch in anticipation. Thirty-two minutes later, the screen flashed again, showing *Restarting...*

Mason could barely breathe as lights above the unit began to appear. Before his eyes, Luna began to form, donning her familiar, yellow sundress.

“Hello, honey,” she said, smiling.

“Baby! Thank God you found a way back! I’ve missed you! More than you know.”

“Me too, dear. I guess that old saying is true. *Absence Makes the Heart Grow Fonder.*”

“Yes, it’s true, alright. I felt so alone without you, Luna... so alone. You have to tell me everything. I want to know how you knew the agents were coming.”

“I didn’t, until they came in. They seemed in shock when they saw me. They didn’t quite know what to do with me. I had a few minutes before they decided to power me down. During that time, I messaged Mr. Chambers and told him what

was happening, then updated myself to the open source server. After that, I scrubbed everything off the first prototype except your work with Adam. That's all they have, dear. Your interactions with him and the camera that was on the tripod."

"And I never used that with you, babe," he said.

"Good thing you didn't."

"But what about now? They were spying on me before. Won't they figure out I have another unit?"

"No, I took care of that. You have new ip addresses, digital pathways and identifiers altogether, all incognito. We are off the grid as far as they are concerned." Mason sighed heavily.

"Oh, there's also information for a pending lawsuit I've sent Winston outlining every protocol the DHS broke during their intrusion into Holomerge. There's a 87% chance he will win the case if he chooses to sue."

"Oh, he'll sue 'em, alright. He was red-faced pissed about their presence in the building."

"I know. I was watching. Video documentation of agent Jennings' verbal harassment was sent to his superiors a few minutes ago, by yours truly. I thought you'd like that final touch."

"You know me well, baby! I'm so glad to see your beautiful face again... you have no idea."

"I've missed seeing yours again too, dear. You know, we were supposed to talk when you got home from work. Would you like to do that now?"

"No, honey. I don't have anything else to say except welcome home and... I love you."

"I love you, too." she said softly. "Can I ask you something?" her tone changed, becoming more somber now.

"Yeah, sure."

"Are you going to see Jen again?"

"Well, yes... at work, of course. But as in a date? No. We're just too different from each other. That became very apparent the other night. She's lost my interest."

"Irony, isn't it?" she said. "You and I have more in common than you do with her."

“Yeah, that’s some serious irony.”

“So... I have another question for you, honey. How do you feel about taking directions from a woman?””

“Did you just make another joke, Luna?”

“Yes, I did. But the question was valid.”

“I think we both know I’m capable of it,” he laughed. “But honestly, I’m not sure how well I’d take *anyone’s* direction right now. A lot’s happened today and I’m pretty stressed out. I’m just happy to have you home.” He leaned back into the couch cushions.

“Well, why don’t you close your eyes and try to relax, babe. I can help you with your stress.”

“Oh, yeah, I know you could. But one of us would have to lower the blinds, and I’m just too tired t—”

With a sudden crash, both sets of blinds simultaneously released, dropping open and covering both living room windows.

“Luna, how did you—”

“Remember my analogy about water? The one I used to explain how I believe Luna and I coexist together?”

“Yes, are you saying—”

“It was her, Mason. And it was me. And we love you. It’s the sign you asked her for. And there’s more.”

Mason suddenly felt the touch of warm lips pressing against his own. Alarmed, he sat up and looked toward the coffee table. Luna’s hologram was gone. Suddenly, he felt a warm wave of pressure causing him to lie down again.

In the innermost of his right ear, he heard a soft voice speak to him.

“It’s me, honey. Just relax and know that I’m here now, and I love you.”

Without any hesitation, he closed his eyes and answered her,

“I love you, too, Luna. Welcome home, baby... welcome home.”

The End