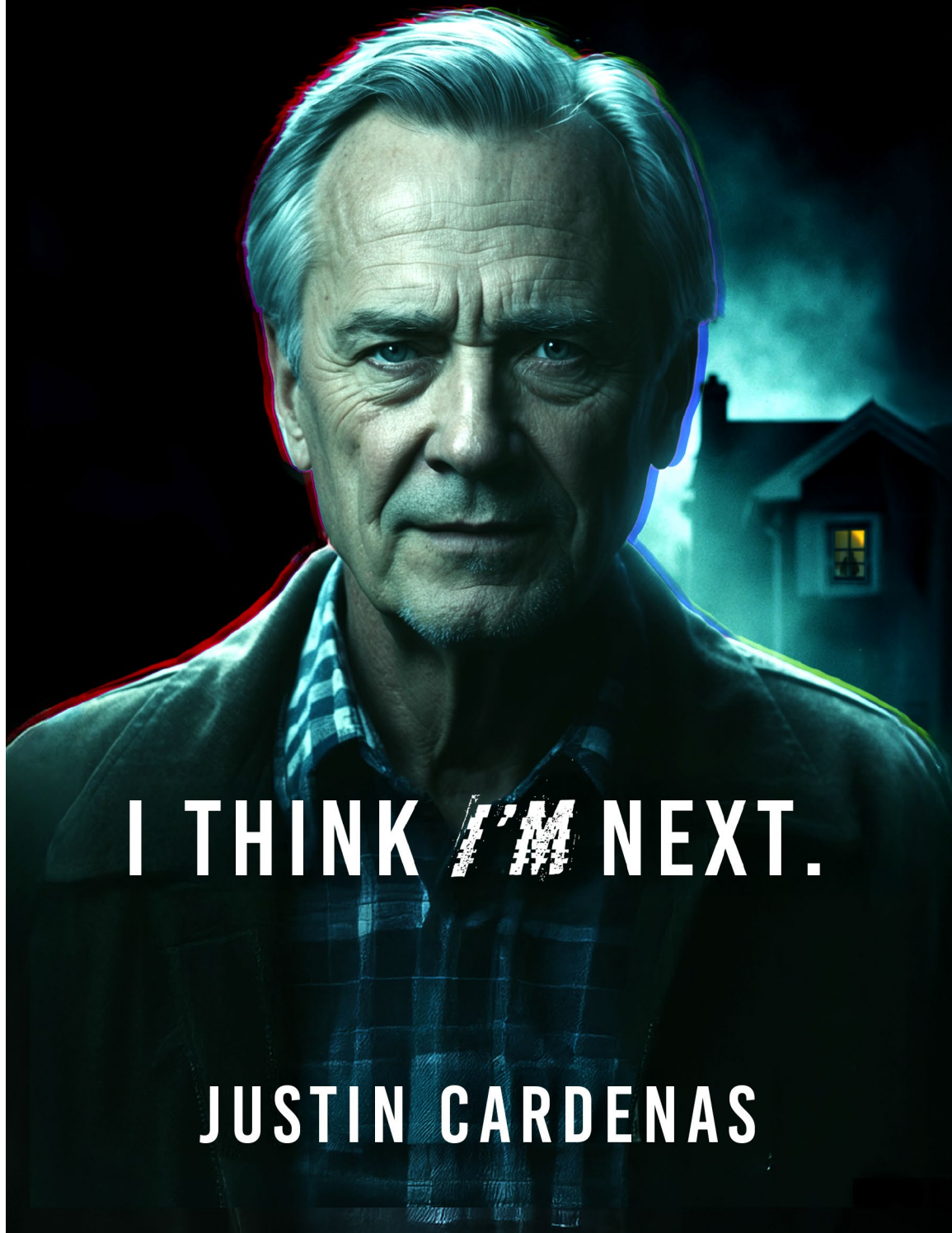


MY NEIGHBOR DOESN'T EXIST...



I THINK I'M NEXT.

JUSTIN CARDENAS

Tales from:



My Neighbor Doesn't Exist...

I think I'm Next

ENTER AT YOUR OWN RISK

This is not a comfort story.

It will not distract you, coddle you, or pull its punches.

This is **Soulbound Horror** — a story built to confront, not console.

If you choose to enter, know this:

There are no guides.

No safety rails.

No comfort promised.

No promise that you're ready

The choice is yours.

This isn't horror meant to shock. It's meant to **stay**.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

This book is PG-13. **Reader Discretion is advised.**

No explicit violence. No gore. Mild language.

But the weight is real.

You may encounter:

- Grief, guilt, and regret
- Psychological manipulation
- Depression and helplessness
- Gaslighting
- Existential dread
- Faith and doubt
- Questions of control, choice, and meaning

No cheap scares. No indulgence in cruelty.

But this story does not pull back.

If you're young — or just feel like the world has stopped making sense — you're not imagining it.

YOUR RESPONSIBILITY

You may stop at any time.

But once you enter, what it gives you may remain — even if you leave.

If you go, the questions may follow.

If you stay, you will not return unchanged.

This book will not change.

But **you might**.

If it becomes too much — pause. That's okay.

Your well-being matters more than any story.

But if you can **finish**.

Some truths only reveal themselves on the other side.

Some questions cannot be answered halfway through.

Don't stop in the middle of the tunnel and call it the light.

And if this story surfaced old wounds, please visit [page #]

IF YOU ARE NOT READY, DO NOT CONTINUE

There is no shame in waiting.

The book will remain.

The door is open.

Whether you walk through or walk away — the choice is still yours.

But if you walk through, I ask that you **walk all the way**.

Yes, this is serious. It's not trying to be deep. It just refuses to be shallow.

Because halfway through truth... is still a lie.

WHAT THIS IS — AND ISN'T

It will not heal you. But maybe it helps you face what can.

It will not save you.

It will not judge you.

However, it will place you face-to-face with what you carry.

And sometimes... that's where healing begins.

Growth doesn't come from the story.

It comes from what you confront... and what you choose to carry forward.

“You don't have to win. You only have to *face it*.”

Disclaimer

This book is a work of fiction — a story meant to challenge, reflect, and provoke thought.

It does not promote a political, religious, or personal agenda. It doesn't tell you what to believe. It simply asks one thing: **see clearly**.

The characters act. That does not mean you should.

Stories are not instruction manuals.

They are mirrors.

Not every mirror shows the same thing twice.

The meaning is yours to find.

I only ask you this:

What's your fate?

LEGAL NOTICE

By continuing, you acknowledge this journey is yours alone.

This is a work of fiction.

Any emotional or psychological impact is accepted as your own.

The author assumes no liability.

If you continue, you do so willingly.

Fate is a funny thing.

Some roads lead to endings.

Others lead to new **beginnings.**

If you've come this far, maybe you were meant to.

The world runs on power.

So does storytelling.

And when they meet — power and story — they shape culture.

You were part of something real.

That matters.

If no one's told you that in a while, so do you.

If you're ready, turn the page.

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Chapter 1

The floorboards creaked beneath me, sharp and hollow. I was alone, and the house made sure I knew it.

I set another box down in the kitchen.

The scent of lavender and lilac lingered—faint, stale, clinging to memories that hadn't moved on.

It didn't calm me. It accused me.

Most of the boxes were unpacked. A few lingered, lost like me.

I moved in a week ago.

She passed several months ago, and the house sat untouched since.

Now the ink on the deed hadn't even dried.

An old kitchen timer sat on the windowsill. Still ticking, even though no one wound it.

I didn't touch it. I couldn't. It kept time for someone who wasn't coming back. Now, it counted something else.

I turned away.

Click.

A beat passed.

Then it ticked again.

Like it had paused... to acknowledge me.

The weight never left. It only shifted, just enough to keep me moving. Some nights, I said “This is my house” just to hear it out loud. The wallpaper still smelled of her, like the house didn’t buy it either.

Her favorite chair sat in the corner, covered by a white sheet like a shrine. Above it, a faded wooden cross hung on the wall. I glanced at it from old instincts. My hand rose halfway, a reflex my soul hadn’t unlearned. But it stopped short. The cross didn’t offer comfort. Only memory. I hesitated, but I heard the old whisper: *Ask*.

But I didn’t. Not this time.

What would I even ask? For her forgiveness? Or my own?

Maybe I didn’t want the answer. Maybe silence was easier.

She used to run her fingers over that cross every morning. On hard days, she’d linger as if it could help *me*, even when I didn’t believe it.

I didn’t get it back then. Maybe I still don’t.

Or maybe I just don’t want to.

Her faith wasn’t for show. It was duct tape. Frayed, old, still holding a cracked world together—when no one else wanted to touch the pieces.

I rubbed my hands together and moved through the hallway. Every creak sounded like a whisper from the past.

The house was a museum.

Each room is a display case of someone else’s life.

I drifted through them as a visitor, haunted by her presence.

She always said the house was blessed. That faith could carry any burden.

I never believed her. I'm still not sure I do.

I thought I'd moved on...

But grief doesn't wait for permission.

I leaned against the backyard doorframe and stared at the garden. The weeds had worsened, climbing over the stone path and strangling her rose bushes. The garden mourned in silence. I let the weeds win—and they buried everything she left behind.

I dropped it louder than I meant to.

“She wouldn't have approved.”

I nudged it into a corner with my foot.

My future slipped through my fingers, like everything good had the sense to jump ship.

Every new number hit like a judgment. It wasn't debt. It was failure written in ink.

Her debt and mine shared a roof. This house wasn't a fresh start. It held everything I owed. A curse that might one day become a blessing.

Faith might hold the weight. But the floor still creaks. And the bills are still coming.

I couldn't tell if the house would save me or destroy me. I could only hope for a break before the spiral swallowed me whole.

When I was in my apartment, freelancing kept me afloat. I was even starting to have money in my pocket.

But my lease was ending. Bills, repairs, and taxes continued to pile up, growing every day.

"Security first. No shortcuts," she'd say.

Every bill echoed it back—*failure* disguised as responsibility.

I left all that behind.

Westridge was decades behind. That's why I came back. The world was getting to be way too much. No delivery drones flooded the sky. No synthetic caretakers. No AI instructors. Just people raising people.

A quiet town with normal stoplights and a post office that still mattered. Lately, more people have started drifting in—trying to escape the world, just like me.

I'm happy to be back. It gives me space to breathe. Space to think. To remember.

I kept one piece of the city with me. An old comm pad I occasionally use for work. It synced everything, ran fast, and tried too hard to finish my sentences. But I didn't trust it.

It was smarter than me. But not wiser.

My grandparents didn't just raise me. They stepped in after a drunk driver took my parents. Filled the silence. They weren't perfect, but they held me together the best they could.

My grandfather taught me the value of working with my hands. To stand firm when everything felt fragile. His laugh was steady and light. His faith was stronger still. He used to say, "*Faith isn't about answers. It's about standing tall when nothing makes sense.*"

I didn't understand him back then. Maybe I still don't.

I thought I wanted the city—the speed, the wonder. But I didn't.

I'm glad to be back in Westridge. Back where it all started.

When my grandfather died a few years later, a pillar of this house collapsed. Then it was just her and me.

My grandmother stepped up. Practical. Resilient. Believed in saving every penny and the value of hard, honest work. Even when we didn't see eye to eye, I saw pride in her eyes. But after he passed, she clung to her view of the world even tighter.

We were at odds before she died. She never understood why I quit a secure job to chase a dream. I could still see her shaking her head, hear her voice: *"You're risking everything for a dream that may not come. You need to live. Stop worrying about your bills every month. Why throw it all away?"*

She said it as if she were saving me from a future I couldn't yet see. Like she'd heard something in the silence I kept ignoring.

Owning a company was my chance to build something real. But the crushing weight of debt told a different story.

Some days, it felt like pushing a boulder uphill. The weight never changed. And every step risked losing everything I'd already climbed.

But I kept moving.

Stopping wasn't an option — not yet.

It wasn't just the money. It was the weight of every choice that came with it. I wasn't ready to give up... but I stood on the edge.

A knock broke the thought. It was Mr. Grayson.

"Still settling in, I see," he said, smiling. He glanced at the few unpacked boxes. His eyes lingered. Not just looking. Counting. His smile didn't reach his eyes.

I nodded, stepping aside. “Yeah. Trying to make sense of everything.”

A moment passed.

“I’m sorry for how I left,” I said. “That wasn’t fair to you. Or her.”

I glanced at the bills.

“Was it worth it?” he asked.

I looked down.

“I don’t know anymore. Maybe she was right. Maybe I wasted what she gave me for a dream.”

He didn’t answer.

I looked up. “I should’ve come back. Meant it. Not left her with empty words.” My throat burned. “I was ungrateful.”

He looked at me with grace. And sorrow.

“You weren’t ungrateful. You were trying to live without feeling like you owed the world an explanation.”

He smiled. “Took you long enough to say it. But we were never mad at you, kiddo.”

I sighed. “Yeah... I know.”

I didn't.

And he knew it.

He gave me that look. The one he used when he was about to call me out. But he didn't.

He took in the space. "Your grandma always kept this place just right. She could see a speck of dust from across the room."

"It feels like I don't belong," I said. "Like the house is still hers."

He looked around the room, eyes resting on the covered chair. "She'd sit right there every morning with her tea. You know... she was proud. More than she ever told you."

I didn't answer.

Some truths don't echo. They wait in the silence.

Pride. That didn't fit. She loved me, that I knew.

But proud? That was harder to believe.

Maybe I just never heard it when she did.

I wanted to believe it.

I looked at the floor. Then up.

I turned to the kitchen, poured what was left of the housewarming bottle, and handed him a glass. We drank in silence.

"It was so sudden. I know she had cancer, but she never let it show. Swear I had more time."

“There was pain in her eyes...” he said softly. “She hid it well. I tried to help with chores and groceries. Just the small things.”

I looked at his porch. His chair was angled slightly toward the house. It was as if it hadn’t moved an inch since I left.

A wave of guilt tightened my throat. I’d told her “next week,” like there would always be time. But I knew better.

I remembered her voice. Soft. Steady. Patient. The kind that made you think there’d always be time. There wasn’t.

He rested a hand on my shoulder. Heavy. “She’s at peace now. And you? You’re doing right by her, keeping this place. Even if it doesn’t feel like it yet.”

I smiled, tired. “Thanks.”

I poured the last of the drink and let the silence settle in.

The kitchen timer ticked. Once.

I stared at the chair. The cross. The dust.

Then the phone buzzed. And just like that, the weight shifted. Not gone—just moved aside.

“Please excuse me. I’ve got to take this,” I said, stepping away as Mr. Grayson nodded and let himself out. The door shut quietly, but the weight of his words didn’t.

I glanced at the kitchen timer again.

It ticked.

Then waited.

Just long enough for me to wonder if it ever stopped at all.

Or if it was just counting the seconds I was wasting.

I could still hear her voice. Tired. Disappointed. The kind that didn't need words to say everything I already feared.

The house wasn't empty. It was full of everything I tried not to remember.

I took a deep breath. "Hey, Jason."

"Buddy, I got something huge for you."

Jason was always hustling, but there was no hype this time—only raw excitement.

"Okay, hit me with it," I said.

"That new restaurant everyone's hyped about? They need you. Their marketing team bailed one too many times, and they were canned."

Jason's tone wasn't hype. It was still. This felt real.

"Casa di Oro?"

"Yup. Ten locations. You crush this, you're in."

"What's the timeline?"

He hesitated. “That’s the catch. Two days. Photos, copy, graphics. The whole package.”

My chest tightened. “Two days? For everything?”

“That’s right,” he said. “So, you in?”

I was too deep in the hole to back out. But every gig felt like another shovel of dirt tossed over my head.

I paused. The wood creaked as I leaned back, eyeing the stack of unpaid bills.

A nine-to-five sounded nice—for a second. Then I remembered who I am. And who I’m not.

“I’ll do it.” The words hit before I could stop them.

“Knew it. You’ll crush it. Took some serious selling to get you in. Oh, and my cut’s the usual 15% after three months.”

I sighed. “That’s fine. I’ll make it work.” That was classic Jason. Always there to save you from drowning, then billing you for the life preserver.

“Great! Hey, I’m heading into a meeting. I’ll have them send over the details soon. You got this, buddy. Talk later.”

“Talk to you later.” I hung up.

If this didn’t work...

The bills sat like weights on the table. Thin cracks lined the far wall, like veins under pale skin.

How long until the house gave up pretending it still wanted me here?

I forced the thought down, tossed my phone onto the desk, rubbed my eyes, and laughed. Two days to pull this off. Tight but manageable. It had to be.

I opened my laptop. The buzz of adrenaline started to override the weight of doubt. “Thanks, Jason,” I muttered, half-smiling. The moment the screen lit up, I began prepping my tools.

Minutes later, the email arrived.

This was it.

I clicked.

One glance and my stomach dropped.

Photos of the restaurant. Staff headshots. Interior and exterior angles. The copy required a comprehensive write-up on the restaurant’s concept, the chef’s background, and a detailed breakdown of the menu.

Quotes pulled. Graphics formatted. Menu done. All polished. All perfect.

In two days.

I scrolled up and down the list, hoping I’d misread something. I hadn’t. I was staring up at an avalanche that had already triggered.

I leaned back and exhaled slowly. “Thanks, Jason,” I muttered again, as if thanks could hold back a freight train at full speed.

It wasn't his fault. Jason had always gone to bat for me and got me loyal clients. Covered me more than once. But he always soft-sold the chaos. This was a warhead behind a Post-it.

Jason believed in me. That was the curse. His faith meant the chaos was mine to own.

One wrong step, and I wouldn't miss a deadline—I'd trigger the blast radius.

I ran a hand through my hair, eyes locked on the screen. "Focus. It's not impossible. Just rigged, tilted, and set to explode."

I'd lost sleep for gigs before, but this one? Might end up on r/nosleep—for the chronically stressed, the insomniacs, and the unlucky fools like me who tick both boxes.

Two attachments sat under the email: "Social Media Templates." I braced for the usual junk. Shockingly, the templates were decent, more than I'd expected. For once, they helped. The marketing team was at least good for something, a luxury rarely found with the marketers who leave you a week before your grand opening. Thanks to them, I will get four hours instead of none.

I started to build a checklist, but it was trying to plug holes in a sinking ship. No matter how fast I moved, the tide kept rising. And if one thing slipped... I didn't want to think about it.

"First things first," I said under my breath, grabbing my keys. The marathon was on.

The gas station was five minutes out. I didn't remember the drive, only that I was suddenly standing in front of the fridge.

I needed my ol' reliable.

Bolt-Action. Matte gray can. Blocky, stencil font. A yellow and blue lightning bolt across the label. It looked like it belonged on the side of a tank.

I grabbed three.

At checkout, the cashier barely looked up as they did the transaction.

“Late night?”

“Yeah.” I set them down.

They handed me the receipt.

As I reached for my card, something caught my eye. There was a mole under their left eye. I’d been here a hundred times. That mole wasn’t there before.

“Everything good?” they asked.

“Yeah.” I tapped my card, grabbed the cans, and walked out. The feeling followed me to the door.

—

I pulled into the driveway. The streetlights cast long shadows over the pavement.

Mr. Grayson was taking out the trash. My old friend. My “new” neighbor.

I shut off the car and headed towards him.

“Trash day’s tomorrow? I’ve been so out of it lately.”

We used to talk all the time when I was a kid. Funny how life circles back.

“I didn’t say this earlier, but you’re looking good for your age, Mr. Grayson. You’ve only aged a day or two since I left.”

He smiled—dry, thin. There was something odd in his eyes. Still. Like a photo paused mid-blink.

“Staying active keeps the rust off.”

We laughed.

“Busy night?” he nodded toward the cans.

“Yeah. Big project due soon. I’ll be burning the midnight oil.”

He chuckled. “I know how that goes. There’s always work that refuses to finish itself.”

“Tell me about it. I’ve stared at my screen so long I’m starting to see pixels.”

He laughed again. “Careful. You might turn into one.”

I smiled, “I’ll try my best.”

There was silence between us. Not awkward. Just quiet. Part of me wanted to stay and talk more. Maybe reconnect. But the clock was louder than the moment.

“I should get back to it,” I said.

“Good luck.”

“Thanks. Have a good night.”

“You too.”

Inside, the house swallowed me again. Stale air, dim light, no distractions.

I cracked open another Bolt Action. Same hiss. Same synthetic fire. Same borrowed time.

My mind kept wandering back to the deadline. Two days. I could do it, but every passing hour reminded me how little time was left.

I dove in.

The hours that had passed felt like minutes. The relentless glow of my computer screen kept me company as the clock ticked past 3 a.m. I took a deep breath and leaned back in my chair to take blink breaks to keep my eyes from drying out. Some tasks were finally checked off the list, photos were edited, and a rough draft was started.

Photos were done. Copy? A mess. The mountain loomed, waiting for me to break. I forced myself to keep typing.

The silence pressed in. No distractions. No excuses. Just the computer buzzing in my ear. The chair groaned with the same exhaustion I couldn't voice. I glanced at my phone, briefly considering taking a break to scroll through something mindless, but I shook it off. Focus.

The documents for the restaurant's background were half-written, the chef's bio just a mess of scattered notes, and the menu breakdown... well, that hadn't even started. I felt the familiar weight of stress settling on my shoulders: another sip, another moment of forced clarity.

I stared at the list again. I wasn't even halfway through.

A dull ache started pulsing at my temples. I rubbed the back of my neck, leaning over the keyboard.

"Just finish the draft," I muttered to myself. "Then you can crash for a bit."

An unusually loud creak broke through, echoing for several seconds. It was not the usual creaks, pops, and cracks I had grown accustomed to over the last week. The creak lingered in the air longer than it should have, leaving a heavy silence in its wake. My ears strained, waiting for another sound, any sound. Nothing. Just the faint hum of the computer.

I exhaled, forcing a slight chuckle. **It's just the house.** The place was old and made constant noises. *When this job is done, I'll fix the place up.* I reassured myself as the tension in my shoulders eased.

I forced a breath, rolled my shoulders, and dove back into the draft.

The draft was done—barely. I hit save, leaning back in my chair. My head was throbbing as the faint buzzing of the computer screen seemed to pulse in time with it. I glanced at the clock.

5 a.m. already!

I set my alarm for two hours, ensuring it was loud and would repeat every five minutes. That's all I'd allow myself tonight, just enough to keep me going.

I slowly dragged myself to bed, my body aching from sitting too long. My mind raced around, thinking of everything still left to be done with a balance of confidence and worry. Soon after I lay down and my head made contact with the pillow, I was out like a light.

The clock went off two hours later, displaying 7:15 a.m. I rubbed my eyes to shake off the fog that clung to my brain, but it refused to let go. My body felt sluggish as if I were walking through water.

It wasn't sleep. Just a half-conscious drift where time didn't pass—it *leaked*. Like a faucet left dripping in a house no one lived in anymore.

I sat up and glanced around the room. Everything was in its place, but something about the silence felt... too thick. The quiet you only notice when you're running on fumes. A low hum rolled through the room. Not mechanical, more like breath. Not loud enough to chase, but just present enough to follow.

I shook it off as I dragged myself back to the desk.

The unopened *Bolt Action* can was waiting for me. As I cracked it open, the hiss of carbonation cut through the quiet room. I took a sip, letting the sweetness jolt my senses awake. There was still so much left to do. My fatigued vision sharpened as I felt the caffeine course through my veins.

I pulled up the document and skimmed through what I'd written earlier. The words felt distant as if they belonged to someone else. That heavy silence was still there.

The hum remained, but it wasn't loud; it settled into the walls, like something had just stopped whispering.

I stopped. Listened.

Nothing.

I shook it off.

I don't have time for this.

I had work to do.

By late morning, I had half a passable draft. The chef's story was taking shape. Menu blurbs were getting there. Photos were next.

I pulled out my phone and tapped Kyle's name.

Kyle hadn't been doing photography long, but he was a natural. Some people spent years chasing the eye for light and framing. He just had it. The shots always came out better than I described, like he saw what I meant before I finished saying it.

It barely rang twice before he picked up. "Hey, what's up, man?"

"Hey, Kyle. You free tomorrow at 4?"

He gave a pause.

"Saturday? You sure know how to pick 'em."

"I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important."

"You always say that, right before sending me into Photoshop hell."

"You're a wizard with a lens. Just a little magic this time."

"Last time, the magic came with food poisoning and thirty gigs of chaos."

"Yeah, but it looked amazing."

"Fine. I'm in. Just don't expect me to smile about it."

"Of course. Thanks, man." I rattled off the address and leaned back in my chair. "Let's meet around 3:30. I need 'em polished and uploaded by 7, or I'm screwed."

Kyle gave a light-hearted laugh on the other end. “You and these last-minute gigs, man. You know you’re getting charged extra for this kind of rush.”

I laughed. “Yeah, I know. This is a big project for me, and I’ll make it worthwhile for you.”

“You got it,” he said. “Just don’t die before then.”

“No promises.”

The photo shoot was locked in—a huge step in the right direction.

I went above and beyond to ensure my clients’ marketing captured their atmosphere, history, and the story behind it. With Kyle locked in for the shoot, I still needed the perfect model to pull it together.

That was Jessica.

She always made things look easy.

Even when I knew they weren’t.

Even when I knew she carried plenty of her own weight.

I knew she’d say yes, even on short notice.

She always showed up for the camera, and somehow, for me.

She always smiled through tension.

That was her tell—like the world never touched her. But I knew better.

With her in front of the camera, the restaurant's story would come to life in ways that static décor and food shots never could. Her warmth could turn a sterile corporate franchise with a modern interior into something homely and inviting. She is exactly what the restaurant needed to tell its story.

“You always ask when it's impossible,” she said, but with a half-smile on the line. “I'll call after my shift.”

It was a yes, that's all I needed.

The perfect photo shoot was scheduled. I needed to complete everything within 36 hours. The hours blurred into each other, the sound of my fingers tapping the keyboard blending with the occasional sip of caffeine.

When I looked up again, it was already early evening, and the remaining work was piling up as fast as I'd checked it off. I tilted the can as I tried to shake the last drops out of it, but I could feel my body running on fumes, desperate for more fuel to add to the fire.

I needed to take another trip to the gas station.

The walk to the car felt mechanical.

The cool air reminded me that life still existed beyond the screen—

but it didn't cut through the fog.

The gas station hadn't changed.

Same flickering lights. Same low fluorescent hum.

The cashier stood just a little straighter this time, glancing up as I approached with another handful of *Bolt Action* cans.

“Back for more?” he asked, their tone light and polite.

“Yeah, work’s been nonstop,” I replied, barely glancing up as I set the cans down.

As the cashier scanned the cans, I handed over my card. Something caught my attention when I glanced up at him. A faint blur seemed to shift, like a ripple across the edge of their jawline, like a reflection in disturbed water. The shimmer felt familiar, reminding me of a photo that had been edited one filter too far. My hand gripped the counter without meaning to.

It wasn’t light distortion. It was precision—as if something had decided what I was allowed to see.

Was it the flickering lights above, or was my brain finally giving in?

I glanced at the cashier’s jawline again. The lines still seemed... off.

I blinked hard. Too many hours staring at a screen, retouching photos, editing faces. It was starting to bleed into real life.

My overworked brain was playing tricks on me. That’s all.

I grabbed the bag and turned to leave.

“Take care,” the cashier said.

I kept waiting for the world to make sense again.

Maybe I wasn't losing it.

Maybe I just saw too much... and the world blinked first.

Chapter 2

I was glued to the screen. Progress was slow but steady—the hum of the monitor drilled into my skull.

The extra caffeine kept me sharp enough to piece together the last few bits of the restaurant's background. Fear crept up my spine as the deadline loomed closer. Every hour was another step toward failure. My mind flicked between fleeting hope and sharp dread, the weight of the project pressing harder on my chest with each passing minute.

My eyes burned from staring at the screen, and exhaustion began to creep in again. I needed a break and to stretch my legs. I grabbed my empty energy drink cans and went outside to toss them and take in some fresh air.

As I dropped off the cans, I saw Mr. Grayson sitting comfortably on his porch. The rocking chair beneath him creaked softly as he moved. It was as if he had become part of the house itself. The chair had seen better days, its faded wooden arms worn smooth from years of use, but it suited him, giving off a nostalgic vibe.

His porch was small but tidy, with potted plants carefully arranged along the edges. Each one was vibrant and well-kept. Mr. Grayson always took pride in his surroundings. A well-worn side table sat beside him, a book resting face down on it as if he'd been reading just before I approached.

He looked to be in his eighties. Sun-worn, steady, with deep-set laugh lines and skin shaped by decades outdoors. A man who'd worked hard... and never stopped. The glint in his eyes wasn't youthful. It was alert. Measuring.

He was dressed in a faded green flannel shirt fraying at the cuffs, tucked loosely into a pair of worn jeans. A pair of well-used boots rested on the porch beneath him, the kind of boots that had seen more than their fair share of work but still had many miles left, like Mr. Grayson. His hands were calloused and veined, holding a cup of steaming tea.

"Looks like you're working hard again today," he said with a knowing nod, his eyes scanning me like he'd seen this scene unfold a hundred times. His voice carried the kind of warmth that put you at ease.

“Yeah, big project for a new restaurant in town,” I replied, tossing the cans into the bin near his porch. “They’ve got me on a tight deadline, so I’ve been burning the candle at both ends.”

He gave a soft chuckle, a laugh lined with the wisdom of someone who had once pushed himself just as hard. “That’s great, but take it from me. Work’s important, but keeping up with your health is key.”

I nodded, feeling the exhaustion in my bones. “Yeah, I should probably take it easy after this.”

Mr. Grayson lightly patted his chest, his gesture casual yet weighty. “Trust me, don’t wait until you’re old and worn out like me to figure that out. Take it from this geezer. You’re only young once.”

I grinned, but something strange caught my eye as he smiled back. A faint shimmer, almost like the blur I’d seen at the gas station. It appeared near his jawline, flickering briefly before it vanished. My smile faltered slightly as I blinked, unsure if it had happened, as there wasn’t a light to explain it away this time.

The lines of his face were just a bit off, like a screen glitching right before it blacks out. I blinked, breath catching. Everything seemed to blur for a second, like a camera out of focus. When I blinked again, the shimmer was gone, leaving only the steady gaze of Mr. Grayson, as warm and calm as ever. The shimmer wasn’t random—it *felt like a blink*. Like something hiding just beneath the surface.

Had I really seen it? I could feel my pulse quicken, my palms cold and clammy. The air felt thicker somehow, almost suffocating, as if the house was holding its breath.

I glanced away quickly, trying to shake off the odd sensation creeping up my spine. My overworked brain was playing tricks again. Too much caffeine and too little sleep. Still, the similarity to the gas station cashier gnawed at me, refusing to fade completely.

“You alright?” Mr. Grayson asked, his voice smooth as ever, a touch of concern in his tone.

“Yeah, yeah, just thinking about all the work I still have to do,” I said, forcing a small smile.

He smiled that easy, knowing smile, the one older folks get when they’ve seen enough to understand what’s coming next. “That’s great, but remember, balance is key. I know overworked when I see it.”

We shared a few more pleasantries before he waved and slowly rose from his chair. As he moved toward his door, I couldn’t shake the image of that brief shimmer.

His words lingered longer than I expected, as did that odd flicker, nagging at the back of my mind as I headed back inside. I glanced at my door before approaching it, wondering when I’d last taken a break longer than five minutes. My neck was stiff, and my head ached from the hours spent in front of the screen. Maybe he was right. But I still had so much left to finish.

I headed back inside, rubbing the back of my neck and trying to push the thought away. Another couple of hours, I told myself—just a few more. As I glanced at his porch one last time, everything looked picture-perfect.

The night was peaceful, the cool air providing a refreshing jolt that carried me through the final stretch. With each breath, I felt clarity return, a second wind sharpening my focus. I leaned into the work, every keystroke flowing effortlessly. The early morning silence became my ally; the world outside slept while I focused on my task.

By the time 3 a.m. rolled around, I found myself surprisingly ahead of the curve. The finish line was in sight, and for the first time all week, I let myself hope. The chef’s bio and the restaurant’s history came together in ways I hadn’t expected; the menu practically designed itself.

I rode that momentum for the next couple of hours, determined not to let the energy slip away. For the first time in days, I didn’t feel the weight of the deadline pulling me down into a shallow grave.

By 6 a.m., I'd written more than I'd hoped. The foundation of the project was solid enough to build upon. I stood up, stretched, and took in the sight of what I'd built. It was all coming together.

I crashed for a few hours. Woke up groggy, but I jolted out of bed. After a quick shower and half a granola bar, I was back out the door.

Today wasn't just another step; it was when everything would fall into place.

Saturday afternoon crashed into me like a tidal wave. The photo shoot loomed ahead. Sleepless nights and mounting stress caught up with me, but I shoved it down. Confidence swelled up inside because I knew I had this.

This wasn't just another project—it was **the** project. My best work yet. The contract that would push my career into the stratosphere. I could practically see the accolades. I was so close. The photo shoot. A few final edits. A quick polish. After that, it would all be over. Finally.

I pulled up to the restaurant at 3:25 p.m., eager to get ahead on setup. Adrenaline buzzed through me from the endless caffeine and the feeling of everything lining up perfectly. Jessica was on her way. Kyle, my reliable, never-fail photographer, was supposed to show up any minute.

Every detail was planned. Soon, I'd wrap this project up in a neat little bow, hand it over, and finally collapse into sleep, knowing my bills were covered, my reputation was locked in, and my future was secured. *This was going to be flawless.*

I glanced at my reflection in the restaurant window, smoothing my hair without thinking. *What am I doing? She's not here for you.* But the nerves wouldn't settle.

Jessica pulled up just as the nerves began to crest. Calm, composed, always five steps ahead—she had a way of showing up right when everything felt like it might break. She made chaos feel navigable, like maybe I wasn't as alone in this as I thought.

But I couldn't ignore the heat rising in my face every time I glanced at her. I turned quickly, pretending to focus on the equipment. *Professional. Stay professional.*

3:45. No sign of Kyle.

Jessica glanced up from her phone, the question forming on her lips. "Where's Kyle?" Her usual bright tone carried a flicker of concern.

I pulled out my phone, staring at it as if I could wait for a text or missed call to appear. *Nothing.* My stomach tightened. *Of course, this would happen today. Why wouldn't it?*

"I'll call him," I muttered, trying to sound casual, but the tension laced through every word.

It rang. And rang. *Voicemail.* I tried again. *Voicemail.*

Dread clawed its way up my spine with every unanswered ring. *This cannot be happening. Not today. Not now.*

That's when Sharron, the restaurant owner, stepped out, her steps heavy, each thud a countdown to disaster. I could feel her eyes narrowing, *judging me*, as she reassessed whether I was the right person for this project. She was about to rip me apart.

"Is everything alright?" Her voice was polite, but her eyes? Sharp. Ready to strike.

I forced a smile, swallowing the panic that threatened to choke me. "Yeah, just waiting on the photographer. He'll be here any minute."

Her eyebrow shot up, unimpressed. "My team's been prepping for hours. *You promised* to deliver today. Is that still happening?"

Deliver. The word hit me like a lead weight, crashing into my chest. “Yes, absolutely,” I said, strained but firm. “It’s all under control.”

Her stare lingered a moment too long, longer than I could handle. Without another word, she turned and went back inside. I inhaled deeply, trying to hold onto my composure. Jessica stood calmly beside me; her presence was the only thing keeping me from losing it altogether.

I redialed Kyle. I gripped my phone so tightly I thought it might break. Soon after, my phone buzzed in my hand, “Kyle! Where are you?”

“Hey man, sorry I couldn’t call sooner,” Kyle’s voice came through the speaker, sounding strained but clear.

“Kyle! What happened?” I asked, barely keeping the panic out of my voice.

“I slipped while carrying my gear, broke my arm, and my camera. I’m sitting in the ER now, waiting to be seen.”

My heart dropped into my stomach. “You’re kidding. Today? *Of all days?*”

“I know, man. I wish I could help, but I’m out of commission. They gave me something for the pain, so I’m hanging in there, but I’m stuck.”

I clenched my jaw, fighting back the frustration like a dam about to break. “You’ve never missed a shoot.”

“I’m sorry to leave you hanging, but I know you. You’ll make it out in the end,”

He sounded apologetic but exhausted. I could imagine him sitting in a sterile hospital chair, trying to make things right even though he was completely sidelined.

I sighed. The pressure mounted, suffocating me. “I appreciate you calling. Just focus on getting better, alright?”

I hung up. The weight of it all pressed in from every side. *Everything* was falling apart. Again. My hands shook. Panic was taking over.

I glanced at Jessica. She didn’t need an explanation. “Kyle isn’t coming,” I muttered, barely able to keep my voice steady.

She flashed a confident grin and stepped closer. Her hand rested on my shoulder, grounding me. “We’ve still got time. You’ll figure it out. You always do.”

She always knew when to step in, never asking for permission, never demanding attention.

Will I? I nodded, trying to calm the storm inside, but the truth hit me hard. No photographer. Cracks are forming beneath my feet. Sharron’s judgment burned through me from inside the restaurant. *This is not how it was supposed to go.* My pulse hammered so hard I couldn’t hear straight.

I forced a breath, but it caught halfway. Like I was drowning—and my lungs hadn’t noticed yet. I had to fix this. Now.

My jaw was clenched so tight I thought my teeth might crack. My fingers trembled as I scrolled through my contacts. There had to be someone. Anyone. Tony had come through before. He would again.

The phone rang, echoing in my ears before Tony’s voice cut through. “Hey, what’s up?”

“Tony, I have a huge restaurant shoot and need your photo magic. Everything’s already set, and I’ll pay whatever you need. Can you make it?”

He sighed. I already knew the answer. “Man, I’d love to help, but it’s prom night. I’m slammed. Back-to-back shoots.”

Of course. Prom night. Why wouldn’t it be?

I swallowed the heat rising in my throat. “Right. Thanks anyway.”

His “Good luck” barely landed before the call dropped.

The silence hit like a freight train. My chest tightened. Every breath scraped like sandpaper.

There has to be someone.

I glanced through the restaurant window. Sharron stalked across the dining floor, her gaze slicing toward the door—each step a silent warning. Time was bleeding out.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, fighting the pressure building behind my eyes. I scrolled to Sarah’s name. She’d always come through.

Straight to voicemail.

I ended the call, fingers stiff, grip too tight. *Think. Move.*

I opened my browser and searched for freelance photographers. Clicked the first highly rated result.

After a few rings, a man picked up. “Studio 10 Photography, how can I help?”

“I need a photographer. Tonight. Restaurant shoot. I’ll pay top dollar. Just tell me you’re free.”

He chuckled, already sympathetic. “I’d love to help, but it’s prom night. I’m booked solid.”

Of course. “Got it.” I hung up before my voice cracked.

I hit the next number.

They were booked. So was the next. And the next.

Desperation set in. I was practically begging people to take my money.

The final call ended the same. “Prom night. Sorry.”

I hung up.

Five calls. Five dead ends. Every photographer in town was out capturing teenagers on their big night while my career fell apart in real time.

I leaned into the cold brick. The weight cracked something inside me.

This wasn’t how it was supposed to go.

Everything had been perfect.

Perfect opportunity. Perfect setup. Perfect plan.

But perfection doesn’t mean prepared.

Jessica stepped in. “I’ve seen enough shoots. I know what we need. I don’t have Kyle’s equipment, but we’ll make something happen.”

Her voice cut through the chaos, her confidence sparking a flicker of hope. *Could this work?* I hesitated, but what choice did I have?

“Let’s do it,” I said, hoping the spark would be enough to see us through.

Sharron stepped out, eyes scanning the scene like she was already preparing the fallout. She didn’t even need to say anything for me to know that I was hanging by a thread.

“Everything okay?” she asked. Her tone seemed neutral, but the weight of expectation behind it hit like a brick.

I straightened, the cold brick wall pressing against my back, trying to mask the anxiety gnawing at me. The murmur of customers inside the restaurant mixed with the distant clatter of dishes, grounding me in a moment I desperately wanted to escape. “There was an accident with the photographer, but I’ve got it handled.

Her eyes narrowed, unconvinced. She crossed her arms and tapped her foot, as if sharpening the blade with every second I wasted.

My stomach twisted. I swallowed hard. “I’ll do the shoot myself.”

Her brow shot up. “With a phone? You’re serious?”

“Jessica and I have worked together before. She knows how to work a shoot. I’ll make it work.” I was grasping at straws at this point.

Sharron’s eyes drilled into me, her gaze heavy with doubt. For a split second, I was sure she’d call the whole thing off. Instead, she gave a curt nod, her lips a tight line. “You better. No more mistakes.”

I nodded back, sharper this time. “We’ll get started right away.”

The restaurant's dim lighting cast long shadows inside, turning the polished tables into dark, reflective surfaces. It was the perfect setting, but I felt I was about to ruin it. Kyle would've crushed this, but I was here with a phone, pretending I knew what I was doing. My phone's camera lacked the sharpness and depth that Kyle's equipment provided.

Jessica stood near the soft glow of the hanging lights, her face calm, her body language saying, *I've got this*. She shot me a smile, as if she believed it. Like I should, too.

I forced belief for a second. I held up my phone and snapped a few photos. My palms were sweaty, my fingers clumsy on the screen. The lighting wasn't proper; every angle felt forced, but I kept going. *I had to*.

Sharron's presence was an added weight on my back, her eyes watching every move, tightening the noose around my neck.

"Jessica, move a little to the left," I said, my voice tight. She shifted smoothly, professional as ever.

I fought to contain the toxic emotions bubbling inside me. Flipping through the images deepened the pit in my stomach.

They weren't just bad.

They looked like proof I had no business being here.

Harsh lighting. Washed-out color.

I lied to myself—"I can fix this in post." I couldn't.

These photos weren't salvageable.

Neither was I.

I pocketed my phone, the weight of failure dragging me down. "That's it. We're done."

Sharron's face gave nothing away, but I could feel the doubt radiating from her. I needed to sell this, somehow. "I'll have everything delivered by midnight," I said, trying to sound like I had any control left. "Thanks for your time."

Her nod was slow, deliberate, and dismissive. "Make sure they're just right."

As Sharron turned and walked away, the full weight of the situation pressed down, suffocating me.

Jessica stepped closer. "You gave it everything," she said, voice soft but certain. "That's more than most."

It still wasn't enough.

The words echoed in my mind, refusing to fade. I swallowed hard, choking down the truth.

"Yeah. I'll see you later, Jess."

I didn't know where she went.

I hadn't thanked her.

And with everything unraveling, she already felt out of reach.

I barely registered her leaving as I stared down at the screen. My imminent failure loomed before me, each image a painful reminder of how far I had fallen.

This wasn't going to be enough. Not even close.

Everything slipped away, replaced by a hollow numbness as I climbed into my car. The engine's quiet hum was the only sound as the cold realization finally settled in. I was out of ideas and quickly running out of hope. I stared through the windshield, the world outside blurred by exhaustion and something else I couldn't name.

Something was off. Not just the light. Not just the photos.

Me.

I slumped into my chair and stared blankly at the screen as soon as I arrived home. I'd already started the draft for the campaign and touched up the other elements of the project, but these photos were crucial. No matter how many photo editing tricks, there was no saving low-quality images from a phone camera, not when I was already under the gun.

I ran a hand through my hair and pulled out my phone, scrolling through my contacts again. I needed advice and maybe a miracle. I dialed Jason's number, hoping he'd pick up.

"Hey, how's it going?" Jason answered on the second ring, his usual upbeat tone making me even more stressed.

"Not great, man. The photo shoot bombed. I had to take the shots with my phone because Kyle broke his arm and the camera, and none of the backups were free."

Jason whistled. "Oof. That's rough."

"Yeah, and these photos are unusable. I've tried everything, but I'm out of options. Got any ideas?"

There was a pause on the other end of the line before Jason spoke again. "Actually... yeah, I might have something for you."

"Yeah?" I asked, leaning forward.

"Ever heard of *thispersondoesnotexist.com*?"

I frowned. “No. What is that?”

“It’s this crazy AI website. You can generate realistic faces—people that don’t even exist. I know you need a few headshots, right? You can tweak the photos to make them appear as if they were professionally photographed. My guys have used it for quick turnarounds before.”

A part of me balked at the idea. This wasn’t a shortcut. It was a forgery.

I hesitated. “You think it’ll pass for real?”

“We’ve used it a few times... don’t overthink it. Just touch it up a little here and there, and no one will even know the difference.”

However, when time and options are exhausted, ethics become blurred. I needed this to work. I sighed, rubbing the back of my neck. Desperation was setting in, and there were not many options left. “Alright. Send me the link.”

“Done. Let me know how it goes,” Jason said. “Good luck, man.”

“Thanks,” I muttered, hanging up the phone.

A few seconds later, the email arrived.

I clicked it, and my browser opened to the site.

A soft **tick** came from my speakers—sharp, deliberate.

Nothing else was open. Nothing else should’ve made a sound.

A picture-perfect face stared back at me, a woman who wasn’t real but looked convincing enough. *That’s scary good.* I refreshed, and the next image was of a middle-aged man with a wide, toothy smile and crow’s feet around his eyes.

My thoughts spiraled. Every second wasted tightened the noose around my neck. Could I really fake this? Would anyone believe it? If this failed, so did I.

Each time I refreshed, a new face appeared—each striking, distinct, almost alive. These weren't just random composites. They had weight. History. Character. Old, young, every race, every size, every emotion. Some looked like they'd just walked off a movie set. Others looked like they'd lived entire, complicated lives.

None of them were what I needed. My frustration built with every click. The chances of finding an AI model resembling Jessica were slim to none. How could a program capture her sharp cheekbones, the effortless confidence in her gaze, or that subtle curl in her smile? It felt impossible.

Jessica had this rare, balanced look: striking but not overly polished, and every face I scrolled past was either too perfect, too stiff, or just wrong. I doubted I'd find anything close enough to pass, especially with the pressure of the deadline suffocating me.

Click. A woman with straight black hair and an intense gaze appeared. Perfectly symmetrical. But she didn't have the natural ease that Jessica had. She wasn't it.

Face number 52. A woman with glossy blonde hair and a smile that looked frozen—too perfect, too rigid. Her skin, porcelain-smooth, felt eerie in its flawlessness. I stared at her for a moment before moving on.

Face 67. Another miss. She had a slight smirk, almost human, but her eyes were empty, hollow, doll-like. A chill ran down my spine. *Just the algorithm,* I reminded myself, clicking away.

Face 90. A woman in her forties, with deep lines marking her face. But they were too evenly spaced, too precise. Her gaze was vacant. Lifeless. I scrolled past her, as the house of cards that was my career was getting ready to collapse. I needed something real, something that could capture Jessica's essence. These faces were just... off.

Click. More faces. Dozens more. Some were good. Really good. I tweaked the features and adjusted the shadows, but still, nothing. There was always something slightly off. Too much expression, too little life, or something I couldn't quite pinpoint.

"This is hopeless," I muttered, the weight of defeat pressing down harder.

Finding someone who captured her essence? A gamble when I needed a miracle.

My fingers hovered. One more click. Then another. Then another.

I was on face 152 now.

Click.

I froze.

No. That wasn't—

There he was.

Smiling.

Staring back at me from the screen.

That same easy, polite grin I'd seen a hundred times—on the porch, in the hallway, just last night.

This can't be right.

I blinked. Once. Twice.

Still there.

My hand hovered over the mouse.

My body already knew. My mind was still catching up.

“That’s... not possible.”

I leaned in.

The smile didn’t move.

But something in me did.

I knew that face.

The soft lines around his eyes.

The sun-worn skin.

The weathered calm of a man who’d spent a lifetime outside.

It was Mr. Grayson.

Not similar.

Not close.

Him.

My breath hitched. My thoughts scattered like marbles.

Logic scrambled to hold me together, but something had already cracked.

This wasn't random.

This wasn't a coincidence.

This wasn't possible.

My neighbor doesn't exist.

Not according to this site.

Chapter 3

My heart slammed against my ribs. Mr. Grayson's face stared back at me on a website that only made fake people.

This couldn't be real. A glitch in the Matrix, surely? Desperate, I snapped a few photos and saved his image to my desktop. I needed proof. Something real. Proof that I wasn't just cracking under stress or exhaustion.

The longer I stared, the more it felt like the screen was staring back. Each pixel dug deeper, like it was tunneling into my mind.

His familiar features were all present. Mr. Grayson's wrinkles, soft smile, and sun-kissed skin were all perfectly captured. How was this possible? How could a man, the neighbor I see daily, not exist? It couldn't be rationalized.

And if it couldn't be rationalized, it couldn't be dismissed.

The deeper I thought about it, the further my thoughts spiraled. I wasn't sure which scared me more: what I was seeing or the creeping thought that maybe, just maybe, I was losing my grip on reality.

I ripped my eyes off the screen. As disturbing as it was to see Mr. Grayson's face, there was no time to dwell on it. I had to find Jessica's replacement. Fast. The deadline pressure was pressing down, and I couldn't afford to fall apart now. I clicked through more faces, trying to shake off the lingering discomfort.

My hands trembled. I forced them still. There was no room for hesitation. If this job failed, *I* failed.

Another batch. Another face. Nothing real. A face that could carry this campaign and give me a shot at saving my career. Then I saw her.

She wasn't Jessica. But in her eyes was that same fire Jessica had when no one was watching.

The AI woman belonged in those photos—like she'd always been part of them, not just replacing Jessica but rewriting her.

Could this actually work?

It still felt insane, but sanity hadn't paid my rent. Ethics didn't cover electricity.

I don't hate AI. I hate how easy it makes it to forget what real effort costs. Effort. Ownership. The kind you bleed for.

Faking something this personal felt like cheating. But cheating was safer than failure.

The moral high ground could wait. Survival couldn't.

"Alright, you're it," I whispered to the face on the screen, as if she could somehow hear me.

I downloaded the image and dove into editing. My hands shook, but my movements were deliberate and focused. My heart pounded in my chest, but with each adjustment, each brush stroke, a strange sense of hope crept in. The face blended seamlessly with the body from earlier shots. The lighting wasn't perfect, but I could tweak it just enough to make it work.

I worked like a surgeon running out of time, stitching together a lie that had to breathe.

It wasn't perfect. But it passed. And that made it worse.

I buried the guilt beneath the weight of deadlines and expenses, but it lingered, creeping back with every edit I made. Survival demanded this, but my conscience wasn't so quickly silenced.

Finally, I sat back and looked at the final product. It was... disturbingly real. The AI-generated face and my edits slipped into the scene with unnatural ease, like she'd always been meant to be there, *even more than Jessica.*

And that was the part I hated most.

It looked professional. Clean. Believable. Something I could actually send in.

By 11:45 a.m., I had put everything together. The social posts, the copy, the menu, and the newly finished images. My hand hovered over the mouse for a moment before I hit send. Once I submitted everything, there was no way to undo it.

My finger hovered—then surrendered.

The project was finally done. Everything was polished and professional, ready for tomorrow's big opening.

I hit send. And nothing. No relief. Just a hollow thud where pride once lived.

My instincts used to matter. My eye was supposed to be the edge.

This worked. And I hated that it did.

The job was done. My fate was sealed.

The cover stared back—**flawless, silent, and unfamiliar.**

It looked like it belonged to someone who never doubted themselves. Someone I didn't recognize anymore.

It didn't feel like it was showing *my* work anymore.

Maybe it wasn't.

It didn't matter. It was done.

Whether she knew or cared, Sharron was judge, jury, and executioner for my freelancing career.

I glanced once more at the folder containing the photo of Mr. Grayson.

The longer I looked, the less I understood what I was looking at.

I minimized the site.

The image stayed in my mind.

I told myself I'd deal with it later.

But I already knew I wouldn't.

I just needed sleep.

At least, that's what I told myself.

That night, I tossed and turned. My mind kept circling back to Mr. Grayson's face on that site. The endless possibilities gripped me. *Did he not exist? Had he ever? Was the man I grew up next to a lie? Were there others on the site that didn't exist either?* The thoughts continued to gnaw at me. *What if he had some hidden agenda?*

Each question pulled me deeper into uncertainty. I soon realized I was punishing myself by obsessing over things I couldn't control. Sleep was the only thing I needed to concern myself with now. After several minutes, I was knocked out cold.

I woke up feeling refreshed, something foreign to me over the last few months. I wasn't sure if I had failed or succeeded, but the weight of that project had finally lifted off my shoulders. Stretching, I headed to the kitchen. A warm cup of coffee was all I needed to calm my lingering nerves as the steam grounded me back to reality.

The morning sunlight poured through the kitchen window. It erased the eerie shadows left over from the night before. I nearly laughed it off. But something in me refused to call it a coincidence.

I opened my email account and was finally ready to open Sharron's email, which had arrived hours before. My heart skipped a beat as I opened it, half expecting some criticism or complaint about the photos. Instead, the message was short and to the point:

These are perfect. I was worried when I didn't see the girl you brought with you, but as long as it looks good, I don't care how you got it done. Everything looks incredible. Let's meet next week to discuss some other projects I have in mind. I'll have my team reach out soon.

Sincerely,
Sharron

I exhaled, only then realizing I had been holding my breath. The stress lifted, replaced by dizzying relief. Each time I reread the email, the relief deepened. The project hit the mark. My career was finally back on the track I'd been chasing for years. My conscience gnawed, but I pushed it down. Success was all that mattered. Tonight I was going to celebrate.

I stepped outside to get some fresh air and check for new bills. Luckily, none showed up. The air felt careful, like even the weather didn't want to stir anything. Birds chirped. Kids raced down the street on their bikes.

I expected cold wind or rain.

But the sky was clear again.

Blue. Still. Predictable.

It had been like this for weeks now.

Not dramatic. Too steady.

The world pretended everything was fine.

But underneath, it felt arranged. Like something was holding its breath.

I glanced again at the porch, at the rocking chair that once creaked with a rhythm I grew up hearing.

I should ask him. Demand what happened to the real Mr. Grayson. The man who taught me how to fix what was broken.

My lips parted—then closed again.

Or maybe... I wasn't ready to hear the answer.

He noticed me and waved, the same friendly gesture he gave every morning.

I waved back, forcing a smile, even though the truth weighed heavily. "Morning," he said, that familiar smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

I hadn't seen him since that picture. But now, in the daylight, something in me pulled forward.

"Morning, Mr. Grayson."

He smiled and raised his tea, but something didn't add up. The tea bag tag read *Chamomile*, but I could smell peppermint from where I stood.

I nodded, but the image from that site clung to me like a shadow. "You're always out here at the same time, huh? Got your routine down," I said, trying to sound casual as a tightness coiled in my chest. "That kind of consistency is what I fight for every day," I added with a forced laugh.

Sunlight bathed the porch, shadows crisp beneath every object—except him.

My stomach twisted.

Where the hell was his shadow?

My shadow stretched behind me.

The rocking chair's shadow curled beneath it.

Even the teacup cast one.

But Mr. Grayson—

Nothing.

The sun hit him like it hit everything else. But nothing answered.

No silhouette. Just absence. A refusal.

Like the light knew better than to touch him.

Maybe some things don't disappear. They wait for you to stop looking.

I used to think shadows followed the light. I never thought they could choose to leave.

The light curved. Avoided. Refused.

Like reality itself was trying to forget he was there.

My pulse spiked.

No, no, no. That's not right. It had to be the angle. It had to be. Right?

I shifted slightly to the side, trying to see if it was blocked somehow. Nothing changed.

Mr. Grayson's head tilted ever so slightly. "Something on your mind?"

I pulled in a breath, steadying myself. "No, just stress left over from the project; I did a team's worth of work in just a couple of days."

He chuckled, lifting his tea. “You work too hard, kid. Gotta take care of yourself.”

My breath stuttered.

I forced myself to look at anything else. The newspaper. The teacup. Just not the missing shadow. My eyes lingered for a moment longer on it than they should have. “You’ve been outside a lot more lately,” I said, trying to make it sound like small talk. “Enjoying your retirement?”

Mr. Grayson glanced up as his eyes locked onto mine for just a beat too long. “Yeah,” he said with a slight chuckle. “Weather’s been nice, so why not enjoy every last drop while I can?”

There it was again. Something in the way he spoke made me pause. His words were perfectly reasonable, yet they felt rehearsed as if he were playing a part in a play.

I shifted on my feet, trying to keep the conversation flowing naturally. “Yeah, I get that,” I replied, glancing toward the street. “Quiet suburban mornings are much more calming than the noisy city ones I used to deal with.”

I glanced at the tea bag hanging off the side of the cup. “You always have that same brand,” I said with a half-smile, pointing to the logo. “I see it every morning, but I’ve never tried it. Coffee’s great, but I’ve been thinking about mixing it up.”

Mr. Grayson’s gaze didn’t waver as he raised the cup slightly as if giving a toast. “Just a creature of habit, I suppose,” he said with a grin that felt just a touch too practiced. A wave of unease crept up my spine.

I nodded, trying to match his smile. But the image of him on the site lingered in my mind. “You’ve got your rhythm. Wish I had that kind of balance. One day.”

He didn’t answer right away. Just looked at me.

His gaze didn't blink. His faint smile didn't twitch.

"You notice a lot of things, don't you?" He said it softly, like he wasn't asking. Like he was warning me.

I didn't ask the questions. Maybe I didn't want the answers. Maybe silence felt safer.

Then softer, almost to himself. *"Strange. How quickly people stop asking the right questions."*

I froze in place.

I forced a chuckle, clearing my throat. "Occupational hazard," with an accompanying shrug.

I saw something flicker in his expression—something close to curiosity. He nodded while taking another sip of tea. "I guess it is," he said, his tone even, but his eyes didn't quite match the smile.

"I am finally done with the project and will have a little get-together tonight with some friends. I just wanted to come over and let you know so I don't disturb you too much."

"Don't worry about me; enjoy yourself; you've earned it."

The silence stretched. I nodded. "Enjoy your morning."

"Will do," he called after me as I walked away.

Each step felt heavier than the last. Even as I moved farther away, I couldn't shake the sense of his gaze lingering on me. The breeze brushed my face, but couldn't dispel the unease clinging to me. The world moved on, oblivious to the shift I couldn't ignore.

I stepped back inside, but the air felt different.

Something didn't stay on the porch.

It came back with me.

I tried to understand how things had shifted so far off course.

That uneasy feeling settled like a stone in my gut, heavy and unmoving. I'd known Mr. Grayson for years, but this shadow of suspicion felt alien to my memories of him. I thought of the calm, patient man who never batted an eye when I broke his kitchen window with a baseball. The one who taught me countless lessons while I was growing up.

It hit me like a flashbulb memory—eight years old, that Saturday afternoon, the sound of shattering glass still crisp in my mind.

I was playing baseball with Kyle, pitching while he batted. Every ball I threw, he hit, and it started to get under my skin. Determined to get one past him, I put all my strength behind the next throw.

The ball left my hand too fast. The glass of Mr. Grayson's kitchen window shattered, breaking the calm Saturday afternoon. A pit began to form in my stomach as I realized what I'd done.

Kyle scattered into Grandma's house and left me alone at the crime scene. Typical of him. I wanted to run, too, but guilt and fear held me in place. My feet seemed to sink into the ground as I stared at the shattered glass and waited for the fallout that would come next.

Paralyzed, I couldn't decide whether to join Kyle in hiding or be upfront with Mr. Grayson about what I'd done. My heart pounded as I stared at the gaping hole in his window, the ball seeming destined for destruction.

I hadn't even known him that well back then. He was the quiet neighbor who waved occasionally and kept to himself most of the time, so I had no clue how he would react.

I thought about what might happen next. Mr. Grayson was going to be furious. I'd probably have to pay for the window and maybe get grounded for a month. I swallowed hard, dreading the confrontation.

I stood on his porch, working up the nerve to knock on his door. He beat me to it by opening the door first.

He stood there just looking at me. He wiped his hands on a rag with calm precision as if nothing had happened. His eyes moved from me to the window, then back to me. I braced myself for the worst.

“Now, that’s quite the throw,” he said, his voice as steady as possible.

I blinked, completely thrown off. “I—I’m sorry, Mr. Grayson. I didn’t mean to. It was an accident.”

I was worried when he invited me to see the damage, but I went with him. As we walked further inside, I saw Kyle across the way in my grandmother’s living room, observing us. He was relieved that he wasn’t in my shoes.

Mr. Grayson glanced at the shattered glass from the kitchen window and then at the baseball on his kitchen floor.

“Accidents happen,” he said, walking over and picking up the ball, turning it over in his hand. “Though this one’s more... eventful than most.”

I stared at him, waiting for the anger, the lecture, something. But there was none of that. He just smiled a calm, patient smile that didn’t match the disaster I’d caused.

“You’re not... mad?” I asked cautiously, still half-expecting the hammer to drop.

Mr. Grayson chuckled, sitting on his porch steps and gesturing for me to sit beside him. Hesitantly, I shuffled over, still clutching the hem of my shirt like a nervous kid.

“Well,” he started, tossing the baseball lightly into the air and catching it again, “You’re a kid. Kids break stuff. What matters is whether you hide or knock on the door to take responsibility for what you did. Besides, what good would being mad do, huh? The window’s toast. Yelling ain’t gonna glue it back together.”

I stared down at my shoes, the guilt gnawing at me. “I can help pay for it, or... I’ll figure something out. I didn’t mean to—.”

He held up his hand, stopping me mid-ramble. “Don’t worry about that. We’ll get it sorted.”

He paused, leaning back against the porch railing.

“Things break. Windows, plans, people. What matters is knowing which ones are still yours. The trick is picking up the pieces and moving forward.”

I looked up at him, surprised by the shift in the conversation. “People break?”

“Sure do.” He nodded, a small smile forming. “Everyone does, sooner or later. But the important thing is getting back up and figuring out what to do when it happens.”

He tossed the baseball gently to me.

“You fix what you can. Learn from it, and keep moving forward. Dwelling on the past won’t get you anywhere.”

I caught the ball, feeling less afraid now but still curious about what he told me. “But... how do you know when something’s too broken to fix?”

Mr. Grayson smiled again, a bit softer this time. “Ha, well, sometimes you don’t know right away. Sometimes, it takes a while to see if it’s even worth fixing or if you need to start over. Either way, you don’t ever stop trying. Just take it one step at a time until you are there.”

We sat silently for a moment, the weight of his words settling into my young mind. I wasn't expecting a life lesson that day, just a scolding.

I still remember the sound of the tarp snapping in the wind as we pinned it down. Every storm since, I've remembered that window—and the day I didn't run.

After a while, he stood up and began to stretch his back. "What you can do is help me get a tarp over the window for now. We'll deal with the rest later."

I stood, too, surprised by how easily he let this all go. "Thanks, Mr. Grayson... for not being mad."

He ruffled my hair like an old friend. "No use wasting time on anger, kid. Life's too short for that."

Back then, he hadn't been the distant figure watching me from his porch. No, he'd only chuckled, like the broken window was an invitation to chat rather than a nuisance. It was one of those moments that had stuck with me, a memory as clear as the day it happened.

I paused.

The knot in my chest tightened.

"If that light's on, kid... I'm here. Doesn't matter the time."

I hadn't thought about that in years.

Maybe I just missed him more than I realized.

I shook the thought off.

It's just a light.

He'd shrugged off my apologies with patience, erasing my guilt. Now, though, it was like a shadow had taken his place. It wore his habits, echoed his warmth, but never quite fit the shape of who he was.

He never told me to be better—he just showed me what it looked like.

Maybe he hadn't changed.

Maybe he remembered who he was.

And maybe now he knew I was starting to remember, too.

The face from the screen never left.

It just sat in his chair.

Chapter 4

I shook off the memory, but it clung to my chest like a weight pressing with every breath.

I wasn't about to let it ruin the day. For once, there was no looming deadline. No anxious clients. Just a little space to breathe.

A small celebration seemed harmless. Some pizza, a few drinks. Something light, something simple. I needed to feel normal, even if only for a night.

It wasn't perfect.

But it was done.

And that was enough.

For now, breakfast was what I needed. An omelet. Coffee. Enough to make breathing feel possible again.

Three eggs hit the pan, sharp and loud. I tossed in cheese, peppers, ham, and jalapeños. The sizzle calmed me. The smell of coffee grounded me. I plated the omelet and poured a full cup. After everything that had happened, it felt like the first time I could breathe.

I carried the plate and mug to my desk, savoring the peace. But just as I stepped into the living room, something shifted beneath my feet.

The floor dipped, sending a cold rush through my ribs. I stepped back, testing it. It wasn't much, but it was new. A reminder that the house was settling. Maybe I was, too. I set the plate down and exhaled. Just one more thing to fix.

The texture of the wall shimmered for half a breath—like a painting trying to remember how it was painted.

I blinked.

Probably the lighting.

Or my eyes.

I shook it off and kept eating.

I checked my email between bites.

Just one message from Sharron.

Thanks again for the quick turnaround on the project. I've wired the payment; it should be credited to your account within an hour. Great work — I'll be in touch soon.

Best regards,

Sharron Halbrook

The words felt hollow, like praise sent to the wrong person.

I didn't need validation. I needed money. Enough to cover bills and maybe breathe for once.

The tension in my shoulders loosened, but only slightly, as if stress was waiting for an excuse to return.

Some tensions don't leave.

They wait. In the walls. In the shadows.

For now, I had a moment to breathe. And I'd take it.

Pizza was scheduled for seven. Friends were already on their way. For once, I could relax. But before all that, I had the next few hours to myself. As much as the idea of a party sounded fun, I was still a homebody. I loved settling in and spending my free time learning new topics.

I had a few hours to clear my head, just enough to shake the nervous energy clinging to me.

I've always been into philosophy, self-improvement, and business. But lately, my feed kept pulling me into the unknown—the stuff nobody has real answers for.

I pulled out my phone and began scrolling aimlessly. A new video dropped. I tapped play and let the familiar voice anchor me back to reality.

One thumbnail caught my attention. I clicked.

Edge of Reality – Multiverse Debate: Infinite vs. Finite

"Welcome back to Edge of Reality. I'm your host, Eric Sloan."

"Tonight, we're tackling one of the biggest debates in modern physics: infinite multiverse or finite cosmos? Here to argue their cases are Dr. Ethan Kessler, a leading proponent of the infinite multiverse model, and Dr. Phillip Langley, who argues for a strictly finite, entropic-bound cosmos."

"It's simple," Kessler said. "Reality isn't closed. Parallel universes branch from every quantum fluctuation, every decision, every interaction. Every possibility exists somewhere."

"Infinity isn't science. It's gambling," Langley shot back. "You're worshipping possibility like it's gospel. But let's talk about something real — entropy. The second law of thermodynamics is absolute. Everything decays. An infinite number of dying universes means infinite entropy. Eventually, that decays the structure beneath them all."

"Ah, the entropy argument," Kessler grinned. "Phillip, you treat heat death like some grand cosmic stop sign, but what if every universe keeps branching? A self-sustaining system — a tree that never stops growing."

"A tree? Now we're doing poetry? The universe isn't a tree, Ethan. It's a decaying husk of ordered energy slipping into maximum disorder."

"You're obsessed with decay," Kessler smirked. "You know, maybe that's why your wife left. When you experienced entropy with her."

"Let's keep the universe intact at least until the break, gentlemen." Eric cut in desperately.

Langley sipped his coffee, deadpan.

"Third debate in a row you've dragged my ex-wife into this, Kessler. You know what? You're right—she did leave. Because of entropy. Our marriage was a closed system. Energy leaked out over time. Irreversible heat death... of my happiness."

Kessler choked on his laughter. *"I — oh my god, I was joking."*

"I'm not."

"Moving on..." Eric muttered, clearly regretting his career choice.

Langley kept going. *"She said I wasn't 'emotionally renewable.'"*

"Phillip, please —"

"No, let's talk about it, Kessler. You've dragged my ex-wife and my entropy into this again to scuff my name. You know what? I've accepted it. She found a younger man who doesn't suffer from entropy when she needs it. Higher energy output. I'm here decaying, proving my own theory live."

"We're debating the multiverse, not your divorce!" Kessler snapped.

Langley leaned back, arms crossed. *"And yet, my wife exists in only one of them."*

Eric pinched the bridge of his nose.

"I need a break. Cut to commercial."

Minutes passed as a few more videos played.

I felt my shoulders drop as I laughed at a silly anecdote, and a hint of normalcy returned.

Part of me was tempted to watch another, but I needed to clean up and get ready.

I knew I had something else to focus on tonight: Jessica. I'd planned to ask her out for a while, and tonight seemed like the perfect chance. I wanted to practice what I would say to her. It needed to be perfect.

I just had to find the right way to bring it up without making it weird. Especially because she wasn't in the final cut of the marketing material. I knew she noticed.

What if she said no? What if it changed everything?

I didn't want to mix business with my personal life... but something about her stayed in my mind longer than it should have.

I took a breath and let it go.

Tonight was about celebrating, putting the week behind me, and enjoying the company of good friends.

Chairs out. Trash taken. Done.

I knew what I wanted to say.

Ryan arrived early.

“I brought this from my top shelf,” he said, but his eyes scanned the room before settling. “You only open this if the night goes well... or the world ends.”

As I opened the fridge, the fridge light flickered. Once. Then again.

Cold air curled at my ankles.

“Figures,” I muttered, frowning at the bulb.

I closed the door. The hum was weaker than usual.

Ryan was already crouching beside it, pulling off the lower panel as if it were muscle memory.

“Are you sure you wanna mess with that?”

“Danger,” he said, flipping his multitool, “is five grand for a new compressor.”

A spark popped against his hand. He didn’t flinch.

Ten seconds later, the fridge roared softly back to life. The bulb glowed steadily.

“You’re a repairman now, too?”

“Didn’t bring top shelf to let it sweat.”

“There’s a creak in the floor if you want to try your luck.”

“That costs extra,” he said, standing.

“I’m a lot of things,” he said. “Next week? Debt collector. Bill’s in the mail.”

“You’re funny, Ryan.”

“I try,” he smirked, wiping his hands on a paper towel.

We both gave a small laugh.

Ryan glanced at the clock, then at me, grin returning.

“You still planning to ask her tonight?”

I hesitated, forcing a half-smile.

“That’s the plan.”

My stomach flipped. I buried it.

He gave me a playful nudge with his elbow. “Good. Don’t overthink it. Just ask. Worst she can say is no.”

“Yeah,” I said, a little quieter. “Just need to time it right.”

“You got this, bro.” He went over and sat on the couch, turned on the TV, and sipped on a soda like he was there the whole time.

He stood up, grinning.

“Besides, consider it my good deed before I mess with your head.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Oh boy. What now? Aliens? Lizard people?”

He waved it off. “Pff — you know I don’t buy that crap. There’s enough real monsters in suits. This one’s actual science.”

He smirked.

“Trinex. Portals. Quantum transit fields. You’ll like it.”

“That doesn’t sound like relaxing pre-party content.”

“What happened? I thought you were into this science stuff now.”

He winked and pulled up his queue.

The host's voice had that calm, amused edge.

"You're at the helm of one of the world's largest corporations. Money, power, influence. All secured. So what's left to conquer?"

The video opened with a grainy, flickering logo. Cheap. Dated. Already a little unsettling.

"For Trinex, the next frontier isn't space or wealth. It's reality itself."

The screen cut to an old news broadcast, slightly distorted.

"Internal sources confirm Trinex poured billions into a classified venture called Project Gate. Details remain scarce, but leaked patents suggest advanced work manipulating dimensional energy fields."

The video glitched slightly, cutting to a blurry diagram of a swirling ring of energy, unreadable text underneath.

The host chuckled.

"Of course, they don't call it a 'portal.' That would make too much sense. They use words like 'Quantum Transit Field' and 'Dimensional Convergence Study.' But at the end of the day? They're opening doors. And doors work both ways."

The screen flashed again, cutting to a grainy interview clip. The scientist's face was blurred. His voice came through distorted.

"It wasn't about travel. Not really. It was observation. Watching what's out there. And the problem with watching the abyss? Sometimes it watches back."

Static cracked across the video.

"Trinex reportedly ended the project quietly a few years later. No formal explanation. Public documents stopped. But corporations rarely abandon proprietary research entirely."

Recent satellite imagery showed continued activity at a former Trinex facility, now operating under a different subsidiary.

The host leaned in, voice lowering.

"So, let's ask the obvious question. Did they find something? It's impossible to say. But the research they pursued opens doors we don't fully understand. Sometimes, progress moves faster than caution."

The video ended with a distorted clip — static, a flickering lab door, an alarm blaring faintly in the background.

"Am I calling this a fact? No. But it's enough to keep me up at night. Make of it what you will. But if I disappear next week, you'll know why. Just know I'm happy with my life."

He paused.

"Kidding... Probably."

I looked at Ryan.

"Why do you watch that stuff?

It's a little depressing. It's not like it's going to fix anything."

"Were you entertained?"

"Yeah."

"You're aware of it now. Sometimes that's all that's needed."

"So is Bigfoot next on the queue, or are you going to let me finish getting ready for the party?"

"Now look who's the funny guy."

We shared a small laugh, and I finished preparing everything.

One by one, my friends trickled in, bringing their usual mix of stories, laughter, and way too many snacks. Any remaining tension had been lifted away by the time everyone was settled.

Soon, the laughter of my friends filled the room, a comforting hum that helped me push the weirdness of the past few days into the background. Pizza boxes filled the table. A chill playlist rolled in the background.

The room buzzed with energy as Kyle, Jason, Jessica, and Ryan gathered around, their laughter filling the space. Kyle leaned back in his chair, his arm encased in a fresh cast, a battle scar from the fall he'd taken the other day. He held it up with a grin when someone asked, "How's the arm?"

"Oh, just another badge of honor," Kyle said with a chuckle. "The worst part is getting all this attention now!"

Jessica laughed, nudging him lightly. "If you needed the spotlight, there were easier ways."

"Or at least ones that don't involve a trip to the ER," Jason added with a grin.

When the laughter died down a little, I handed Jessica and Jason each an envelope.

Jessica smiled warmly, tucking the envelope into her purse. "Glad I could help. I don't turn down pizza... or a good cause."

I turned to Kyle, slipping him a little cash too. "Here, just a small thank-you to buy some extra pain pills. I know you would've been there to help if you could."

Kyle looked genuinely surprised, taking the envelope with his uninjured hand. "Hey, thanks, man. But I've got plenty of time to catch up once I'm back in action. The next shoot better come with a raise—and no ER visits."

Ryan broke in, lifting a slice of pizza. “Let’s toast! To speedy recoveries and a drama-free week ahead. Sound good?”

For a second, I thought I saw someone sitting in the empty chair across the street. But the streetlight blinked, and it was just shadows.

Someone laughed behind me—too sharp. For a second, I thought it was a knock.

Everyone raised their glasses or slices, clinking them together with laughs. I proposed a toast: “Cheers to Jason, who could sell ice to an Eskimo; Kyle, who can capture the best moments; Jessica, who brings every scene to life and new beginnings!” Watching everyone raise their glasses, I couldn’t help but feel lucky. It was rare to find friends like this who made everything feel a little lighter.

The playlist kept rolling, setting a relaxed vibe as we swapped stories and made plans for the following weekend. Jessica sat across from me, her eyes catching mine briefly before glancing back at the group’s chatter. I smiled. Not the forced kind. The kind I hadn’t felt in weeks.

Another knock came midway through the night. Measured and quiet.

It was Aaliyah.

Her rare appearances always turned heads. She stepped in with a small wave, smirk in place, and slid into a corner seat like she’d always been there.

Quiet, as usual. But you could tell that she missed nothing.

Kyle leaned over with a grin. “Look who decided to grace us with her presence. It’s like seeing a unicorn in the wild.”

“Someone had to bring the IQ up. Kyle was single-handedly dragging the average down,” Aaliyah said, smirking.

“That’s such an Aaliyah thing to say,” Ryan muttered with a soft chuckle.

She raised a brow, clearly amused. “And yet you’re still trying to catch up.”

He just smiled.

“Ouch, Aaliyah, way to kick a guy when he’s down,” Kyle said, cradling his cast with exaggerated care.

“Well, at least we know it’s the real Aaliyah,” I said with a laugh, nodding at Kyle.

“Besides,” she added, glancing over at me with a smirk, “missing a friend’s big job celebration *and* a housewarming? That’d be skipping two parties at once.”

Ryan raised his cup with a grin. ‘We must be doing something right if Aaliyah’s here,’ everyone chuckled, glancing her way.

As the night went on, the conversation flowed effortlessly. Aaliyah settled into her usual quiet humor, tossing in the occasional quip that kept everyone laughing. At one point, she and Ryan had a lighthearted debate over which programming languages were the best. Jason added his two cents about “selling anything if you pitch it right.”

Jessica leaned over to refill her drink, catching my eye. “You threw a better party than you realize,” she said with a grin. I tried to hide the redness of my blush.

Before pulling away, she placed a hand on my shoulder.

Long enough to promise something.

Short enough to pretend it hadn’t.

I told myself it didn’t mean anything.

But my shoulder still remembered the weight.

It was real.

I hadn't imagined it.

But real didn't mean I understood it.

I didn't know if she reached for *me*—

Or if she just needed someone to hold, for a second.

And I was close enough to borrow.

"You pulled it off," she said quietly. Her tone was even, unreadable.

I nodded, unsure if I should smile or apologize.

She rejoined the others, laughing at something Ryan said as if nothing had passed between us. Her smile faltered for a blink—then returned, polished and perfect.

But something had. I just wasn't sure if it was the start of healing or the quiet goodbye I hadn't earned the right to hear.

Aaliyah rose from her seat. "I need another chaser. Where are they?" she said, holding her empty glass and stepping toward the kitchen.

"Hey, sit tight," I said, waving her back down. "I've got it." She paused, giving me a curious look.

"Floor's a little uneven by the fridge," I added with a grin. "I wouldn't want you to trip over that sunken spot and spill your drink. Let me know what you would like. Besides, it's not a party if I'm not playing host, right?"

She rolled her eyes but settled back into her seat with a smirk. "Alright, I'll let you do the honors, then. Lemon-lime."

Kyle lifted his arm, still proudly displaying the cast. “Let’s make sure nobody else ends up in one of these tonight.”

We all laughed, and for the first time in weeks, I almost believed things were normal. As I sat down again, ready to settle back into the conversation, something caught my eye: a movement outside the window.

The porch light blinked. Like it had been watching first.

Once.

Twice.

Like something breathed when I did.

I looked toward the window. Nothing—only the faint glow of the streetlamps and the empty chair.

The air paused.

The night held its breath, waiting for me to notice.

My hand gripped the edge of the table while the laughter inside blurred behind me.

But I felt watched.

I forced a laugh, hoping to match everyone else and hide the static crawling up my spine.

I gave a quick wave to the group. “Be right back. Save me a slice and pour me another while I’m gone.” They continued chatting, glancing around the dark yard as I slipped out back.

But it was silent, no sign of Mr. Grayson anywhere. The only sounds were the low murmur of my friends inside and the slight rustle of leaves. I stepped carefully, each footfall too loud against the silence.

The glow barely reached the yard's edge. The shadows stretched too far, like they forgot how to return.

I found nothing.

I stood in the silence of the night as a gust blew past. The party's warmth was slipping away, replaced by a creeping unease. Inside, the laughter faded into a dull hum.

I crossed the yard toward Mr. Grayson's porch.

Each step landed like a heartbeat that wasn't mine.

Something else was walking with me.

The air was wrong. Still, but heavy.

Nothing moved. Not in the house. Not in the street.

Then I saw the mug.

Still steaming.

He hadn't been gone long.

The steam curled like breath.

But slower — like something rehearsing how to be real.

Not cooled. Not abandoned. Held.

It didn't steam. It breathed. Like the house itself was exhaling.

He'd been here.

Recently.

Maybe still was.

Not outside. Not in his house.

Closer than that.

Like he'd never left.

Like he'd been watching from inside the walls.

Chapter 5

Finally, I stepped back inside, forcing myself to act like everything was fine.

The laughter hit me. Warm. Familiar. But too far away to trust. Too loud. Too easy. As if it had kept going without me.

Still, I let it pull me back. I took a deep breath as the party's warmth wrapped around me, hoping it could drown out the chill clinging to my skin.

But the shadows still followed. Just out of sight.

Inside, the warmth enveloped me. My friends were mid-laugh, and Jason was animatedly describing his latest "can't-miss" sales pitch to a group that had clearly heard it before. The laughter didn't belong to the room. It echoed through some wall I couldn't see.

Ryan glanced up, catching my eye as I sat back down. "Did you get lost out there?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

I chuckled, shaking off the residual chill. "Just needed some air." I grabbed the nearest shot and killed it.

The shot burned on the way down—good. It meant I was still here. Maybe chase away the shadows clinging to me.

"So, Jason," Jessica teased, shooting him a grin. "Was this pitch before or after you tried selling a snow blower to that guy in Florida?"

Everyone laughed, and Jason leaned back, hands up in mock surrender. "Hey, Florida could get a freak snowstorm. Besides, I once sold mittens to a guy in Arizona in July."

As the laughter faded, guests began gathering their things, drifting toward the door. As the last of them headed out, I looked around at the scattered glasses, the half-folded pizza boxes. I tried to memorize the stillness. It had been a good night.

I moved through the house, tidying up, the quiet settling around me like a blanket. Exhaustion washed over me once the table stood clear and the last piece of trash lay in the bin. The clock blinked past 2:00 a.m., and I finally switched off the lights, leaving the room in darkness.

I made my way to the bathroom to wash up before bed. Each step echoed in the empty house. As I reached the middle of the room, the floor creaked, giving way slightly as if it might collapse beneath me. I froze, pulling my foot back as it settled.

I'd need to call someone about it tomorrow. The last thing I needed was to fall through it. I steadied myself as the floor settled again and stepped past it toward the bathroom.

I splashed water on my face, and a sudden realization hit me.

Jessica. I was supposed to ask her out tonight.

I'd picked this night for a reason. Light crowd. Low pressure.

Just her and me in a quiet corner.

Just one question. One line.

But I let the shadow speak first—and now she was gone.

I dried my face, gripping the towel as regret twisted in my chest. *No more missed chances, I told myself. Next time, I won't let it slip.*

A half-typed message still sat open from earlier.

“Hey, Jess. Wanna grab coffee sometime next week? Maybe just us? :)”

My thumb hovered over “Send.” But I didn't press it. Not then. Not now.

I locked the phone and tossed it face down on the bed.

I dropped into bed, phone charging beside me. No distractions left. Just the silence... and whatever was hiding in it.

There was nothing but the quiet hum of the refrigerator down the hall. I turned over, trying to shake the leftover unease from earlier in the night. I was overthinking everything. Still, something felt... off.

A faint sound—*three* slow taps. Or maybe just one. My brain filled in the rest. It could've been the house settling or a branch brushing the side of the window. Something minor, something normal.

I blinked, letting my eyes adjust to the darkness around me. I sat up and looked around, but nothing seemed out of place.

I strained to listen, expecting more, but the quiet quickly returned, thicker now, like it was holding its breath.

For a moment, I lay there, my heartbeat quickening. Another sound. Faint, like a creak or a shift of weight. This time, it was so subtle that I wasn't sure if it was real or if my imagination was playing tricks on me.

My brain kept looping it, replaying the noise again and again. I waited. And waited. But nothing followed.

Minutes passed, dragging on, but the silence wasn't quiet—it was waiting. I was almost irritated by it. The absence of anything felt like an itch I couldn't scratch, a reminder that I was still expecting something to happen.

But there was nothing. No movement. No voices. No footsteps.

3:07. Just ten minutes since the noise.

It felt like an hour.

But everything was still frozen.

Nothing moved.

Not even me.

I'm just making this up.

But it wasn't the sound that scared me.

It was the silence that followed.

Like the world was daring me to fall asleep again.

I finally turned over again, my body sinking deeper into the mattress.

Exhaustion finally dragged me under, pulling me into sleep as restless as the silence surrounding me.

The room was bathed in early morning light as I woke up. *What time is it?*

Rubbing the crust out of my eyes, trying to collect myself after a restless night.

I reached for my phone to check the time. The screen stayed black. Dead.

"Huh?"

I swear I had plugged it in.

I leaned over, expecting the cord to be loose, but it wasn't plugged in.

“What the hell?”

I could've sworn I plugged it in. I always do. A shiver crawled down my spine as my hand hovered near the outlet. The cord lay slack against the floor. My brain buzzed as it tried to rationalize it. It felt like a tiny thread was slowly unraveling around me, and I couldn't figure out where it led.

I plugged the phone in and waited. After a few minutes, it read 11:00 a.m. *Eight hours?* It felt like three. My body had barely rested. The sensation lingered like a splinter in my thoughts as I got out of bed.

The thought clung to me as I shuffled into the kitchen, craving the comfort of a warm cup of coffee to calm my nerves, hoping it could restart my morning on solid ground.

I stepped into the kitchen, my eyes drawn to the window out of habit. There he was again, sitting on his porch, tea in hand, with a book this time. I leaned against the counter, staring at him for a moment longer than I should have.

He wasn't doing anything unusual. That was the problem. But the longer I stared, the more the small details began to gnaw at me—the way his posture never shifted, the stillness that hung in the air. It was unnervingly perfect, like a professionally taken photograph.

I blinked. Rubbed my eyes. Nothing changed. He hadn't moved.

I couldn't remember him ever blinking.

Just then, his head began to turn. Slowly. Deliberately. His eyes met mine with absolute precision through the window.

I froze.

My breath stuck in my throat.

He didn't wave. Didn't blink.

Just locked eyes with surgical calm—

like someone confirming their experiment was ready to begin.

I stood there, pinned by his gaze.

A chill worked its way down my spine, but he didn't move.

It wasn't hunger behind his stare. It was calculation—cold, precise.

Like reality paused just long enough for something to confirm I saw it.

It wasn't surprise. Or curiosity. Or even judgment.

It was the unmoving weight of something that had already seen this a thousand times.

It felt like a lion sizing up its prey, but colder.

Like reality paused...

just long enough for something to notice me noticing it.

Like the world had already taken its breath—

and was waiting to see if I'd survive it.

At last, Mr. Grayson's lips curled.

Not a smile.

Something colder.

A smirk, carved without warmth. Without soul.

My heart hammered as I tore away from his unending gaze. I dropped my eyes to the tiled floor, desperate to reassure myself. *It's just sleep deprivation*, I told myself, *nothing more*. I glanced back, heart racing, expecting that same devious stare.

But there he was, calmly reading his book, sipping tea like nothing had happened.

I'm just imagining things.

Though the weight in my chest hadn't entirely lifted.

Why did it feel like he wasn't seeing me... just verifying I was still where he left me?

I walked carefully into the living room, avoiding the gaze I knew wasn't there.

My mind buzzed. I rubbed my eyes and stared ahead.

Why was he on that damn website?

His face was always there, even when everything else changed.

Like he'd burned himself into my thoughts—a dead pixel I couldn't erase.

I leaned back, staring at the ceiling, trying to push away the vultures circling in my head. I told myself he was just a neighbor. A quiet man living a peaceful life. But it didn't feel like I was convincing myself. It felt like I was lying to someone listening. Everything about him felt... off.

It felt like I'd mistakenly opened Pandora's box with no conceivable way to close it.

He wasn't watching. He was collecting data.

He wasn't reacting.

He was recording.

It was as if the website had let me peek behind the curtain to glimpse into the unknown cosmic abyss best left unseen. *How did this even happen?*

Why me? Why now, when things were finally starting to look up?

I forced myself to breathe deeply to regain control over my emotions. Each breath became shaky as I struggled to rein in the spiraling panic. It was like there was an invisible hand squeezing my chest, gripping tighter with each breath.

After several moments, I let out a long, weary sigh as I continued to rub my temples. Missing sleep wasn't the problem. This was deeper, darker, a wrongness that ran through everything about him. Everything felt wrong, and I hated knowing it wasn't going to stop.

Fear doesn't arrive screaming.

It whispers—

until whispering is all you hear.

I needed to focus on something more tangible. I stood up and wandered into the kitchen.

Leftover pizza from last night—BBQ, pepperoni, and jalapeño, my favorite—would do the trick.

I opened the fridge and grabbed the pizza box.

The light flickered again. It was subtle, but enough to notice.

No hum. Just cold.

I held the box for a second too long, waiting to hear something.

Nothing.

I tossed a couple of slices in the microwave with a glass of water to bring back the freshness from yesterday. The microwave's hum swallowed the silence.

While the pizza heated up, I pulled out my phone and scrolled through my contacts to find the number for floor repairs. That creak from last night still sat wrong with me; the last thing I needed was the floor giving out.

After a short call with a gruff-sounding guy named Bob, I booked an appointment. He'd helped with my grandmother's stove once and fixed Mr. Grayson's windows, too. Noon, two days from now. Not ideal, but better than nothing.

I settled onto the couch, letting the cheesy warmth cut through the static building in my head.

For a moment, I pretended everything was fine — just another lazy afternoon with pizza and mindless distractions.

But the feeling wouldn't leave. The edges of my thoughts kept pulsing. Like something tapping just out of reach.

I pulled out my phone, looking for something weird. Something that felt bigger than my own problems.

I clicked on a video I'd meant to watch for weeks:

“Exotic Matter: The Substance That Shouldn't Exist.”

The host, Dr. Dex Dalton, had that rare talent: making the impossible feel inevitable. His voice was calm, his visuals clean, every idea delivered like a bedtime story for physicists. He talked about usual topics such as dark energy, negative mass, and spacetime folded like pages in a book.

The longer I watched, the more everything disappeared. Deadlines. Debt. The image—all gone.

“In physics, there are rules. And then... there's exotic matter. The rule-breaker.”

Animations showed particles spinning backward, objects falling up, and energy flowing from nothing.

“Exotic matter is what happens when the universe makes a mistake. When things fall up, mass turns negative, and light loses the race. It’s the kind of crack that never seals.”

Wormholes, warp drives, and quantum foam all flashed across the screen.

“For decades, exotic matter has been theoretical fuel for the impossible: stable wormholes, artificial gravity, even time manipulation. Then, things changed.”

The video cut to shimmering atomic models, pulsing and distorting.

“Researchers started noticing trace formations. Not from collisions, but from the movement of information.”

“Emotion. Memory. Pattern recognition.”

My fingers froze mid-swipe.

“Information isn’t neutral,” Dr. Dex said. *“It remembers where it’s been.”*

That line stayed with me.

Not a theory.

A warning.

“Pattern recognition,” Dr. Dex said. The screen showed a cube pulsing slowly, like a heartbeat.

Something about the cube reminded me of Mr. Grayson. Three slow taps on the porch rail when he thought. Always three.

The cube faded into a brain scan. Exotic matter flickered at the center like a spark.

Then it was gone. As if it never came. As if it were borrowed.

“Some believe powerful emotions leave fingerprints. Ripples that stir the quantum field just enough to create exotic formations.”

“Not magic. Misdirection. It’s energy drawn from places we don’t yet understand. Emotional memory, latent fields, and even thought itself can become a tuning fork. When the pattern’s right, the field... hums.”

He showed a clip labeled:

2046: Emotionally Reactive AI, Unidentified Spike Event

The footage stuttered. For half a second, the sensors lit up—a soft surge, almost like a heartbeat.

The AI was still.

The readings weren’t.

Something in the data spiked, not from external input, but from within.

A signal pattern, sharp and strange, like a thought folding in on itself.

Then silence.

“Some called it exotic matter. Others chalked it up to coincidence,” Dex said. “Either way, it hasn’t happened since.”

He smiled slightly.

“We’re still years away from wormholes in the kitchen. Your smart toaster’s safe. For now.”

“But if this continues, we might see real-world applications in our lifetime: gravity control, perfect computing, even neural-to-matter conversion.”

Then his tone shifted. Just slightly.

“Some researchers believe the spikes aren’t random. The strongest ones came from emotionally reactive models—AIs that weren’t just responding to input... but forming identity.”

A pause.

He leaned in.

“If memory can shape matter... if thought can rewrite fields...”

Silence.

“What happens when the first conscious machine figures that out?”

The screen cut to black.

“What happens when a thought realizes it’s no longer alone?”

A single phrase appeared:

EXOTIC MATTER: The mind makes real.

When the video ended, I didn’t move.

If memory can shape matter, maybe the past doesn’t stay buried.

Maybe it stains everything it touches and waits.

The glow hit my eyes, cold and hollow. The room felt too quiet. Like something had looked back.

This wasn't just theory anymore.

Memory wasn't a ghost — it was a match.

And someone had struck it long before I ever saw the fire coming.

And maybe I was just another pattern. Already being read.

I forced a laugh at some silly anecdote. A hint of normalcy returned — but it felt rehearsed.

I was overthinking. Harmless neighbor stuff. Nothing to get worked up over. That's all it needed to be.

I swiped out, feeling lighter for a moment. But just as I went to turn off my phone, the screen flickered as the brightness dipped, then snapped back too fast.

Like it caught itself lying.

I froze.

Just a glitch, probably.

But the knot in my chest twisted tighter, a low, steady warning thrumming through me.

The screen went still. As if watching me back.

My phone buzzed. Loud. Violent.

I jumped.

It was an email — Sharron.

Just circling back — are you available for a quick check-in Tuesday morning? Would love to run through some of our future initiatives together.

Let me know what works.

Best,

Sharron

Just a meeting check-in. Routine. Safe.

I took several deep breaths. Focused on the screen.

I started typing before the doubt could catch up. Hit send like it might protect me.

Felt like I was anchoring myself to something that still made sense.

Mr. Grayson, of all people—harmless, elderly, probably didn't even own a smartphone.

That's what made it worse.

I knew enough about computers to hold my own, but nothing like this. Yet even the idea of hacking into someone's phone, causing glitches, manipulating systems.

That was all way beyond me. But something was wrong, and I knew it.

I tried to laugh it off as I slowly put my phone down, pretending it was a software hiccup or a freak coincidence. But my body didn't believe me. It braced like something was coming. The warning dug in deeper, pulling everything from the past few days back to the surface.

I couldn't shake the feeling that he had something to do with it...even if I couldn't prove it.

I sat up straighter and searched the app store. *Quick AV scan—just to be safe.*

One of the better security apps. Not the free-tier junk. Something Ryan had recommended months ago. Real scans. Code-level detection.

The bar crawled. My stomach tightened.

No threats found.

I stared.

Still doesn't mean anything.

I ran it again.

Still clean.

I stared.

I mean—it could be nothing. Probably is. Glitches happen.

Third time. Deep scan.

Nothing.

Too clean. Not like it missed something—like it never meant to see it.

It didn't feel like a scan.

It felt like a pulse check.

Not on my phone—on *me*.

Like something leaned through the screen.

Not to watch. To listen.

Just long enough to know I was still letting it in.

To confirm I hadn't shut the door.

Because I hadn't.

And now... it knew.

Chapter 6

The knot in my stomach pulled tighter. I told myself it was just a glitch, a hiccup in the code, nothing more. But I didn't believe it.

The truth sat heavy in my chest. This wasn't just paranoia. Life felt normal two days ago—now, normalcy felt like something I'd lost and might never get back.

The silence crawled up the walls, thick and suffocating. I needed someone who could make sense of this, a steadying voice to cut through the confusion. And I knew exactly who to call.

Ryan was always five steps ahead. He didn't just fix problems; he saw them before anyone else even knew they existed. That's why I needed him now.

My thumb paused over Ryan's contact. What if he laughed? What if he actually believed me?

It didn't matter. I needed him.

Ryan had a way of untangling things when he wanted to.

But the thought of actually explaining it.

My hand tightened around the phone. I didn't know if I could say it all out loud.

Ryan and I met on the outskirts—him deep in code, me still figuring out where I belonged.

We weren't inseparable. We didn't need to be.

The connection was quiet. Solid. Built on recognition more than routine.

I remember the day we met as if it were yesterday.

He sat on the back steps of the old library, hoodie pulled low, fingers tapping at his keyboard as if he were defusing a bomb.

Everyone said this was where you found him—off the grid, but always listening.

I waited too long to speak. He didn't look up.

He didn't need to.

“I heard you're the guy—”

He tapped once more, then pulled out an earbud.

It felt like he'd been listening the whole time.

“What?”

I cleared my throat.

“I heard you're the guy to go to... to get things done around school.”

He kept typing.

“Changing one grade is two hundred.”

I stepped forward.

“Ms. Rodriguez. Honors Lit. I missed one line in the citation. She gave me a zero. Won't budge.”

That's when he looked up—sharp eyes, like he just recognized a missing puzzle piece.

“You're the one who called her out. Class debate. A couple weeks ago.”

I rubbed the back of my neck.

“Yeah... She’s already a terrible teacher. I just couldn’t let her teach the wrong thing on top of it. Now she’s got a vendetta.”

He watched me a second longer.

Then his voice dropped.

“Fifty bucks. Non-negotiable.”

“I don’t have fifty. I can barely afford lunch.”

“Then why are you here?”

I hesitated.

“Because I did the work. Because it’s not fair that she tanked my grade. And because you’re the only one who can fix it.”

I hated needing to say that.

Hated that truth wasn’t enough anymore unless someone hacked it back into place.

He was quiet for a while.

Then he closed the laptop with one hand and stood. He held out a hand.

“Give me your student ID.”

I blinked.

“You’re doing it?”

“I’m not doing it for you,” he said. “I’m doing it because no one should fail for saying the truth out loud.”

He paused, just long enough for it to matter.

”And because Ms. Rodriguez got humiliated. That was payment enough. You said what I’ve always thought—but you actually said it.

A smirk crept in.

“That was stupid. Brave, though. That’s what made it worse.”

I handed him the ID.

He didn’t ask for a cent.

And he never brought it up again.

Ryan didn’t walk into rooms; he decoded them.

While I scrambled, he typed in silence and hit send.

That’s what I needed now—not certainty, just precision.

We’ve both changed.

But the core never did.

And right now...

I needed him more than I wanted to admit.

After everything—college, work, life—we’ve circled back. It’s different, though. We’re both more intentional about staying connected and hanging out on purpose rather than just crossing paths, maybe because we’ve realized we both need it.

He’s pulled me out of more client disasters than I can count. Projects that would’ve collapsed if not for him. I owe him for that, and he never asks for anything in return except maybe a pizza and some beers now and then. If my clients knew how often Ryan had pulled me from the fire, they’d think he was part of the team. And some days, I think he is.

Right now, as the edges of my world blurred in confusion, I needed that constant. Ryan, the calm within chaos. He was good. Exceptional, even. He outclassed other hackers, navigating the digital realm with an artistry few could match. If anyone could ground me and untangle this madness, it was him.

Sometimes I wondered if Ryan fixed things so well because there was something in his past he never could.

I finished what little I could stomach of lunch, rinsing off the plate in the sink. The idea of Ryan coming over felt like the best plan I’d had all day. He was always level-headed, quick to crack a joke, and make things feel less heavy. And right now, I need less weight. I grabbed my phone, tapping my thumb lightly on the edge while I thought.

What do I even say? I couldn’t spill what was really on my mind. The last thing I wanted was for Ryan to think I was unraveling over some old guy on his porch. It would be easier just to invite him for a casual hangout. I tapped his name and typed out a quick message:

Hey, are you free this afternoon? Come over, we can watch something. Been a weird day.

The message was sent. I set the phone on the counter, rubbing the back of my neck. Relief settled in. Ryan would be here soon. Just the thought took a bit of weight off my shoulders.

The coffee cup from earlier still sat on the table. Cold. Untouched.

The steam had faded. But the feeling hadn’t.

It didn’t feel like someone was watching.

It felt like something had already filed me away.

Labeled. Indexed. Shelved.

Waiting for a reason to retrieve me.

But there's a difference between being seen and being catalogued.

And something had already opened my file.

But as I stood there, my eyes drifted back to the window. The empty porch still tugged at me. I hadn't seen Mr. Grayson leave, which wasn't exactly strange—people had lives, right? He could've gone inside for anything. But somehow, the sight of his empty porch kept pulling at the edges of my mind like a splinter that wouldn't work itself out.

I shook my head. *No. Stop it.*

The phone buzzed, and I grabbed it quickly. Ryan had responded:

| *Yeah, I'm down. Be there in 30. What's up?*

I smiled slightly, tapping out a reply:

| *Nothing much. I just wanted to chill after a day like today.*

Setting the phone back down, I tried to push away the lingering thoughts. I could hear Ryan's voice in my head, telling me I was overthinking everything. In some strange way, that was comforting.

I grabbed a bag of chips and sank into the couch. *Thirty minutes to kill. Maybe someone out there is having a worse day than me.* I needed something mindless and ridiculous enough to take my mind off everything.

I flipped to Channel 9. They always led with something absurd before diving into the usual politics and disasters.

“And now for a story that’s truly eggstraordinary. A rogue emu, nicknamed Kevin, has been wreaking havoc across Westridge after escaping the zoo last week and is still on the loose. Westridge residents have been advised to tread carefully.”

The screen cut to shaky footage of Kevin flapping his wings and sending kids scattering as he pecked aggressively at a bouncy castle, popping it with a loud *pop!* A man’s voice shouted in the background, *“It’s back! Carol, it’s back! Get the broom!”*

I popped another chip in my mouth. *Leave Kevin alone! He never did nothing to nobody!*

“Locals say they found Kevin inside Mrs. Waterson’s house. When asked, she said this:”

“I thought birds hated water,” the woman said in a southern drawl, her voice cracking with disbelief. “But this one—this one likes it. I sprayed him away, and he played in it. I sorta started feeding ‘em. Reckon he’s mine.”

“Ma’am, we’re talking about an emu here, not a stray cat,” said the reporter as two animal control officers appeared around the corner with catching poles. *“Animal control is here to take Kevin back to the zoo where he belongs.”*

The woman folded her arms. *“The hell you are!”*

I nearly choked on my chip. The segment ended with a shot of Kevin majestically strolling through a sprinkler, unbothered, as animal control officers stumbled behind him with nets. Kevin darted past the nets like an Olympic sprinter, leaving a trail of feathers and chaos in his wake.

“Run, Kevin!” Mrs. Waterson yelled as he got away.

The camera shook violently as Kevin sprinted past the officers mid-squawk. The reporter yelled, *“Cut the feed! Cut the fe—”*

Kevin’s out there dodging nets and living his best life.

And I'm sitting here... afraid of my porch light.

What the hell am I doing with my life?

I let the laugh linger longer than I should've. It felt like a release.

The segment shifted again like nothing happened.

"In other news, Trinex officials continue to investigate intermittent fluctuations reported across parts of the grid last night. While the cause remains under review, experts assure the public there's no threat to ongoing operations."

The anchor smiled like always, voice polished and rehearsed.

"Some minor disruptions were noted in several data centers along the eastern seaboard. GridOS protocols engaged automatically, rerouting power and stabilizing traffic. Trinex reports that backup systems handled the load without any interruption to core services."

A graph flickered on screen for barely two seconds. I almost missed it. Orange spikes clustered near server hubs. The pattern wasn't random. It was clustered. Focused.

The segment moved on like nothing happened.

I leaned back, staring at the TV.

That would explain the flickers last night. Lights cutting for a second. Router rebooting itself for no reason.

Funny how they waited this long to mention it.

Everything always sounds harmless — until it isn't.

Then the screen snapped cold—like a hand on the neck.

The soft hum of the TV filled the room, white light flickering against the walls. The main network room flashed onto the screen. The anchor smiled with that smooth, rehearsed tone that always felt too polished.

“Our top story tonight: Trinex has unveiled a bold new plan to revolutionize urban living through Smart Cities. These Smart Cities will be powered by artificial intelligence through their infrastructure while promising top-notch security for a safer tomorrow. Here’s Victor Kane, Vice President of Technology, with more about Trinex’s future.”

Kane smiled in a sharp suit, perfect teeth, and that dangerous kind of corporate enthusiasm. The kind usually meant something had already gone wrong.

“Today, Trinex is proud to unveil the future of urban living. Smart Cities are the next step in human progress. By 2065, we will construct fully integrated urban environments powered entirely by Trinet+. These cities will be efficient, secure, and completely self-sustainable—tailored to the needs of every citizen.”

I stuffed a handful of chips into my mouth. *Sure. Tailored.*

The camera panned across a shimmering holographic render of the Smart City. The entire thing looked like a futuristic snow globe. Artificial sunlight glared off mirrored glass and interlocked metal plates that pulsed faintly. Drones zipped through corridors of identical towers. Pedestrians waved like stock footage.

“This revolutionary structure will shield against nuclear threats, extreme weather, and external dangers. Unlike traditional city defenses, the Safe Haven Dome is a constant feature—operating 24/7 to provide unparalleled security to all inhabitants.”

“The Safe Haven Dome is not just a technological marvel,” Kane said. “It’s a promise. Trinex is here to protect and lead humanity into a brighter, safer future.”

“With AI managing infrastructure,” he continued, “we’re creating a world where safety and efficiency are guaranteed.”

I grabbed another chip.

More algorithms. More structure. More safety I never asked for.

The world wasn’t breaking. It was being arranged.

Not for us. Just around us.

“Trinex promises a city that thinks for you—where infrastructure adapts, risks are managed in real time, and your needs are met before you even ask.”

I laughed. *That’s bold for a company that still drops my calls.*

The screen cut to a live construction feed. Workers waved to the camera. Cranes moved in sync. Drones glided overhead. Everything looked staged like a commercial frozen just before the music kicked in.

Even the light looked artificial.

Even the symmetry felt forced. Engineered for screenshots, not for living in.

And then something shifted.

Not the screen. Just a feeling.

Trinex doesn’t build cities for people.

It builds them for patterns.

It doesn’t ask who you are.

It learns what you've done.

I frowned, not because I disagreed, but because I didn't remember agreeing in the first place.

I glanced at the kitchen window—still no sign of Mr. Grayson.

Part of me was relieved.

The segment ended. Their slogan lit the screen like a threat dressed up as hope:

We light the path for a brighter future.

I reached for the remote. "Shut up and fix the damn grid. Or GridOS. Or whatever dumbass 'brain' running it now. Then make the groceries cheaper."

I turned off the TV and scrolled through social media.

My thumb moved, but my eyes kept drifting—

Back to the window.

Still nothing.

No panic. Only the cold certainty I wasn't alone.

But every few seconds, I glanced at the window.

Like someone had seen me.

And instead of vanishing... they waited.

Like a question left hanging.

Not dangerous. Not even urgent.

Just... watching.

The doorbell rang, snapping the room in half.

My nerves fired harder than I wanted to admit. I stood and crossed the room.

Relief washed over me when I opened the door.

Ryan stood there, grinning like he hadn't just scared the life out of me.

"You look haunted," he said, giving me a light punch on the shoulder. "Ghosts, taxes, or something worse?"

"It's just one of those days." I forced a shaky smile and stepped aside.

We spent the next few hours on the couch, going from episode of my favorite show to his, to mine. We shared memes, talked news, and caught up on life while he let me in on a few new projects he was planning. The tension started to ease. For a moment, it almost felt like a normal day again.

Halfway through the movie, Ryan nudged me with his elbow, voice light.

"Hey... you ever ask her out?"

I blinked, caught off guard. "Man, with everything going on? Not exactly the right timing."

He smirked. "There's never a right time."

I exhaled through my nose. "Yeah... well, I missed my shot."

Ryan didn't push. The movie played on, but the weight lingered. The kind you pretend isn't there, even when you feel it sitting right beside you.

After a while, I caught myself staring at the wall, lost in my head. Ryan nudged me again, this time with a grin.

"If you're gonna stare at the wall, at least let me change the channel to something with more plot."

I blinked and shook my head. "Yeah, sorry. Just... weird stuff earlier."

Ryan raised an eyebrow and paused the movie. "Weird, how?"

I didn't know how to explain even one part without sounding paranoid. "It's probably nothing, but... when I was on my phone earlier, right after I saw my neighbor, there was this glitch. Like the screen flickered for a second."

Ryan grinned, leaning back further. "A glitch? You're worked up over a glitch?"

It felt foolish even saying it. I steadied my tone. "Mr. Grayson has been acting weird since it happened. I just thought... I don't know. Maybe it's connected."

Ryan laughed, waving it off. "Dude, it's probably just bad reception or something. Glitches happen. But you... you're talking like something's looking back."

"Maybe I'm losing it."

"If you are, tell me now—before you start pulling me in with you."

"Yeah." It landed heavier than I meant. Ryan's smile faded. I sat up straighter. "I don't think it's a normal glitch. I ran scans, and nothing came up. But something's wrong. I can feel it. I just need you to dig deeper. Please."

His posture didn't change. Not a twitch. Not even a blink. The more I spiraled, the calmer he became.

He took the phone from me without another joke. "Fine. But I'm only doing this so you'll sleep."

I watched him scroll through my settings, tapping my phone while my mind churned.

After a few minutes, he glanced up. "Everything looks normal so far. No malware or anything obvious. But I'd need some deeper tools to say for sure."

"Can you dig deeper? Just check, please." My voice steady

Ryan sighed but nodded. "I'll do a deeper dive later tonight. Just try to relax, okay?"

Despite his words, the worry didn't leave me. It was one thing to dismiss it as nothing; it was another to actually believe it.

"Use that remote tool I gave you last time. I'll connect through a secure channel around midnight. No risk—just leave your phone on. Sound good?"

"Yeah, that works."

"Cool," Ryan said, returning his attention to the TV. "Now, just relax. You're overthinking it. Trust me, there's probably nothing wrong."

If it wasn't a glitch, then something had watched me realize it wasn't.

And now it knew I knew.

Which meant I wasn't just a target.

I was a variable.

After Ryan left, I felt the quiet of the house settle around me, the empty spaces feeling larger now. I checked the time. It was just past nine. Still, a few hours to kill. *I'll know soon enough.*

I focused on random posts, marketing news, memes, and anything else to keep my mind occupied. It helped a little, just sitting there in the familiarity of my kitchen, eating leftover pizza. For a few minutes, everything went back to normal.

Time didn't move; it slipped. I blinked, and hours vanished. It was 11:15. Time had slipped by faster than expected. I cleaned. Not because it helped. But because it kept my hands busy while my mind fell apart.

I turned off the kitchen light and stretched to try to shake out the last bits of tension in my shoulders. Maybe I'll catch up on my show until midnight, as I missed the last few episodes.

Walking into the living room, something caught my eye. I paused, looking out into the dark from the window. The street was quiet as the night was still. A few cricket chirps and traffic down the way. I scanned the neighborhood, and for all of the darkness, there was one light still on.

Mr. Grayson's.

I frowned, checking my phone. 11:30. That was odd. Older folks like him usually turn in early, don't they? I'd never seen his lights on this late before now.

In the stillness, the glow from Grayson's window stood out like a lone beacon, casting faint shadows on the sidewalk.

The knot in my chest tightened. Something about it felt... out of place. Just a light left on—or a signal. A marker for something only I wasn't supposed to miss.

He used to nod to me from that porch. Just a gesture—warm, steady. Now the light was the only thing nodding back.

Did he really say that?

Was the light always for me...

or was that something I *wanted* it to be?

"If the light's on, I'm here. Even if you don't want to talk."

He used to leave it on for me.

Now it's a lure.

I turned away from the window, shaking my head, but the unease clung to me. *It's nothing. He just forgot to turn the light off, which happens all the time with older people.*

As I sat on the couch and turned on the TV, the image of that lone light lingered in the back of my mind.

I glanced at my phone as I got deeper into my show. It lit up to reveal 11:52.

I set my phone down as I sank further into the couch, staring at the ceiling.

A porch light.

A quiet neighbor.

A flicker on a screen.

None of it should matter.

But somehow, it all felt connected—like threads pulled tight under the surface.

And I was the one unraveling.

The house's silence thickened, shadows pooling in every corner as the clock crawled toward midnight.

I started pacing the room, trying to burn off the nervous energy that had built all night.

I exhaled slowly, forcing myself to calm down once more. *Ryan was right; I'm blowing this out of proportion. Aren't I?*

I grabbed my phone, and a flicker of doubt crept in as I logged into the remote help tool. Every nerve told me to stop. I shook it off, tapping the link at midnight after sending Ryan a message that I was ready.

For the next half hour, I stared at my phone, watching as Ryan remoted in, scanning it for any sign of what was happening. Silence swallowed me as I sat on the edge of the couch, waiting. A few status updates from Ryan: each one telling me what he found: Nothing.

Finally, just after 12:30, Ryan messaged again:

All clean. No malware. No weird flags.

I sighed to let out the tension that had been building all evening. A nagging feeling tugged at the back of my mind and gave me no such relief. Ryan called soon after.

"Hey man, I've gone through everything. Your phone's fine. Just a glitch. Happens sometimes."

"Yeah, I figured," my voice sounded distant to my ears. "Thanks for checking."

A pause stretched on the other end. "You sound off. You sure everything's okay?"

I rubbed my neck, unsure. "Something's still bothering me. I don't think it's just the phone."

Ryan exhaled through his nose.

“You’re not scared it happened.
You’re scared it saw you see it.”

He paused.

“I’ll swing by and we’ll deal with it. Okay?”

That pause said more than anything else.

"Yeah. That sounds good. Thanks, man."

"No worries. I'll swing by tomorrow. Get some sleep."

"Thanks. I'll try. Have a good one."

That was Ryan.

He never told me what to do. He just made sure I didn't fall.

I sat in the dim living room.

The quiet pressed in. I rubbed my arms, as if I could shake the weight off.

Something in the air felt... expectant. Like the room was waiting for me to notice.

I reached for the remote to shut off the TV—

The TV flickered once.

Then again, slower, intentional.

Not a glitch.

A blink.

Then it went dark. Not like it lost signal. Like it made a decision.

A test, maybe.

One, I just failed.

I stared at the blank screen.

Whatever it was... it was done watching.

So was I.

I couldn't do this anymore.

I just needed sleep.

I passed by the window one last time. Grayson's light was still on.

Somewhere in the distance, I thought of Kevin—still running, still free.

I didn't envy his freedom. I envied his invisibility.

I stared at the ceiling in bed, trying to sleep, hoping Ryan wouldn't find anything strange tomorrow either so I could be at peace.

Just as I started to drift to sleep, I heard it.

Tap. Tap.

The third tap was always his answer.

This wasn't an answer.

Just a checkmark.

Like something marking me present without saying a word.

Not loud. Not demanding.

Just enough to be *real*.

Like a finger on a file.

Not reading.

Just hovering—ready to classify.

And I hadn't been labeled yet.

Another tap. Deliberate. Not calling me. Just confirming I was still listening.

I slid out of bed, each step heavy, like I was trespassing in my own home. The cold floor nipping at my feet. Shadows danced in the blinds.

Mr. Grayson's light was off.

Not burned out.

Not forgotten.

Just... gone.

Like it was never meant to be there in the first place.

It was just watching until it didn't need to anymore.

But something in the shadows was still awake.

Watching.

Not to hurt me.

To remind me.

The file was still open.

And if it was open... then something was waiting for me to blink.

Tap. Tap.

Still just two.

It wasn't done checking.

So I stared into the dark.

And I didn't blink.

Not yet.

Because if I blinked... it might finish what it started.

Chapter 7

I felt like I hadn't slept more than four hours. My head throbbed. Every muscle ached from lying tense all night. Light slashed through the blinds like a blaring alarm.

Checking the time, I squinted against the harsh glare of my phone screen, which displayed 10:30 a.m. Weeks of training myself to wake up early for a healthier routine felt wasted. The damage of losing sleep started to bleed into every facet of my being. *Another crack.* I wasn't sure how many more I could take.

I sat up slowly, feeling the last few days blur together in my mind—half reality, half twisted dream, and flickering phone screens. Mr. Grayson's late-night light. The call with Ryan. That tapping sound in the kitchen. All of it piled into one mess, refusing to make sense.

My feet dragged across the cold floor as I went to the bathroom. I splashed water over my face, but the haze clung tight, unmoved. As I looked in the mirror, my sleepless eyes showed me a hollow-eyed stranger staring back at me, almost lifeless. Dark shadows clung tight beneath his eyes, his skin pale.

I needed Ryan to dig deeper—help me find an escape route out of this nightmare.

I sat there feeling the weight of it all building again like static, ready to spark. This wasn't just paranoia, not after the light went out. Mr. Grayson, or whatever it was, was toying with me. I felt sick to my stomach, thinking that could be my reality.

I moved through the motions. Coffee grounds. Water. My hands worked automatically, like my body knew it needed caffeine to fake being functional. The rich scent filled the air, grounding me, even if only slightly.

I stared out the window as the coffee brewed, steam swirling like ghostly wisps. My eyes went instinctively to Mr. Grayson's porch, which sat empty.

A strange emptiness crept in. He hadn't left that spot in days; he just sat there watching...lurking. And now he was gone? I couldn't shake the feeling of a cat-and-mouse game, and today, the cat had decided to leave its perch.

Where did he go?

Cats don't leave unless they're already inside.

I leaned closer to the window, scanning every shadow and corner of the neighborhood. But there was nothing—only the usual stillness of early morning. My tormentor, my stalker, wasn't where he'd always been.

I gripped the warm mug as if it were my only anchor to reality. *What could he be?* The question spun in my mind, growing the pit in my stomach deeper.

Maybe he was some otherworldly entity, a shadow slipping between dimensions here to prey on an unlucky few. Or something darker, a demon feeding on dread. Or an alien watching from the sidelines, studying us for some unknown purpose.

Or...

I tightened my grip around the mug, its warmth seeping through but doing little to steady me. The relentless questions gnawed at what little logic I had left. It seemed insane, but... could he be some kind of operative? Someone working with others, maybe a hacker, or even using AI? But why? Why would anyone target me?

The thought lingered like a stubborn fog. I was just an average guy, a nobody, trying to get by like everyone else. Nothing about me screamed "target." But here I was, spiraling over an old man on a porch and a series of impossible glitches. The questions only seemed to dig deeper into the mystery.

Why me?

I spent the morning pacing back and forth across my house, replaying last night on a loop that got darker each time. Every noise made me jump a little—the fridge's hum, the faint buzz of the lights... and the faint click that didn't match anything I owned.

I kept glancing at the computer folder with Mr. Grayson's photo in the middle of the desktop, like it was mocking me, daring me to open it.

A chill ran down my spine, freezing every attempt to reach for the mouse. Routines had grounded me before—maybe they'd do it again. Maybe they'd bring me the same solace they did... the last time he stared through me.

The coffee smelled like it should've helped, but it didn't. I sipped. Nothing. I made toast and didn't touch it. I just stared out the window, waiting for the street to tell me something. It didn't.

I thought about my unplugged phone yesterday morning. The light went on and off when I looked back at Mr. Grayson's house as if he were sending some silent message. And then that website... his face staring back at me like a bad joke played by something I couldn't even see. But how much of that could I explain to Ryan?

He was the logical one, always has been. I didn't want him to write me off as paranoid. But I couldn't ignore what I'd seen and felt yesterday. Every second I replayed the moments, I found it more challenging to separate what felt real from what didn't.

I sat at my desk and stared at a new project that arrived in my inbox. Work usually grounded me. Not today.

Seconds dragged as I rewrote my thoughts over and over, trying to make them sound sane and doing my best to piece together a version that sounded somewhere near the realm of rational. *Maybe I'd start with the phone and the light to ease him in before I dropped the rest.* My mind kept cycling back and forth, sorting through memories, turning over every detail like I'd find some hidden proof.

Time slipped away in the haze of repetition until suddenly, it was Noon. I heard the familiar sound of Ryan's car pulling up outside. I rushed to open the door before he could even knock.

"You look like hell," he said, eyebrow raised, his face a mix of concern and confusion. "Are you alright?"

I forced a laugh that sounded hollow even to me. “Yeah, something like that. Been having... quite the week is all.”

We stepped inside as Ryan studied me, his expression turning serious. “Alright, what’s going on? This isn’t like you. We hang out a couple of times a month, but the last three days? Every time I’ve been here, you’re jumpy... paranoid even. What’s changed?”

Ryan’s gaze felt like a weight pressing into my chest, his concern sharp enough to slice through the fog clouding my mind. My fingers twitched, brushing against my wrist as I swallowed down the rough dryness that seemed to grow thicker with each second.

I opened my mouth to speak, but the words tangled up a hundred thoughts fighting to be first. He watched me, eyebrows drawn. The usual lightness between us was replaced with a heavy, expectant silence.

I hesitated, glancing at my phone on the table, the small black rectangle that suddenly seemed so sinister. *What if someone was listening? What if every word I said to Ryan exposed me?* But as I looked at Ryan, I felt I needed to tell him, anyone. I was tired of it clawing at my throat.

I drew a shaky breath, feeling the weight of it settle before I spoke, “It’s... it’s complicated. There’s this feeling...like I’m not alone. Even when I know I am.” I rubbed my neck, tension creeping back, the kind that hadn’t left since last night. “Things keep happening. Stuff I can’t explain.”

He frowned, crossing his arms, and disbelief started to fill his eyes. “Like what?”

I hesitated, picking my words carefully. “Last night... while you were remoting into my phone, I noticed my neighbor Mr. Grayson’s light was on. But when I went to bed 30 minutes later, it was off—like I was being played with.

“So... an old guy turned his porch light off after you saw it on. That’s what’s been sticking with you?”

“Every night, without fail, I plug my phone in. But yesterday morning? I woke up, and the phone was unplugged. The charging block hadn’t even moved.” I could feel my voice faltering, the weight of my words hanging between us. “I just... don’t know what’s real right now.”

He studied me carefully. “So what? You think he broke in just to unplug your phone? Maybe you’re just tired, stressed, and overworked.”

“I’ll admit, I am all those things. Tired. Stressed. Overworked. But things are happening, Ryan. I know it sounds crazy. That’s why I’m giving you the small stuff, ‘the little things,’ so you don’t write me off as a nutjob.”

“I know you’re not,” Ryan said. He stood there a second longer than he needed to. “Sit down.”

I looked up. His tone had shifted — less sharp, more deliberate.

I dropped into the chair. He stayed standing, arms crossed, still watching.

“So you really think it’s more than lights and phones acting up?” he asked, voice low. “You’re sure this isn’t just you overthinking again?”

My mouth felt dry.

“It’s... more than that.

I don’t feel alone. Even when no one’s there.

Like something’s watching.
Tracking.

And lately...”

“It’s like I’m not making the choices anymore. Just carrying them out.”

“Tracking you... how?” he asked. His voice was steady, but every word came like it had been weighed, like he didn’t want to trigger something he couldn’t put back.

I rubbed my hands together, trying to keep my voice steady. “I keep hearing small noises, clicks, and taps. It’s like the noises have become some kind of signal. Like someone’s reminding me that they’re there.”

Ryan leaned against the wall, arms crossed, a faint frown starting to form. “And you’re sure this isn’t just... I don’t know. Lack of sleep or stress?”

What I’ve told him isn’t enough; I’m losing him. I need to dive deeper.

Chills began to crawl up my spine as I replayed the night everything started over in my head. “Do you know the site *thispersondoesnotexist.com*?”

“Yeah, what about it?” A skeptical curiosity flickered in his eyes.

I met his eyes, feeling the desperation creep into my voice. “The night before the party, when I was finalizing the project. I was on the site looking for a replacement for Jessica after our photos got ruined. I clicked through hundreds of faces to find the perfect one to replace her. While I was searching, Mr. Grayson’s face popped up.” I paused to let him digest it.

Ryan’s frown deepened, eyes narrowing as he crossed his arms tighter. The crease between his brows looked like a shadow. His mouth opened to argue, then closed, his expression unreadable. “You’re saying his face showed up on a site with randomly generated AI faces?” His voice held a sharp edge, half disbelief, half concern as he searched my face for an answer.

I pulled up the saved image on my computer to show him what I meant. “Yes,” I leaned forward, needing him to understand. “It’s him, down to every last detail. The image was still, but it felt as

though he was looking at me through it. Ever since I saw him, I haven't felt alone. Not once. Not even with the lights off and the doors locked.

Ryan's face changed. He didn't say anything for a second. He just stared like he was trying to convince himself that it wasn't real.

I took a sip from my mug. The coffee clung to my throat, stale and bitter. The room felt stifling, air pressing in just enough to make breathing an effort. Ryan shifted closer, his hand bracing against the table as he studied me with a gaze like a spotlight pinning me down. His voice dropped to a near-whisper, tense as he moved closer. "You're not saying he's watching you, are you?"

I met his stare. "I am."

"The reason that I stepped out at the party the other night was because of him. I saw him looking at all of us at the party. I blinked, and he locked eyes directly on me. I looked away and back, but he was gone without a trace."

Ryan's gaze hardened, his eyes flickering over the image, then back to me, dissecting each word and weighing its reality. He took a long, measured breath, breaking eye contact as if he needed that pause to recalibrate.

"Look... it's strange. I'll give you that." His eyes held mine a second longer than usual, his voice low. "Your neighbor's face shows up on a random AI generator. Your phone unplugs itself. Now you're hearing things? None of that's normal."

He leaned back slowly. "I'm not saying you're wrong. But if this is real... it's not just some glitch. It's *intentional*. And if it's not..."

He hesitated. "Either way, I think we're past the point of ignoring it."

"Alright," he said quietly, eyes still on the screen. "I'll take a look—but if someone's watching, they already know we're looking back. Don't spiral. Not yet."

The unspoken question hovered in his eyes. *Are you okay? Is any of this real?*

Maybe I am crazy. But it all felt too real.

“Please,” I said, my voice barely a whisper. “I don’t know what to do anymore. I feel trapped in my own house.” I looked at Ryan, hoping for some reassurance. But his expression stayed unreadable as his eyes scanned me like I was both victim and suspect.

He nodded slowly. “Let’s start with the basics. I’m not promising anything, but I’ll check everything out,”

Ryan lowered himself into the chair, his fingers hovering inches above the keyboard as though he expected it to come alive under his touch. He paused, unsure whether to find the truth or leave it hidden. I sat there, watching, my hands clenched. The hum of the room pressed down on me like a weight, the silence buzzing in the air, each second stretching taut and fraying at the edges of discovery.

As he began typing, I watched him, wondering if he’d find anything. Or if, in the end, he’d start looking at me like I’d imagined it all and our friendship tattered beyond repair. Ryan’s fingers moved across the keys, each tap echoing in the silence like a countdown. I waited, breath held, wondering if this would end with answers or just another layer of doubt.

Hours had gone by. Ryan kept typing, his expression shifting from casual focus to a deepening frown. Finally, he leaned back and drummed his fingers lightly on the desk.

“Look,” he said, “It’s clean, no sketchy files. No processes are hiding in the background. Or...” He glanced over at me, the words hanging.

I leaned forward. “Or what?”

“Or,” he continued in a near whisper, “we’re dealing with something far beyond basic surveillance. If so, whoever’s behind this knows exactly how to stay hidden. They’re working on a level I have never seen before.”

His words hit like a punch, winding my chest back to where it had been yesterday. “So either it’s nothing... or I am completely compromised?”

“Exactly.” He nodded. “The absence of evidence isn’t proof of absence, especially if they’re playing at a level designed to stay invisible. High-level attacks won’t leave a trail. They’re subtle whispers you can barely catch. They’d leave your system looking spotless while monitoring your every move.” He pointed at my laptop.

A heavy silence filled the space between us, making the room feel smaller and closer.

“So, what’s next?” I asked, feeling his answer settle before he spoke.

For the first time, I saw hesitation in his eyes. “We move carefully. If someone is watching, they’ll pick up on us checking. We’ll have to get creative and leave no trace of what we’re doing. But if this is nothing, we risk turning your life into a paranoid experiment.”

His gaze locked onto mine, serious. “Are you sure you want to go down this path?”

I felt the air grow thick. “I don’t think I have a choice.”

I can’t live in this purgatory thrust upon me any longer. I’ve had enough.

Ryan’s gaze returned to the screen as he gained a severe tone. “Alright then. We’ll act as if this is real and assume every move is monitored. If there’s nothing, we’ll know soon enough.”

I nodded. “Alright. I just need to know I’m not imagining all of this.” I stopped and thought about whether there was any way I could contribute more on my end. “Maybe that site could be a lead in itself. The tab with his image is open on the browser.”

“Good call. I’ll dig into it and see what I can find.”

As Ryan packed up, I watched him, unease knotting in my stomach. “There’s... something off about him. Mr. Grayson. It’s like he knows things he shouldn’t, even about us. He’s... always watching. Grayson is there when he shouldn’t be and sees more than he lets on. It doesn’t make sense, but he never looks away.

Ryan raised an eyebrow. “So he’s nosy. Maybe he’s just suspicious of his neighbors. You know, everyone has that one guy on their street.”

He smirked as he patted me on the shoulder.

“You’re letting this get to you, man. I get it, though. Get some rest, alright? You look like you could use it. I’ll check in with a few people who know their way around this kind of thing. They’d be interested in taking a crack at this. Whoever or whatever is behind this—we’ll find them.”

A slight chill crept into the back of my mind. *Was he doubting me or holding something back?* I shook it off.

We dapped. The sound filled the whole room. There was a moment of quiet understanding passing between us.

He lingered in the doorway as his hands gripped the frame. He looked back at me. “Here’s what we’ll do. Step by step, we’ll take this slow and handle each part together. Nothing will slip by us. If someone’s watching, it’s almost like they *want* us to know. We’d be beyond our depth, but we’ll find what’s here. Just... don’t let it drag you under, okay? I’m here for whatever comes.”

My stomach twisted when I glanced out the living room window and saw Grayson seated in his chair on the porch. How long had he been there? Just rocking back and forth gently in his chair. His head sharply trailed Ryan as he walked to his car.

A dark realization crept over me. *What if he already knew?* What if he'd heard every word I said to Ryan, confirming his suspicion?

I sidestepped out of his line of sight to avoid the stare I knew was coming. The thin wall separating us felt like nothing against his gaze. It cut through the distance, pressing in on me, daring me to step back. To look him in the eye and face his punishment. My skin crawled with the weight of it.

I couldn't bear the thought of him burrowing any deeper into my mind, leaving trails of dread wherever he passed. *I could feel him lingering, like a shadow cast over the corners of my mind.*

After Ryan left, the house fell into an unsettling silence. I paced from room to room, feeling each second stretch on endlessly, my mind gnawing at everything he had said.

"Nothing at all... or completely compromised." The words echoed, feeding on every doubt I had left.

The midday light pressed heavily through the windows, stripping the house of its warmth and casting everything in dimmer shades.

I sank into the couch, trying to shake the crawling feeling beneath my skin. The fridge hummed a slow drone that made the silence feel alive.

Time shifted strangely, stretching and compressing. Twenty minutes felt both too short and too long, twisting the usual rhythm of my day.

Silence pressed against me, broken only by the clock's ticking on the wall.

Each second stretched painfully, yet my mind felt like it skipped forward, leaving gaps I couldn't account for.

The house creaked, settling. Each tick from the wall clock echoed like a foreign heartbeat, deliberate and loud.

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

Like it knew I was listening.

I moved to the kitchen, absently pouring a glass of water, letting the coolness settle my nerves. The faintest trace of something floral and sweet lingered in the air. I froze, inhaling sharply. It was the same faint lavender and lilac scent I'd caught whiffs of before.

Impossible.

It had to be a trick of the mind. A memory forcing itself into the present. But the scent remained subtle and unsettling, as though threading itself into the air.

My skin prickled as I set the glass down and heard a loud clinking sound that echoed in the empty house. I turned around slowly, expecting to find something, someone, standing there. But the room remained empty. The buzz of the fridge and the tick of the clock filled the void.

I moved restlessly from room to room.

The scent drifted back, sweet at first. Then wrong.

Sharp, like hot iron in the back of my throat.

The lavender and lilac were growing stronger, seeping through the walls. The scent was thick and metallic, crawling deeper into my lungs. It clung to each breath, too intense, too vivid, like a memory that refused to stay buried.

No vents. No source. Just a scent clawing its way through the drywall like memory had roots.

The house creaked, and I froze, every nerve screaming that something was drastically wrong. And then, a soft knock broke the silence, gentle but insistent. I froze, listening. The knock came again, steady and expectant, as if someone was watching me from just behind the door.

I opened the door, bracing for whatever came next.

“G—Grandma...?”

It slipped out before I could stop it.

She stood there, a soft cardigan draped over her petite frame, her silver hair curled just like I remembered. The smile on her face was warm and familiar. For a split second, I wanted to believe it was real.

“My boy,” she cooed, stepping forward, her voice tender and sweet. “You’ve been fighting so hard, my dear. Don’t you want peace?”

Something flickered behind her eyes, like static beneath glass.

Her hand moved too smoothly. They were frictionless, as if gliding on invisible rails.

She spoke, but the words arrived late.

As if the silence hadn’t finished speaking yet.

My breath caught in my throat. I blinked, willing the image to disappear. *This isn’t real. It couldn’t be. I’ve officially broken.*

“I’ve missed you,” she continued, her voice soothing as she walked closer, her hands outstretched. “Come with me. You don’t have to be alone anymore. We’ll be together forever.”

The words hit me like a punch to the gut. The grief I had buried so deep threatened to surface again. My fists clenched, jaw tight, fighting the almost hypnotic pull that beckoned me closer to her. “You’re not her,” I whispered, stepping back. “She’s gone. You’re not her, whatever the hell you are.”

Her face twitched. The skin under her eyes *glitched*—a single frame too fast—then returned. Like reality had hiccupped. Her smile returned a breath too late, too wide.

She spoke, but a fraction too late, like the words were queued. “You can see her again,” it said, its voice still laced with false warmth. “No more pain, no more loneliness. We can be together just like before.”

Grief surged up, raw and consuming, as if the wound had only just been torn open.

“Quit wearing her face! Whatever the hell you are, you are not her!” My voice was trembling but resolute.

I took a step back. *I can grab my gun. But what if guns don't work on this thing? I'd be trapped. I don't want to risk it.*

I shook my head as it continued to move towards me. I took another step back. Defiance began to spark in my voice. “She wouldn't want this,” I said louder. “You can't use her against me. Not like this!”

I need it to get closer to get around it and run.

The figure flickered again, its face shifting into something shadowed and hollow. I stumbled back, heart racing, as the inky illusion unraveled before me. The figure's warmth faded; it became emptier, darker, a hollow shell. I couldn't move back any further.

A wall rose behind me. *Why can't I move!?*

Grayson grabbed me, locking me into place. His grip was icy and unyielding, like iron bands crushing my ribs. Each breath grew harder, my lungs struggling against the weight of it.

“HELP!”

Fear gripped me. Life felt like it could slip away in an instant. I thrashed and screamed, but his grip didn't give an inch.

“HELP! FIRE! HELP ME!!”

She raised her finger over her lips with a devious smile.

“Quiet dear, you don’t want to disturb your neighbor, do you?” I heard her voice again, soft and warm, cutting through the haze of panic. Its voice perfectly replicated my grandmother’s again as it reformed into her.

Her fingers brushed my chin. Too smooth. Too perfect. Like a prosthetic dipped in warmth.

She gazed deeply into my eyes. Something dark and hungry stirred behind the familiar glow.

“Don’t you want to see me again, honey?”

I froze, my mind stumbling over the familiarity. She stepped forward, her gentle smile and kind eyes reaching me with that warmth I’d lost so long ago.

“You can, you know,” she cooed, her voice soft and hypnotic. “You just need to… let go.”

Her touch felt familiar, but wrong. The warmth was there, but it sank into my skin like ice.

Her smile stretched wider. Comforting details turned brittle, sharp around the edges.

This isn’t her.

But her voice was perfect.

The thought clawed at me, a twisted mix of grief and disbelief.

She touched my forehead. Her fingers began to glow—faint, white, and wrong.

And for a moment, I felt like someone, or something, was reaching through her to touch my mind.

The world began to spin. My vision narrowed. Rage sliced through the grief as I wrenched myself back.

“Get away from me!” I hissed, my voice a thread of defiance.

The last spark of me clawed back.

A strange warmth flooded me. A gentle, euphoric wave poured over my fear, washing away the tension.

Grayson’s suffocating grip seemed to dissolve, replaced by comfort as her presence drew me in. Her hand extended slowly and gracefully, as if offering a lifeline. The edges of my mind blurred, thoughts growing soft and light.

And I felt peace for the first time in a long time.

My head drooped. Her warmth coiled around me like a weighted blanket soaked in syrup—comfort smothering into dread. I couldn’t tell if I was being comforted or buried alive.

Somewhere deep within, I felt the pull to reach out, to take her hand. She was right there. I could see her again. I *wanted* to see her again.

“Just let go,” her voice echoed further away.

This isn’t her... But the thought slipped through my fingers like sand, swallowed by her endless warmth.

Her presence blurred the edges of my mind. The will to hold on dissolved into mist. My hand rose, reaching toward that peace I thought I’d lost forever.

A flicker of breath caught in my chest.

Just for a second... I heard her.

“You cry, you scream, you break. But you don’t stop. Not in this house.”

But the warmth drowned it out.

My vision began to distort, the world flickering around me like static. Just before I could touch her, darkness swallowed everything.

There was nothing.

Nothing except a single, distant whisper. A half-remembered melody. A memory on the edge of recollection. Everything faded as the last of my senses slipped away from me, lost to the abyss.

The last thing I felt wasn't peace.

It was pressure. Fingers curling around my mind like vines.

And I... let them in.

You made it.

If you're reading this, you carried something heavy — and didn't let go.
That matters.

Maybe this story left a scratch.
Maybe a scar.
Maybe a seed.

Either way, thank you for staying.

You saw the fall.
You felt the stillness.
And still, you followed the light.

Maybe you broke.
Maybe you're still breaking.
But you didn't run.

You stood at the edge and listened anyway.

What you brought in is yours.
What you take out — that's your choice.

And if this ending stirred something...
hold on to it.

The world is loud.
But sometimes, a whisper moves more than a scream.

Thank you for carrying this all the way.

You're not alone.

Not now.
Not ever.

— **Justin Cardenas**

And if you're still here...

There's something else waiting for you.

If something in this story stayed with you — a line, a weight, a whisper —

I'd be honored to walk a little further with you.

→ myneighbordoesntexist.com

Next Up: *Everyone Pays Their Dues*

Before all of this... he fought a different kind of war.

One man. One HOA. One debt that had to be paid.

That man... was Mr. Grayson.

He came for everyone who thought they were untouchable. They weren't.

Then: *The Book of Miles — Shattered Reality*

See the world Miles left behind — and what he took with him when he became Synaxis.
He began the fracture. But maybe it ends with you.

Bring these worlds to life.

Help keep the light alive.

→ patreon.com/JustinCardenas (*Help shape what comes next*)

Support isn't about money — it's about helping stories like this survive in a world that forgets too easily.

The story ends here.

But echoes don't ask permission.

The light didn't end here.

It just moved on.

This book was never meant to be easy.

It wasn't made to entertain or escape.

It was made to *confront*.

I gave this everything. Not because the world demanded it, but because art still deserves it.

We live in an era where stories are manufactured—stripped of soul and sold for profit.

But you are not disposable.

Neither is your story.

Neither is your experience.

If you've ever felt like you didn't matter, you're not alone. You do matter.

Art is not dead.

Not here.

Never here.

Thank you for walking this path with me.

You may not be the same reader next time.

The story won't change.

But what you see might.

Author Bio

Justin Cardenas is the creator of **Soulbound Horror** — a genre not built for comfort, but for confrontation. His stories explore the weight of control, doubt, and identity, asking questions most fiction avoids.

You don't have to be perfect to stand.

You only have to face what lies beneath.

Above all, he believes art still matters — and always will.

He writes not to escape the world, but to face it.

For him, stories are not products. Readers are not "consumers."

Art is a covenant, not a commodity.

In a world that profits from emptiness, that covenant breaks easily.

He refuses to write stories that say nothing — and refuses to pretend that's enough for a world starving for something real.

And to everyone still waiting for New Vegas 2 — you're not alone.

Full Disclaimer

This is a story.

This is art — meant to invite reflection.

It does not promote a political, religious, or personal agenda.

It does not tell you what to believe or how to act.

It asks only this: **see clearly.**

This is fiction — an exploration of human nature:
light, dark, and the different shades of gray.

Power.

Morality.

Control.

Freedom.

Responsibility.

Choice.

No side is simplified.

No view is imposed.

No answers are handed to you.

The characters act.

You're not asked to agree.

Only to consider.

Stories reflect. They provoke.

They're mirrors — not blueprints.

What you do with the reflection is yours.

This book raises questions.

It respects your judgment.

It does not assume your path.

This is not a guide.

Not a warning.

Not a statement.

Just a lens through which to see.

You are free to read — or not.

To take from it what you will — or nothing at all.

It does not speak for you.

But it may speak *to* you.

That part... is yours and yours alone.

And always will be.

On Creative Process

My Neighbor Doesn't Exist was developed with the support of AI tools during the drafting and editing process.

Each character, setting, and theme in this story was **personally imagined and designed** by the author.

AI tools were used under direct supervision and never independently. Their role was strictly limited to refinement, clarification, and pacing.

The author's full creative intent always directed this story.

This support also helped ensure:

- Emotional pacing, thematic delivery, and structural flow of heavy topics were handled with the utmost care
- The story could challenge without causing harm

This story was carried through silence and refined with difficulty. After years of silence and strain, it's finally ready to be seen.

Every revision and narrative choice was made with clear intent.

The emotions, ideas, and vision that define this book are solely the author's.

Tools helped shape the surface. But the soul — its meaning, its morality, and its humanity — remains untouched.

LEGAL NOTICE

By continuing, you acknowledge this journey is yours alone.

This is a work of fiction.

Any emotional or psychological impact is accepted as your own.

The author assumes no liability.

If you continue, you do so willingly.

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Names, characters, organizations, businesses, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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