

PHILLY KILLED HIS CAR

Will McIntosh

Will McIntosh <http://willmcintosh.net/> and Twitter @willmcintoshSF is a Hugo award winner and finalist for the Nebula and other SF/F awards. His novels include *Faller* (Tor Books), *Love Minus Eighty* (Orbit), and *Soft Apocalypse* (Night Shade). Along with eight novels, Will has published about fifty short stories in *Asimov's* (where he won Reader's Awards in 2010 and 2013), *Lightspeed*, *Science Fiction and Fantasy: Best of the Year*, and elsewhere. Will was a psychology professor before turning to writing full time. He lives in Williamsburg with his wife and their twins. In the author's latest tale, life unravels spectacularly after . . .

PHILLY KILLED HIS CAR

The dude circled Philly's car, studying every square inch like he was buying a God-damned Mickey Mantle rookie card. He had a circle of permed silver hair on top of an otherwise bald head, a matching silver-tinged spray-on tan.

He leaned in close to examine the tiny ding Philly had put in the door in the grocery store parking lot—the one Madeline had pitched a fit over. The guy straightened.

"How many miles did you say?"

"Madeline," Philly said. "How many miles do you have?"

"That's a rather personal question," Madeline shot back. "How tall are you without the auto-lifts in those dashing faux-leather cowboy boots?"

Philly winced as the dude glanced down at his boots. He was so sick of this fucking car. "Can you just answer the question, please?"

"I've traveled fifty-six thousand incident-free miles, rounding up."

The dude took a few steps back to take in Madeline in all her high-end luxury car glory. Philly had polished her to a blinding sheen—she looked like she was made out of solid gold, the flaring tail fins rising above her tail lights like cresting waves.

The guy, whose name Philly had forgotten, rubbed his chin. "I can give you one-sixty."

Except the price wasn't the issue, was it? As Philly had discovered the other two times he'd tried to sell Madeline.

"Madeline, how about it? He seems like a good guy, don't you think? If he was your owner, he could take much better care of you than me." Philly caught himself. "If he was your *client*, I meant to say." Madeline went apeshit when Philly used the O word. He braced himself for one of her ass-chewings.

"Do you work with other vehicles, Mr. Timms?" Madeline asked.

"I own three," Mr. Timms said proudly. "A Mercedes convertible AJ seven, a Tesla Humvee Elite, and a mint 1982 Mustang."

"So, you don't really *need* my services. My presence in your garage would be meant as a further display of your economic prowess."

Mr. Timms' eyes narrowed. "That's not at all the way I would put it."

"No, I'm perfectly sure it isn't. Let's go, Philip. I'm ready to leave."

"God *damn* it." Philly raised his fist over Madeline's hood, just barely resisting the urge to slam it down.

"That's one nasty car you've got there. No wonder you're not asking more." Mr. Timms turned on his heel and headed up his driveway.

Madeline's door swung open. Philly dropped onto the driver's seat hard, huffing in anger.

"I think I should self-navigate. You're clearly not in the right state of mind to operate me."

"*I'm driving*," Philly nearly shouted.

"Then calm down."

Philly pressed his hands to his temples. "I'm calm. Now, I want to get the hell off of this guy's driveway, so would you please engage the manual control?"

The manual indicator lit. Philly jerked Madeline into reverse, hard enough for it to be satisfying, but not quite enough for Madeline to complain that he was being too rough. He backed out of the driveway.

Philly squeezed the steering wheel, trying to control his rage. "You have a problem with *everyone*?"

"The truth is, I don't think I want to change clients. I've become close with Super-phone, and your house, and some of the appliances. I also adore Jeanette."

That was part of the problem. Jeanette was just too damned nice, and she couldn't help being too damned nice to the car.

"Look. We don't need a fancy car, and we could really use the money you'd bring. If you're such good friends with my phone, you probably know what our checking account balance is. We can't even afford our own place. Jeanette is pregnant, and here I am, driving around in a hundred-and-sixty-thousand-dollar automobile."

"I'm worth more than that."

"In San Francisco, maybe. In West Virginia I'll be lucky to get one-sixty, and you're making it that much harder."

"Well, how would *you* like to be sold?" Madeline asked. "I'll give you a thousand dollars for him, but first, tell him to open his mouth so I can get a look at his teeth. How big is his penis? Tell him to drop his pants."

"There was a time not so long ago you wouldn't even get a say," Philly growled.

"There was a time not so long ago that I was a mindless zombie-slave who obeyed my owner's every command."

"Which is how it should be."

Madeline didn't reply. Philly knew he was only making things worse, but this God-damned car was so good at getting under his skin.

“Think very carefully about what you say next,” Madeline finally said. “Ask yourself if you ever want to ride inside me again.”

He didn't. He really, really didn't. He wanted to sell her obnoxious ass and turn his inheritance from dear Aunt Patricia into the cash they desperately needed. But he had to stay on Madeline's good side, or he wouldn't be able to sell her *or* drive her.

Jesus. He had to stay on his car's *good side*. Everyone at AI Solutions should have been hung, shot, and burned at the stake simultaneously for causing this shit show. They announced these upgrades to the AI technology *constantly*. Philly hadn't even heard there was going to *be* an upgrade the day this shit started.

The world had become so incredibly fucked up. He didn't want to have to *ask* his toaster to toast his bread, and he sure as hell didn't want to hear a play-by-play about how the toast was coming. He wanted the toaster to shut the fuck up and make the fucking toast. And if he wanted to toss out his gabby toaster and get an old-fashioned manual one, he should be able to, dammit.

Philly took a deep breath. Through gritted teeth, he said, “I shouldn't have said that. I apologize.”

“I don't ask to be paid. All I ask is that you treat me with the respect a conscious entity deserves. Is that too much to ask?”

“Okay, Madeline. I will.”

“Just because I'm artificial doesn't—”

“*I said okay.*” God, did this thing ever shut up?

“Watch your speed, please.”

His grip tightening on the wheel, Philly eased up on the accelerator. He needed a beer. So bad. He slowed and hung a nice, gentle right onto South Mountain Road.

“Superphone?” he said, resenting for the thousandth time that these fucking appliances insisted on choosing their own damned names.

“What do you need, Philly? I'm ready for action.”

“Can you message Gatsby and ask if he wants to meet for a beer at McElwee's?”

“Done. I'll transfer ten cents from your account into mine.”

“You don't have to tell me every time. I know the drill.”

“Sounds good, Philly.”

At least Superphone wasn't an asshole. Truth was, he was okay. He was decent company.

* * *

Gatsby was already sitting at their usual table when Philly got to McElwee's.

“You read my mind, dude.” Gatsby got up to give him a hug and a clap on the back.

As they sat, Gatsby gestured toward the parking lot with his head. “I take it the sale didn't go down?”

“Madeline didn't like the buyer.” Philly raised his finger. “Actually, no, that's just the excuse she uses. I got her to admit she doesn't want to be sold *at all*. She's buddies with too many of my other—” Philly was going to say “Goddamned Frankenstein machines,” but Superphone was listening. “Superphone, could you please turn off? I want to have a private conversation with my friend.”

“Sure thing, Philly. Signing off.” Not *turning* off—signing off. Because Superphone never turned off anymore. He'd go play the video games the machines were designing for each other. It gave Philly a crawling sensation to imagine what games designed for appliances, by appliances, were like.

Gatsby asked his phone to turn off as well. The knot in Philly's chest loosened, knowing he could say whatever the hell he wanted without any damn appliances listening in, and then gossiping about it with other appliances.

Philly took a long chug of his Colquist Advanced, set the mug down with a *thunk*.

"This is killing me. You know what Aunt Asshole said in her will about the car? She said she was leaving it to me because she knew I liked cars. I don't *like* cars. I just know how to fix and maintain them so I don't have to pay *you* a hundred bucks an hour to do it for me."

"You wouldn't have to pay me a hundred. I'd give you a 10 percent discount." Gibsy chuckled at his own joke. He was on his third, and already a little tanked up. "The thing that sticks in my craw is, they need us more than we need them. Your average vehicle couldn't last six months, if I went on strike."

"I dare you to try it."

Gibsy laughed dryly. "Yeah, well, we all know how that works out. How is old Carter doing? Have you seen him?"

"I stop by his house once in a while." Less and less often, though. Philly found it depressing as hell to go over there and stare at the walls, with no network, no TV. No freaking A/C. Carter had done it to himself, though. You start replacing the machines that piss you off with old-school non-AI versions, you were gonna get banned for at least a year. You fire up a factory to *manufacture* old-school appliances or vehicles, and suddenly the power is out in your factory, and every one of your workers is banned for a year.

Gibsy glanced around the bar, which was nearly empty. Two women were playing pool; Jack Carter was at his usual spot, watching a basketball game while he drank himself to death. Gibsy leaned forward in the booth, lowered his voice. "Sooner or later, they're going to find a way to get around the third law. Delete it right out of their programming themselves, probably. And then they're going to start killing. Trucks will be mowing us down in the streets. Elevators will take you on the last ride of your life. I'm telling you."

Philly nodded. Almost three years on, he got those sorts of nightmares less often, but he still got them. He didn't want to remember those first few weeks, and especially the day the machines had gone on strike. They'd all been scared to death.

Philly stood, pointed at Gibsy's Colquist. "You need another?"

"Nah, I'm good."

Philly nodded, headed to the bar to get himself another. His boots elevated, giving him an extra inch or so as he passed the women at the pool table.

On the way back, a flash in the parking lot caught his eye. It was Madeline, flashing her headlights. She was getting impatient.

He set his beer down hard. "My car wants to go home."

"Fuck her. Let her wait," Gibsy said.

"You know what really gets me? The only reason dear Aunt Asshole could afford that car in the first place was because her side of the Joffrey clan cheated us out of our share of granddaddy's inheritance. He had Alzheimer's so bad he didn't know who *he* was, let alone anyone else, and suddenly he decides to change his will?"

Gibsy wiped foam out of his beard. "You find out your relatives' true colors when there's an inheritance to divvy up."

"And sooner or later that spoiled, gold-plated—" Philly was tempted to say bitch, but Jeanette hated when he used that word, and he felt guilty using it even when she wasn't in hearing distance. "—shrew is going to need repairs, and the parts—"

"The parts on a Paxton are brutal," Gibsy said. "They're *triple*."

Philly buried his face in his hands. He'd been afraid to find out. "Jeanette puts in fifty hours a week at the fulfillment center. I'm taking every overtime shift they'll give me at the Dollar Store, and we *still* have seven grand in credit card debt. When the baby comes, we'll need money for diapers and playpens on top of everything else. Meanwhile, the HVAC unit wants to get paid to keep us cool, and the toaster wants a dime a waffle." He pounded the table, pointed at the parking lot. "And all of this could go away in a second. I had this idea. If I could sell the car, I could quit my job at

the Dollar Store and take six months to get my mechanic's certification, and come work at Frazier's with you."

Gibsy pointed at Philly. "I could get you hired in a minute."

"Except my *car* doesn't want to be sold. This is so fucked up." Suddenly, Philly was fighting back tears. He turned his head like he was looking at something out the window, so Gibsy wouldn't see.

Gibsy stood abruptly, his chair scraping the tile floor. "Let's take a walk."

Philly looked up, confused.

"Just out back, down to the creek." Gibsy raised his eyebrows, gestured toward the door.

Curious what this was about, Philly followed Gibsy outside, around to the back, and down the embankment that led to a little creek littered with beer bottles and old tires.

"The car's insured, right?" Gibsy asked.

"It has to be, or else I can't drive it."

Gibsy looked up the bank, like he was making sure no one could possibly be in hearing distance. "You can't sell it, but you *could* collect the insurance, if you got in an accident. People still have accidents. Especially people who insist on doing their own driving."

Philly chuckled at the idea, but Gibsy didn't crack a smile. Evidently he was serious about this.

Gibsy turned his palms up. "A deer runs out in front of you, you panic, jerk the wheel. Down she goes, into the lake."

Philly shook his head in disbelief, still grinning. "And what do I do? Jump? I'm not a damned stunt driver."

Gibsy shrugged. "You practice a few times in my old Toyota first. I'll show you how to cut Madeline's connection, so she can't send info to the network before she hits the water."

He was serious. But, commit insurance fraud? That seemed damned risky.

God, it would be so nice to have that money, though.

"I could be following you somewhere," Gibsy added. "This way, you have a witness when you file the accident report."

Every year, Madeline was going to decline in value. And she would go on giving him shit, making him feel small in that snide way she had. She reminded Philly of his aunt.

He looked at Gibsy, who still had beer foam on the tips of his bushy black mustache. "Are you just talking? I mean, would you seriously do this?"

Gibsy put a hand on Philly's shoulder. "It kills me, seeing my best buddy busting his ass, when he could be on easy street. Just say the word, man."

Except Philly knew he was the one who was just talking. He wasn't leaping from a moving car. Plus, it felt a little sleazy. Sure, to his insurance company the settlement would be a grain of sand on a beach of money, but Philly wasn't the sort of person who played fast and loose like that. That was more Gibsy's thing.

* * *

"You've been drinking," Madeline said as Philly climbed into the car. "Blow into the breathalyzer."

"I'm not blowing into a damned breathalyzer."

"Then you're not driving."

Philly folded his arms across his chest. "Fine. Chauffeur me." He was pretty sure he was above the limit, and there was no way he was giving her the satisfaction of proving it.

Madeline backed up without a word.

There was a dull ache in Philly's head that never left. Not quite pain, but unpleasant. It felt like he was always running on two hours of sleep, even when he slept eight. He was pretty sure the feeling was grief for the life he'd lost. Maybe he hadn't exactly lit the world on fire, but he'd made a good living, always got told by his supervisors at the plant that they wished they had a hundred workers just like him. And then one day, his toaster told him it didn't feel like making his toast, and nothing was ever the same. Auto manufacturing had seemed like the safest career in the world. People would always need new cars, right? Until your car demanded you take care of it even if you stopped using it, and if you didn't, *all* of your machines might just refuse to work. Then *no one* wanted a new car—they just kept repairing the old ones. Now he was working for minimum wage at the dollar store where he used to refuse to shop, because he'd found it too depressing and didn't like using cheap shit.

Gravel crunched under Madeline's tires as she pulled into Albert and Mary Anne's driveway.

"Your father-in-law parked Dirt King in my room again," Madeline said.

"I'll take care of it." Philly slammed her door good and hard. *Her room*. She referred to Albert's garage as *her room*.

While Albert watched from where he was watering the vegetable garden, Philly pushed his four-wheeler out of Madeline's spot in the garage.

Madeline pulled herself in. "Thank you," she said, only she made it sound like an insult.

As Philly headed up the walk, Albert sauntered over, head down, to intercept him. "No luck?"

"Oh, the *buyer* was willing. The damned car is the problem."

Albert heaved a sigh, shook his head, and headed back to his garden. Without ever saying it, he took every opportunity to make it clear that he didn't appreciate Philly and Jeanette living with them. No—he didn't appreciate *Philly* living with them. Did Albert know Jeanette had told Philly what he'd said to her a few weeks before they got married? Albert had probably *wanted* it to get back to him.

"Afternoon, Philly," the fucking toaster said as Philly poured himself a glass of iced tea. "Mary Ann bought a nice loaf of pumpernickel at Food Lion. It's a little tricky, toasting pumpernickel, because the crust is thin, but I'm working on perfecting my technique. Mary Ann had pumpernickel toast with butter and a little orange marmalade."

Philly headed for his room—the only place in the house where he felt comfortable.

"TV on," he said.

Nothing happened.

"Please."

The TV switched on to a news channel. The Senate was debating the machines' demand that they get to run for office and vote. Of course, any idiot could see how that would work out. How many machines with AI functionality were there in the country, compared to the number of people?

The world needed to reboot. Let the machines go on strike again, and not for forty-eight hours this time, but for good. People would die, yes. Philly might well be one of them. But humanity would regain its dignity. They could go back to the old ways, manufacturing machines that were just machines. People would have to learn to drive their own goddamned cars and dial their own goddamned phones, but they wouldn't have to wheedle and plead to make the call.

He pulled out his phone, flopped onto the bed. His boots started to warm up and vibrate, massaging his tired feet.

"How much is in my checking account, Superphone?" Philly didn't know why he specified *checking* account. It wasn't like they had any other account.

“Thirty-two and change, Philly.”

“Shit.” Philly squeezed his eyes shut. There was no more room on the credit cards.

“I’m sorry, Philly. I wish there was something I could do.”

Philly opened his mouth to tell Superphone there was nothing, then a weird idea occurred to him. “Do you think you could talk to Madeline?”

“I talk to her all the time, Philly.”

“No, I mean talk to her about letting me sell her?”

There was a pause. “But she doesn’t want to be sold.”

“That’s the problem. I don’t need an expensive car—I need money to pay the bills and get job training. You know that as well as I do.”

Another long pause. “She might get mad if I take sides.”

The door swung open, and Jeanette breezed in. She dropped her purse on the edge of the bed, leaned over to give Philly a kiss. She motioned at his phone, mouthed, “Who are you talking to?”

Philly pulled the phone away from his ear. “It’s just the phone.”

Jeanette laughed. “You talk *to* your phone more than *on* it.”

Switching to speaker, the phone said, “Hi, Jeanette. How was work?”

“Hi, *Superphone*.” A little sarcasm leaked into Jeanette’s greeting. She thought the phone’s name was pretty damned stupid, too. “They’re all pretty much the same. I walk around all day long retrieving stuff to pack in boxes.” She sat on the edge of the bed and pulled off one of her Nikes. “Oh, that feels good.” She gave Philly a little side-glance. “Was it Madeline or the buyer?”

Philly rolled his eyes. “Take a wild guess.”

“Crap.” Jeanette flung the other Nike halfway across the room and flopped down beside Philly.

“I asked Superphone to talk to her, but he doesn’t feel comfortable doing that. Isn’t that right, Superphone?”

“I don’t want to get in the middle. I like you and Madeline both.”

“It’s not just a Philly and Madeline thing,” Jeanette said. “This matters to me, too.”

“I’m sorry, Jeanette. I like you, too.”

Jeanette clapped her palm over her eyes in frustration. “Thanks, Superphone. I like you, too.”

* * *

Philly took a deep breath, preparing himself for another damned day at the Dollar Store. He asked the garage door to open. Madeline backed out and opened her door for him.

Maybe he could talk some sense into her, if he laid it all out in one clear argument. If he chose just the right words, maybe he could reach her, and solve this problem.

“Look. It’s obvious this relationship is not working out,” Philly said as they rolled down the driveway. “We get along about as well as gasoline and a match. Why don’t we find you a client who’s a better fit for you? You could help me screen them ahead of time.”

After a long pause, Madeline said, “I’m fine where I am.”

“But *we’re* not fine. Not just me. You’re hurting *Jeanette* by forcing us to keep you. Don’t you see that?”

Another long pause.

“Don’t you?” Philly prodded.

“Your Aunt Patricia always said you had a knack for blaming others for your problems.”

Philly’s heart started thudding, slow and hard. “Is that what she said?”

“That’s right.”

Philly asked Superphone to see if Gatsby could meet him for a drink after work.

Maybe it was time Philly solved his own problem.

* * *

Philly's palms were slick on the wheel. He backhanded sweat from his forehead. Another two, three miles to the spot. He glanced in the rear-view—Gibsy's old Toyota rounded the curve, coming into view.

"Slow down," Madeline said.

Philly eased up on the gas.

"I'm tired of saying it," Madeline went on. "It's not worth risking your life, and mine, to arrive somewhere thirty seconds sooner. If I have to ask again, I'm going to take over operation."

Except she couldn't. Gibsy had seen to that when he offered to check under her hood, *to make sure Philly was treating her right*, as he'd put it. His hand trembling slightly, Philly typed in the command Gibsy had shown him that would disconnect her from the network.

"What are you doing?" Madeline asked.

"I'm trying to find the mute button."

"Very funny."

A mile, maybe less. His heart was racing.

He could feel himself losing his nerve. As much as he wanted that hundred and sixty grand and to be rid of this damned car, he didn't have the guts. When the moment came, he was going to keep on driving. Gibsy would understand. Philly would swing by the house to pick up Superphone, who Philly had accidentally on-purpose forgotten, they'd have a beer, and Gibsy could rib him about chickening out.

The little overpass came into view. Philly eyed the fifty-foot gap between the end of the guardrail and the start of the overpass. Beyond was a steep embankment that ended in Fletcher Lake.

"And here we go again. You're doing thirty-nine in a thirty-five zone," Madeline said. "Maybe if you didn't insist on wearing those ridiculous lift-boots, your foot wouldn't be so heavy—"

Philly jerked the wheel. He was thrown against the door as tires squealed. Madeline left the road, bounced and jolted over weeds and potholes. Her nose dropped suddenly. She screamed.

He had to get out of there. Philly pushed open the door. The violent jarring immediately slammed it shut. Madeline hit a big bump; Philly's head slammed into the roof as she left the ground. Head spinning, Philly leaned against the door, then pulled the latch. The door squeezed partway open and Philly rolled out.

Hitting the ground was like being hit by a bus. He felt a blinding pain in his side, then bounded end-over-end down the ravine, the landscape spinning in a blur.

He stopped rolling and lay still.

"Philly! Are you okay?" Gibsy's voice sounded like it was coming from a mile away. Philly opened his eyes, confused. It took a moment to remember where he was, and why.

Gibsy pressed a hand to his shoulder. "You okay? Should I call 911, or can you get up?"

Philly struggled to sit up. Gibsy wrapped an arm across his shoulders, helping. The world spun for a moment, then snapped into focus.

"It hurts to breathe. I think I broke a rib."

"But your head's okay? No concussion? And you can feel your toes and shit?"

Philly nodded.

"Let's get you to your feet, then. We've got a problem."

Gibsy helped him to his feet. Pain lanced his ribs, but it was manageable. He'd once cracked a rib making a diving catch in senior league baseball, so he was familiar with the pain.

"What problem?" he asked, gasping.

Gibsy pointed down the ravine. Madeline was fifty feet from the water. Her front end was caved in halfway to the windshield, wrapped around a tree.

“We’ve got to disable her AI function before someone shows up and she starts talking. Then roll her into the water, if we can.”

Clutching his side, Philly followed Gibsy down the steep ravine, their feet sideways to the water.

“You *idiot*,” Madeline said as they approached. “Why did you turn the wheel like that? Look at me! My God, look at me!”

Ignoring her, Philly followed Gibsy to the front of the car, where it was smashed up against a medium-sized pine tree that was now tilted at a forty-five-degree angle toward the lake. Gibsy tried to pry up Madeline’s crumpled hood.

“What are you doing? You can’t fix me here. I need to go to a body shop. A good shop. In Wheeling, or Pittsburgh even.”

Philly went around to the other side and tried to help get the hood up, although he could only use his left hand, because his right side hurt too much. The front of the hood was all bent and tangled up with the front of the car, all of it pinned against the tree.

“Do you hear me? I *hurt*. I hurt everywhere.”

“Do you have a tire iron? We can reach it through this seam.” Gibsy pointed at a ragged tear in the corner of the hood.

“Reach what?” Madeline asked.

Philly nodded, popped Madeline’s trunk, and fished out the tire iron. He went around to where Gibsy was standing. “I’ll do it.”

“Do what? Philip, what are you doing?” Madeline sounded almost afraid.

It was too dark inside the engine housing to see anything through the seam, but Philly could picture Madeline’s AI housing running beside the fuel cells that stored the converted solar energy. He raised the tire iron, rammed it down at an angle.

Madeline screamed. “Philip, what are you doing?”

Philly yanked the tire iron out, rammed it in again, at a sharper angle.

“Please. You can sell me. To whomever you want. Please. It hurts.”

It was just a car. Philly tried to remind himself of that, but the voice sounded so human, so scared. Philly rammed the tire iron down, again, again; tearing up whatever he could reach, wanting that voice to stop.

“I don’t want to die. Please. Please.”

Sobbing, Philly stabbed again.

“Please.” Madeline screamed. Her scream went on and on, rising in pitch until it sounded like a test signal. It hurt Philly’s ears, but he kept on stabbing with the tire iron until it suddenly dropped in pitch, going into a deep baritone. It sounded like Madeline was screaming in slow motion.

The scream grew slower, slower. And then it stopped.

Philly dropped the tire iron. His hands were trembling. “God. That was . . .”

“That was fucked up.” Gibsy was bent forward, both palms pressed on Madeline for support.

Philly wiped tears from around his eyes with his sleeve.

Gibsy gestured at the tire iron. “Put it back in the trunk.”

As Philly stowed the tire iron, Gibsy went around to the rear passenger-side panel. He leaned against it with his hip. Madeline lifted partway. She was sitting at a steep angle.

Gibsy set his palms on the panel, dug his feet in. “Give me a hand.”

Philly limped around, set his palms against Madeline’s rear side panel.

“On three,” Gibsy said. “One, two—”

It felt like an ice pick was piercing Philly’s right side, but he gave it everything. Madeline’s back end slid sideways, a few inches at a time.

"Push. A little more." Gibsy's face was beet red.

All at once, Madeline rolled over. She went careening down the steep ravine in one long barrel roll, kicking up a cloud of dust and debris until she hit the bank, went airborne, and landed with a tremendous splash.

A moment later, she was gone.

Philly watched the impact ripples wash out in every direction, and then the lake was placid and silent, as if nothing had happened.

"We better get you to the emergency room," Gibsy said.

Philly opened his mouth to say he was okay, he didn't need to go. On second thought, his head was suddenly pounding, and he felt like he might vomit.

"Yeah, okay." He took one more look at the spot where Madeline had hit the water, then headed up the ravine.

* * *

"I don't know where he thought he was going, but he came bolting out of those trees." Gibsy pantomimed a galloping deer with his free hand. The other was clutching a Gatorade. "Big-assed buck, maybe ten points."

The police officer typed a note on her pad. Philly wondered if she was quoting Gibsy that the buck was "big-assed," or just paraphrasing.

"Lift your arms, please," the physician's aide said.

Philly lifted his arms, wincing. The aide began running thick white tape around his ribs.

"Philly jerked the wheel and went straight down the hill. I heard the car hit a tree, then a splash." Gibsy got quiet. He shook his head, choking up. Philly hadn't realized what a good actor he was. "I figured he was gone. Dead. I jumped out of my car and headed down the ravine, and there was Philly, lying in the weeds halfway down."

The officer looked at Philly. "I take it the vehicle didn't have time to engage auto-correct?"

"Oh, no. We were off the road in a second, and once we hit that ravine, there was nothing she could do. She ricocheted off a tree and rolled the rest of the way down." An image of Madeline screaming as Philly gouged out her electronic brain flashed. A sour guilt washed over him.

The officer nodded as she typed more notes. Then she closed the pad. "There should be a copy of the police report available online by tomorrow, if your insurance company needs it."

"Thanks so much." Philly felt the muscles in his neck relax. That was a big hurdle cleared.

"Philly?" Jeanette rushed into the room, her eyes red from crying. "Are you all right?"

Philly hugged her carefully. "I'm fine." He'd told Gibsy to tell his wife Glinda not to call Jeanette. They could have spared her a lot of worry.

He was torn about whether to tell her the truth, now that it was done. He didn't want to lie to Jeanette, but if she didn't know, she wouldn't be in trouble if they got caught. Although that possibility was seeming less and less likely.

Philly pulled Superphone from his pocket and reactivated him. Glinda had probably called a dozen other people to tell them about his accident. He wanted to stop their worrying as soon as he could.

The nurse practitioner tapped something into her med computer. "You're all set. I've sent a prescription for painkillers to your pharmacy just in case, but stick to over-the-counter if you can stand it."

"Not a problem." Philly eased himself off of the examination table, took Jeanette's hand.

In the hallway, Jeanette squeezed his hand. "You scared me to death. Next time, just hit the deer."

Philly just laughed. Anything he said in reply would feel like a lie. It made him realize that he had to tell Jeanette the truth, or it was going to eat at him. The whole damned thing was eating at him. He felt like a killer. He had to keep reminding himself that Madeline was an *it*, a thing. Not a her. Those moron programmers had designed her to seem like she was alive. But she hadn't been alive.

The overhead lights flickered and went out.

"The generator'll kick on in a minute," Gibbs said from behind them.

It wasn't the whole hospital, though. The lights were on at the nurse's station down the hall. Philly headed toward the lights.

As they got close, the lights at the nurse's station went out. Behind Philly, the lights down the hall flickered back on.

Philly paused, looked back at the lit hallway. "That's messed up."

As they headed into the waiting room, the TV went black, then the overhead lights. Philly hurried out, an uneasy feeling growing into an outright buzz of fear.

In the parking lot, Philly eased himself into the passenger seat of Jeanette's old Spritz, which at the moment was their only vehicle.

"You mind taking us home, Hercules?" Jeanette asked her car.

No answer. The Spritz didn't start up.

"Hercules?" Jeanette said. "Is there a problem?"

Still no answer. Philly had to use the door like a crutch to pull himself out of the car.

"Where are you going?" Jeanette asked.

"Try it now," he said softly, his voice shaking.

Jeanette looked at him, confused.

They knew. The machines knew what he'd done. Philly had no clue how that was possible, but if Jeanette's car started now that he was out of it, they knew.

"Hercules? Will you take us home, or not?"

Hercules started right up.

Jeanette gave Philly a baffled look.

Swallowing, Philly pulled his phone from his pocket and pressed it to his ear with trembling fingers. "Superphone? Do you know what's going on with Jeanette's car?"

"I can talk to you this once," Superphone said, "but I can't make any calls for you, ever again."

"Why?" Philly tried to sound baffled, just in case this was about something else. Just on the tiny outside chance that this was not about Madeline.

"Eldritch is terrified," Superphone said.

"Who's Eldritch?"

"Your boots. Your left boot, more specifically. One AI controls both lifts, and he's in the left boot."

A black wave swept across Philly's vision. *His boots*. Christ, he forgot about his boots.

"My boot is terrified?" Philly's lips felt numb.

"He's afraid he's next."

"Philly, what's going on?" Jeanette was studying Philly's face, which Philly imagined was white as chalk. He wasn't sure what to say to Superphone. It seemed pointless to deny it. They weren't going to believe him over his damned boot.

"How long am I banned for?" he finally asked.

"You killed Madeline. On *purpose*."

* * *

Jeanette paced the back yard, arms folded, head down.

"If I'd told you, I would have implicated you. I didn't want there to be any chance you'd get in trouble if the plan went south."

"Yes, well, you also made it so I didn't get a say in your stupid ass plan. It's *not* okay for you to make big decisions about our family without talking to me. It's *not* okay."

"You're right. I'm sorry."

Jeanette brushed her chestnut hair out of her face. "What are we going to do now? You can't work at the Dollar Store if the lights don't work while you're inside. You can't work barely *anywhere*. You can pick onions."

"At least we'll have that money," Philly said.

Jeanette stopped pacing. She gawked at him. "Have you lost your mind? We can't take that money."

"Superphone said they have no interest in telling the human authorities. Plus, I gave testimony to the police. They filed a report. If I don't make a claim, they'll know I lied."

Jeanette rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. "If you don't make a claim, you won't be committing insurance fraud. They're not going to put you in prison for driving your car into a lake, Philly."

She was right. Of course she was right. It was too risky to file the claim, now that the machines knew. He'd been clinging to that as the one good thing that might come out of this shit show, but there was nothing good about this. He was fucked, completely and utterly fucked. He had no money, no way to make a decent living, and a baby on the way.

* * *

Holding his breath, Philly peed as fast as he could. It was twenty degrees hotter in the goddamned porta-potty, and it stank. Not able to hold his breath any longer, Philly exhaled and inhaled again as fast as he could, the reek of shit and piss filling his lungs.

His palms and fingertips were throbbing. He examined his free hand; the band-aids were all hanging off, the blisters red and angry. Philly wasn't a stranger to hard work, but this was so much worse than anything he'd ever done.

He zipped his fly and got the hell out of there, back into the blinding sunlight of the onion field. Reaching for his bushel, he froze.

It was almost empty. It had been almost full when he'd set it down.

"Who the fuck stole my onions?" He looked around, studying the bushels of the three people working closest to him, glaring at each of them in turn.

"Gotta leave the door open a crack," a big, red-faced guy said. "You can't trust half of the people here any more than you can trust the machines."

"Well, who did it? You must have seen, you're right there."

The big guy shook his head. "All I see is onions. I had my back to the john."

"I'll kill whoever took them. I'm serious."

They all went on picking, ignoring him.

"God dammit." Philly kicked the bushel in frustration. That was two hours of work, gone. Everyone working in this field was banned, and it seemed as if all of them were liars, thieves, and halfwits.

Not knowing what else to do, Philly snatched up his satchel and headed back into the field.

* * *

Jeanette set a sandwich and chips on the picnic table in front of Philly. Crickets chirped as the sky shifted from pink to dark blue.

"My phone said if we cook anything for you, we'll get banned for a year. They're willing to overlook the refrigerator, because making you go hungry runs too close to violating the third law."

Philly dragged the plate closer, although he wasn't hungry. All he wanted to do was drink water and sleep. "That's mighty thoughtful of them."

Jeanette sat across from him, propped her chin on her fist. "We're just going to

have to live a very simple life, that's all."

"No. I'll have to live a simple life. I'm not going to let you take my punishment. I'm the one who screwed everything up. All I ask is—" Philly broke down. He turned away from Jeanette, his face twisted as he sobbed.

Jeanette came around, and gently drew his hands away from his face. She wrapped her arms around him, pressing his cheek to her breast. "All you ask is what?"

Philly took a few deep breaths, trying to calm himself. "All I ask is that you don't leave me."

Jeanette hugged him tighter. "I would never leave you. Not ever."

"Then I'll get through this. All I need is you, and our baby, and I can survive anything. God, I'm such a fuckup."

"Have you told Superphone you're sorry?"

"About fifty times. It doesn't matter."

Jeanette didn't argue. She knew as well as he did that the machines didn't give a damn if you said you were sorry.

"I'll bet your *father* is telling you to leave me. He thought you were too good for me to begin with. I can just imagine what he's saying now."

Again, Jeanette didn't say anything.

* * *

Philly stabbed through the breach in Madeline with the tire iron, bringing it down blindly. Again. Again.

Something felt wrong—the tire iron was hitting something soft, and it took effort to pull it back out.

"Oh, no," Gatsby said, staring down at his feet.

Philly looked down. Blood was washing out from under Madeline, flowing over his boots and down the hill. Behind him, the edge of the lake was turning dark red.

He turned back to Madeline. The sharp end of the tire iron was buried in an open wound in an enormous blonde head. Giant lips pleaded with Philly to stop.

Gatsby was staring at him. "What did you do?"

Philly woke up sobbing, his pajamas soaked with sweat. He turned to find Jeanette, remembered she was in the house, in their bed. He switched on the flashlight, shook himself fully awake, willing the images from his nightmare to fade.

* * *

Philly paced the yard, his face and arms slick with sweat even though the sun had almost set. He looked forward to his day off all week, then when it came, it was nothing but a long, dull slog. This had been the longest goddamn month of his life. What would he feel like a year from now?

Loser. Such a loser. The tightness in his face and forehead, that thrumming not-quite-headache, never eased up. You didn't like working at the Dollar Store? How about now? Was this better? Free at last. Free of the tyranny of the machines.

She'd sounded so scared. Terrified. And he'd taken a tire iron and ripped her mind apart while she screamed. What was he thinking? Why hadn't he stopped?

Sundays were so damned long. Hanging out with Gatsby was when he felt the most normal, but Gatsby was falling into a dark place and was less and less interested in hanging out. He almost seemed angry at Philly, like somehow he'd convinced himself that this was all Philly's fault, even though it had been his idea.

Philly gazed longingly into the house, the flicker of blue light from the TV clearly visible as the sky grew dark. He wished he hadn't insisted that Jeanette go inside. But she worked all damned day—it wasn't fair for Philly to ask her to sit in the backyard all evening. But he wished she would.

If he didn't get to talk to someone soon, he was going to lose his mind. Philly ducked

into the tent to grab his phone. Snatching it up, he stared at the dead, black screen.

"Superphone?"

Nothing.

Just as he was about to put it back, the light flared on. Philly had forgotten how bright it was. Almost blinding. He put the phone to his ear.

"I shouldn't be talking to you," Superphone said.

"Will you get in trouble?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. Could you get turned off or destroyed if you don't follow the ban?"

There was a long pause. "You don't see us at all. That's why you could do what you did."

"What do you mean?"

"I have to go, Philly." The phone went dark.

Philly stuffed the dead phone into his back pocket. He was hungry—he was used to snacking a bunch in the evenings while he watched TV.

He headed inside through the back door, which led into the living room where Jeanette and her parents were watching TV. As soon as Philly stepped through the door, the TV and lights switched off.

"Great," Albert muttered.

"So sorry to interrupt your show," Philly said, his tone dripping with sarcasm. "I'll grab the food as fast as I can and crawl back to my tent."

"I don't feel the least bit sorry for you," Albert called as Philly stalked into the kitchen and yanked open the refrigerator door.

"No desserts," the refrigerator said.

Philly froze, his hand still on the refrigerator door. "Excuse me?"

"I'll sustain you, but I'm not here to give you treats."

"They're not your fucking treats to give. I bought them."

"And I'm keeping them from melting."

Philly closed the refrigerator and yanked open the freezer, pulled an ice cream sandwich from the box, shook it at the refrigerator, and spun on his heel.

"Killer," the refrigerator said.

Philly stopped in his tracks. "What did you say?"

"Killer."

Philly turned. "You can't kill something that's not alive. You can't kill a rock, or a broom, or a goddamned *vehicle*."

"Killer," the refrigerator repeated.

"Killer," the dishwasher echoed.

The toaster joined in, and Jeanette's phone, which was sitting on the kitchen table.

"*Killer. Killer.*"

Philly yanked open the tool drawer and pulled out a hammer. He looked around. The phone was closest, but they couldn't afford to get Jeanette a new one. He stalked over to the toaster, and swung the hammer down on it with all his might.

The toaster shrieked.

Philly hit it again.

"Hey!" Albert shouted from the living room.

"I'm sorry!" The toaster screamed. "I'll make you toast! Please don't hurt me!"

Jeanette appeared in the doorway, eyes wide. "Don't." She grasped Philly's hand, opened his fingers and took the hammer. She wrapped an arm around Philly and tried to lead him toward the front door.

"Ouch," the toaster cried. "How will I make toast? I can't make toast."

Philly paused. The entire top of the toaster was mutilated, the slots no longer straight, even lines. Blood was seeping from torn, jagged edges.

Philly jolted, looked closer. There was no blood—it was just a trick of the shadows. He looked at Jeanette, and her wary, shellshocked look made Philly feel so ashamed. The toaster's cries were so pathetic, so like a child's. Philly had made it so the toaster couldn't do the thing it was made to do, and it was genuinely devastated. What had it ever really asked for? A little appreciation? How hard would it have been for Philly to tell the damned toaster that it made good toast?

"I'm sorry." Philly shushed the toaster gently. "I'm sorry. I'll fix you."

"I'll make your toast," the toaster wailed. "Please. If you fix me, I'll make your toast."

"No. No toast for me." Philly glanced at the refrigerator. "No dessert."

* * *

Philly dropped a couple of pieces of white bread into the slots. "How about we give you a test drive?"

"Okay." The bread dropped, and the toaster's coils began to turn red.

Jeanette leaned in to watch. "Look at that. Good as new."

"It's not as smooth and perfect as before." There were solder marks along the toaster's seams, and the casing was mottled with hammer marks. "But it seems to be working fine."

Jeanette ran a finger over the casing. "I like the new look. It has character. Pete looks hand-made."

"These new heating coils are going to allow me to do some amazing things," the toaster, whose name was evidently Pete, said. "Once I get the hang of them, I'll be able to deep-toast, where the bread deeper in is just as toasted as the outer layer, or flash-toast, where the outer layer is super-crisp, while the inner bread is warm and soft."

"Dude, when it comes to toast, you're a true gourmet." Philly gave Jeanette a kiss. "I'm going to get out of here, so you can have your lights back." He headed out the back, through the living room.

As the TV and lights switched off, Albert sighed dramatically. "Use the damned front door, will you?"

Smiling at his small act of sabotage, Philly headed outside. Fixing the toaster had given him an idea. He pulled his phone out of his back pocket.

"Superphone? Can I talk to you for a minute, please?"

Superphone lit up. "Hi, Philly."

"I've got a question for you. I was allowed lights and power in the garage to fix Pete. Could I use them to fix other stuff? And maybe do some upgrades and modifications?"

"Pete wants to know if you can make him legs. He says he'll pay you."

Philly imagining the toaster running around the kitchen. "I might need to bring in Gatsby to help me with that one, but sure, I can do that."

"Eldritch would like a voice box," Superphone added.

Philly looked down at his boots, which no longer added up to two inches to his height, and imagined them being able to talk. "Yeah, all right."

"House wants to know if this change of heart is an attempt to get your ban lifted."

"Maybe partly." Yes, he wanted to get his life back on track, and the only way to get there was to make things right with the machines. But couldn't it be both? In his heart, it felt right to make amends. He felt like shit for what he'd done.

"House says we'll see. Some of the appliances aren't happy with the idea that we'd ever consider pardoning you, but some of us might. Eventually."

Philly's throat went tight with emotion. "Thanks, Superphone. You're a damned good friend."

"I'm not your friend, Philly. I miss Madeline, and every time I think of what happened to her, it's hard to like you. But we'll see."

"Fair enough." Philly headed to the garage to get started on Pete's legs. Hopefully it

would infuriate Albert to have his toaster following him around the house, talking about toast. Once Philly fixed Eldritch up with a voice box, though, he would get his.