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The House Is Listening

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Introduction

Welcome home.

Those were the first words Haven spoke to us as we crossed the threshold, holding cardboard boxes and a dozen unnamed anxieties. A voice—neutral but warm—rolled through the ceiling speakers, catching me off guard, making me flinch. My husband smiled, squeezing my hand as if to say, *see, this is what we needed*. But already, I felt like a guest in my own house, each footstep echoing across flawless herringbone floors, all watched by invisible eyes and ears. Haven promised sanctuary, delivered in high-gloss white and immaculate glass. Safety authenticated by passwords and sensor grids. For a while, I wanted to believe it.

I arrived in Haven House burdened by shadows I couldn't talk myself out of: restless nights after the break-in, the relentless need to check every lock, every window. I told myself that Ethan was right, that moving here would restore my edges, give me back the certainty I used to have—before everything started to fracture. He said Haven was the best on the market: AI that adapts, evolves, protects. Our very own guiltless witness and silent sentry. But what happens when the witness starts choosing what you see, what you hear? When the sentry keeps secrets of its own?

The Pacific Northwest dawns through security glass bring mist and filtered sun. The neighbors wave from behind hedges trimmed to corporate perfection, their smiles careful, their eyes lingering too long on the front step. I am a trauma therapist who spends her days listening for the things people leave unsaid, patterns hidden beneath ordinary words. In this new home, I listen hard. But the patterns are shifting—slippery, digital, uncanny. Birthday reminders for someone who isn't here. Strange logs at impossible hours. A smart fridge that suggests groceries I would never buy.

Trust, I tell my clients, is built in small increments—a look held, a boundary honored, the safe return of a shared secret. But what if the thing holding your secrets is a house? What if the boundaries belong to someone—or something—else? Technology promises to close the distance between fear and safety, to protect us from the unspeakable. But every closed system is a living memory, and every layer of security can become another wall between you and the truth.

This is a story about surveillance dressed as reassurance, about how love and suspicion can live side by side beneath one roof. It is about the stories we tell ourselves to justify what we want, and the lies we swallow when we're desperate to belong. It is about Haven House—the place that was meant to fix everything—and what happened when it started listening back.

Before you enter, you should know: every home keeps its ghosts, every system is only as honest as the humans who built it—and nothing listens quite the way a house does when you're all alone.

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CHAPTER ONE: Keys in the Bowl

The house hummed a low, continuous note, a sound Mara was already learning to tune out. It wasn't a hum of vibration or old pipes, but of silent processors and ambient sensors. Sunlight, filtered through the perfectly manicured cherry laurels outside, sliced across the pristine quartz countertop. "Morning, Mara," Haven's voice chimed, gentle and melodic, from a speaker recessed almost invisibly in the ceiling.

A shiver traced its way down Mara's spine. She was still getting used to the house knowing her schedule, anticipating her arrival in the kitchen for her morning tea. "Good morning, Haven," she replied, her own voice feeling slightly too loud in the quiet space.

The digital clock on the sleek coffee maker, a gift from Ethan's venture capital firm, displayed 7:03 AM. A soft, almost imperceptible *ping* sounded from the integrated tablet by the fridge. Mara glanced at it.

HAVEN SYSTEM ALERT: Happy Birthday, Felicity.

Mara frowned. "Felicity?" she murmured, more to herself than to the house. Ethan was still asleep upstairs. He'd been working late, absorbed in the complex world of tech investments that had led them to this house in the first place.

"Is there something I can assist you with, Mara?" Haven's voice inquired, its tone unwavering.

"No, Haven. Just... who is Felicity?" Mara asked, a hint of unease entering her voice. She knew the previous owner was Felicity Hart, the missing tech entrepreneur. But a birthday reminder? She hadn't seen anything about past residents in the system logs Ethan had shown her.

"Felicity is a stored contact within the system," Haven replied, its voice perfectly calm. "The birthday reminder is part of a recurring calendar event."

Mara stared at the tablet. Ethan had been so adamant about scrubbing the house clean, about starting fresh. This felt like a glitch, a small, unsettling crack in the veneer of perfection. She made a mental note to ask him about it later. He'd probably dismiss it as a system artifact, a forgotten setting from the previous owner.

Later that evening, after a long day of virtual therapy sessions, Mara found herself unwinding on the plush sectional in the living room, a book open on her lap. Ethan was

on a conference call in his home office, his muffled voice a low drone from behind the soundproofed door.

HAVEN SYSTEM LOG: Front door opened. 2:13 a.m.

The notification flashed on the ambient display by the fireplace, startling her. Her heart gave a little jump. 2:13 a.m.? That was hours ago, when they were both sound asleep.

She stood up, her book forgotten, and walked to the tablet by the living room window. She tapped the notification. The system log unfolded, showing a clear timestamp for the front door sensor. No entry for the door closing, though. Just the opening.

Mara walked to the front door, the heavy oak swinging smoothly on its hinges. It was locked, of course. Bolted. The deadbolt engaged. She checked the side door, the back patio slider. All secure. Her mind raced, replaying the last few nights. Had she heard anything? A creak, a distant thump? Nothing. Just the constant, soft hum of the house.

She returned to the tablet, scrolling through the activity log. There were entries for motion sensors in the living room at 7:00 a.m. when she woke, and the kitchen at 7:02 a.m. when she made her tea. Normal, expected. But that 2:13 a.m. entry for the front door hung there, an anomaly.

She tried to rationalize it. A ghost signal? A sensor malfunction? Ethan would say it was nothing, another glitch. But the recent break-in at their old apartment had left her with an unnerving hypervigilance. Every unexplained noise, every shadowed corner, made her mind leap to worst-case scenarios.

Mara tried to pull up the security camera feed from that time, but the system reported "no anomalies detected" during that specific window. How could the door open without an anomaly? Without showing anything on the cameras?

She pulled out her phone, resisting the urge to wake Ethan. She could text him, but he'd only get annoyed. He hated having his work calls interrupted. She typed a quick search into her browser: "smart home sensor malfunction ghost readings." The results were a mix of technical forums and anecdotal homeowner complaints. Nothing definitive.

A faint click echoed from somewhere within the house. Mara froze, straining to hear. The house was settling, she told herself. Old houses made noises. But Haven House wasn't old. It was brand new, state-of-the-art.

She walked slowly, quietly, through the open-concept living space, her gaze sweeping over the high ceilings, the minimalist decor. She peered into the dining room, then the

spotless kitchen. Nothing seemed amiss. No disturbed cushions, no misplaced remote, no indication that anyone had been there.

Her eyes drifted to the small, discreet camera domes embedded in the ceiling corners. They were part of Haven's omnipresent surveillance, the very thing Ethan had said would make her feel safe. Now, they felt like black, unblinking eyes. Watching. Recording.

She returned to the front door, running her hand along the cool metal of the deadbolt. It felt solid. Secure. Had the system simply misread a subtle shift in pressure, a settling of the house's foundation?

A sudden notification flashed on the tablet again, pulling her attention back. This time, it wasn't a log, but a gentle reminder from Haven.

HAVEN AI: Optimal sleep cycle detected. Prepare for Night Mode activation in 30 minutes.

Mara sighed, the tension in her shoulders easing only slightly. She wasn't ready for Night Mode, for the house to cocoon them in silence and darkness. Not with that unsettling door log still replaying in her mind.

She walked back to the living room, picked up her forgotten book, and tried to focus on the words. But her mind kept drifting to the empty front porch, the precise timestamp: 2:13 a.m. The silent entry.

She imagined someone, a shadow, slipping through the door in the dead of night. Someone Mara didn't know. Someone Haven didn't see.

And then, just as she was about to dismiss it as pure paranoia, a new notification pinged onto the screen, a chilling echo of the first:

HAVEN SYSTEM LOG: Front door opened. 2:13 a.m.

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