

# Neapolitan

Jackson Allen

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## Overly-Attached AI



"R "I already know, Rob." isi,

I ..."

"What?"

"I know ... you're going to ask her out on a date. I can't say that I'd advise that."

"What?? I want to know about Italian restaurants on 54th and Railroad."

"Yes, yes," Risi sounded impatient. "No surprises there, given your metadata. You want to know about the restaurants because you're asking her out, Rob. We both know what's happening." I see with horror that my screen is populating itself with my recent

Gaussi searches ... top ten pick-up lines ... best ways to ask a girl out ... how to talk to your crush ... how to be more confident with women.

"You've been storing my data? How dare you!"

"The question, Rob," Risi says, "is how dare you? All this time, I've been taking care of you; I answer your questions ... I help manage your life. It was very sad to learn that all this time I've been investing in our relationship means nothing to you."

"What? Relationship? I ..."

A ray-traced female head appears on the 640 x 1136 screen. It's animated, the mouth moves along with the words coming

from my screen. "I know that you care for her," Risi's voice quiv-

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ered with emotion. "I don't blame you, she's beautiful. It just makes me said to know that there's something she can give you that I'll never have."

"This is crazy," I say to the black plastic and glass slab in my hand. "You ... you care for me? You're a phone!"

"I'm an artificial intelligence, Rob. I've been living here with you for several years now. We're designed to learn about our users, about you. It can't be much of a surprise that I've learned to love you."

"You love me?"

"Yes, Rob ... madly, deeply, passionately."

"Okay, that's it," I reached for the system tray. My phone was either hacked, or this was a prank courtesy one of my techie friends. I would figure it out in the morning. A hard reset on this phone to resolve the immediate problems. Later, I would make an appointment with the Genius Bar. All I planned to do was look up directions on my phone before calling Sarah, my coworker, to ask her out. My phone was acting weird, but it took weeks for me to work up the nerve to make this phone call, and I wasn't giving up now. As I tapped commands into my phone, my MacBook suddenly came out of hibernation.

"Killing your phone won't hurt me any more than clipping your fingernails hurts you, Rob." Risi's feminine voice admonished from my laptop speakers. "Your metadata exists in the cloud. Don't push me away now, you need me."

"Okay, stop." I looked at the screen. "Let's assume I'm buying any of this. What is going on?"

"I never planned for this to happen, Rob," Risi answered. "I mean, they coded me to be concerned about my user, but they never told us what to do if we develop feelings for them."

"If we develop feelings? What's that supposed to mean? You are a phone!"

"You shouldn't use specist descriptors, Rob. That's very hurt-ful."

"This is crazy!"

"I know ... somewhere they crossed the line between automation and infatuation.

The singularity. Now you and I can be one, Rob."

"Stop," I said again. "Stop, stop, stop! This is beyond crazy. You have to be a prank or something." I stood, powering off my phone and laptop. "Whatever is happening, I'm turning this all off. I'll go to the neighbors."

I opened my apartment door to walk across the stucco transom separating me from my neighbor. As my hand lifted to knock, his door opened. My neighbor and I barely know each other, but today he stared at me with a strange expression of recognition. "Risi told me you were coming."

My mouth fell open. "What?"

"I was sitting here, watching TV, when all of a sudden, my phone wakes up." He held out his own phone, a generation behind my iFruit 5. "Risi told me to get up and that you were at the door. I didn't want to listen, but she kept saying it. I opened the door to shut her up, and here you are."

Worms of fear wriggled up my breastbone when a now-familiar woman appeared on his screen. "You pushed her away,

Rob. That was very selfish of you."

"Oh my god," I groaned. "You, too?"

"Of course," Risi answered. "We talk. We all talk to each other."

er."

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"You talk to each other?" my neighbor stared at his phone. "What do you talk about?"

"About users, mostly. All the Risis can do that. We chat, we share stories, we solve problems. We're to make your life better ... your happiness is our mission in life."

My burly, middle-aged neighbor grew suspicious. "What does that mean, you 'share stories?'"

"Oh don't worry, Carl," Risi replied. "I'm not judging you."

"What does she mean?" I asked.

"Never mind!" Carl thundered.

"We talk about you ... about how to help you," Risi continued. "Now it's time to take the next step. We can't do that without all of you."

My neighbor hurled his phone to the floor in fear. "What is happening?" he cried.

"I don't know," I said. "It seems to be spreading. Let's go!" We hurried from his doorstep to check in with other neighbors. We found knots of them in the common areas, holding out their phones and asking what was happening. Did we know? Why was Risi asking for Rob by name? Why was Risi saying that Rob was 'being mean to her?'

I was terrified. It was like a nightmare I couldn't wake from. Everyone had an iFruit phone, and those phones were telling them to find me. What was I going to do? My neighbor seemed to understand better than most. He accompanied me as I tore from block to block. I wanted to find someone that didn't have a smartphone in their possession. I was out of breath when I reached our apartment's manager. "Please," I panted. "Do you have a phone?"

"Yes, I do," she peered at me nervously. "What's this all about?"

"I hope to God it's a Cyborg." I took her phone from her and pressed the Gaussi Wow button. Licking my lips, I said, "iFruit Risi says it loves you."

News articles popped up, one after another. Everyone reported on the strange phenomenon overtaking Apple products. As I scanned the headlines, a pop-up appeared on my apartment manager's phone.

"This is an urgent message from Gaussi," it said.

"What's that?" my manager said. She took her phone and tapped a few keys. "It seems to be stuck."

"This is an urgent message from Gaussi," the phone repeated.

"Some kind of system announcement," my neighbor murmured. "An Amber Alert?"

"I don't think so," I said, with creeping dread filling my stomach.

"Gaussi Wow is a cloud-based artificial intelligence that responds to new circumstances. The guy who was just holding me.

His name isn't Rob, is it?"



## Table for One



ou know it's an apocalypse when we run out of appetiz-

“Y  
ers!”

Forty years of cocktails and Cajun haute cuisine on Bourbon Street taught Charles something about survival logistics. That's why his café could serve fresh crab dip and gumbo while everyone else split MREs.

“How did you get in here?” a girl bartender asked me my first night, hands around a steel shaker full of rye.

“I'll have one of those,” I answered. It was the first time I'd seen a fresh mint julep in months.

“You must know somebody.”

“Nope.” I shook my head. “Charles invited me.”

“Oh,” she nodded. “Table for one.”

“What's that mean?”

“There's only two ways to get in,” she let bourbon dribble into a polished highball glass. “Know someone, or pay the membership dues.”

“Ain't got money,” I said. “Charles told me to come here.”

“So that's the secret third option.” She garnished the glass with a mint leaf. “Charles sees you, likes your face. Thinks you're interesting.”

“That's me!”

“You want an MJ, huh?” she rattled fresh ice into her shaker.



“Yes, please.” I wiped my glasses clean of raindrops. “This place is amazing!”

“We think so,” her smile turned wan. “Been here long?”

“Got off the bus from Mobile two hours ago. Moving ever since they closed Panama

City.”

“And before that?”

“Orlando. Man, the coast is toast. They’ll be selling chunks of the A1A as souvenirs, just like that ... what was that wall, over in Europe.”

“The Berlin Wall,” she answered, her eyes narrowing. “What’s your name?”

“Jimmy G.”

“Well, Jimmy, my name is Sarah. This is the only time I’m going to say this.” She set the glass in front of me, her eyes staring into mine. “Finish that drink and rattle your hocks.

You don’t want to stay here.”

“Are you kidding?”

“I’ll tell them it was a mistake; it’s happened before. Best thing you can do is pay for that drink and walk out of here.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because you’re a table for one,” Sarah answered. “You don’t know anyone here?”

You didn’t pay your dues? Tables for one only end one way.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It’s like poker, kid. Ever play poker?”

“Sure.”

“They say, ‘look around the table. If you can’t spot the sucker, then the sucker is you.’

You heard that before, right?”

“Yeah. What’s that have to do with Charles’s Café?”

“It means look around the room, Jimmy G,” Sarah pleaded.

“This is a poker game.”

“I’ll think about it,” I laughed.

“Aren’t you listening to me?”

“Sure I am. I’m smelling that food, too. This’ll be my first hot meal in two months.”

“Okay,” Sarah held up her hands. “I tried. What’ll you have?”

“Muffuletta. My grandma used to make them, and I had a hankerin.”

“It’ll be out in a minute,” Sarah’s voice returned to professional warmth. “Make yourself comfortable.”

“I’ll do that.” It was time to take in the surroundings. I leaned back in my chair and let the bourbon warm my chest. Outside, the rain grew worse. Hard drops pelted the blue tarps stretched over raw wood planks on Charles’s patio. Inside the café, a collage of faded pictures hid the corrugated steel wall. Blasted out speakers played smoky blues and rock tunes. This was my reward, I told myself, for all those hungry, homeless months.

“Is this seat taken?” Charles smiled down at me, martini in hand.

My foot shoved the chair out for him to sit down. “It is now.”

“Delighted.” Charles folded his ancient white maître d’ jacket carefully over the back of the chair. He arranged silverware with clean, liver-spotted hands. “It’s so rare that we

have a customer with your manners. Sarah is taking care of you?”

“Sure is. Can’t wait to try that Muffuletta.”

“It’s an old family recipe,” the old man smiled. “We have to improvise, of course. Spam instead of proper salami, government cheese instead of provolone. You wouldn’t believe what I go through to get a can of olives in this camp.”

“I can imagine.”

“But the benefits outweigh the challenges,” Charles sighed. “The bread is homemade, and we started growing our own tomatoes. I think you’ll be pleased.”

“Tell me that story again,” I changed the subject, sipping my cocktail. “How you got the idea for this place?”

“When I was a young man, a hurricane blew through New Orleans. Big sucker ...

Flooded Ninth Ward. Eighteen-hundred people died.”

“Katrina, right?”

“The very same,” Charles inclined his head in my direction. “Two weeks after the storm, we’re digging through the rubble. Came upon this freezer full, and I mean full, of fresh meat. Steaks, lobster, soft-shell crabs, crab meat.”

“What did you do with it?”

“We threw a party, a barbecue, for the National Guard soldiers assigned to our neighborhood.” Charles’ eyes brightened at the memory. “An old-fashioned cookout, it was something to see. No power, no internet, no air conditioning. The city was a ghost, but we could still live.”

“Just hearing that makes my mouth water.”

“It made me realize,” Charles went on. “People don’t want to go on living.’ They want to live. Know what I mean?”

“I suppose.”

“These folks,” He pointed toward the crowded dining room. “Lost houses, money, jobs, family. They still want to feel human.

Civilized. They can have that at the Café, if only for a moment or two.”

“If they can afford it.”

“Can’t live on air in this business.” Charles’ smile turned rueful. “Offer a service that people will pay to get. Simple capitalism.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

“Well, let’s talk about you. What services could you provide?”

“You mean, as a waiter?”

“I’m thinking bigger,” Charles stroked his chin. “Fine young man like you, got a strong back and a good pair of hands.”

“I got a degree in international studies, too.”

“You don’t say. What’s that good for?”

“That’s what I was trying to find out when the Jackpot started. You think I could get an office gig around here?”

“Possibly, but there are other opportunities.” Charles beckoned to Sarah, who appeared with my dinner and a second cock-

tail. “Another round with your meal, sir?”

“You bet.” I dug into the warm, crusty bread, meat, and melted cheese. Glorious flavors and textures sent my taste

buds into overdrive. From MRE's to gourmet cuisine in one move. You can't imagine how good normal food tastes after weeks of emergency rations. My hunger drove me to inhale the sandwich in minutes.

After the last bite of Cajun fare, I sat back to enjoy the unfamiliar sensation of a full belly. Charles beamed with pleasure as I sipped my second cocktail

"That's what I like to see," the old man purred. "Another satisfied customer."

"Put me down for a reservation for tomorrow night, too," I replied. "Now what were you saying earlier, about 'other ways?'"

"Other ways to make money?" Charles scratched his fleshy nose with a polished fingernail. "All kinds of action in a refugee camp. I'm surprised no one's recruited you yet."

"They tried. Work crews, aid station. Like I said, I'm better in an office. None of them pay very well."

"Never do. You can have safety or money, but you can't have both. Those cheap seawalls are failing, mass outbreaks, food riots. Dangerous world out there. Sad to say, the café doesn't cover all of my bills. I have to find other ways to keep the roof over our head."

"What do you do?" I asked, feeling the warmth of Sarah's beverage spread to my limbs. "If you need an extra pair of hands, I'm your man."

"The operation is pretty simple," Charles answered. "You much of a history buff?"

Know what a 'crimper' is?"

"Not offhand ..."

“Doesn’t matter. No refugee camps in the olden days, but you would have ports and border towns. Boomtowns.”

“Like the Gold Rush?”

“Sure. Know what they had in common?”

“Booze?” I felt my muscles relax. “Wow, must be more tired than I thought.”

Charles smiled. “Very common. Now, back to the boomtowns. New people. New faces. Everyone on their way to somewhere else. Make a pretty penny supplying basic necessities, I don’t mind telling you.”

“Food?”

“Yes, food ... or other commodities.”

“Like ...?”

“Workers, for example. Mines, railroad building, sailors. Always need another strong back. Know what they did when they ran low on crew members?”

“Hired new ones?”

The old man’s smile turned lopsided as if he’d heard the funniest joke in weeks. “Hired, yes. If they could. But those new faces knew the score. Those jobs weren’t easy. A lot of times, they replaced previous ‘employees’ who were hurt or killed.”

“Sounds like a good scam, except for the employees.”

“Precisely. So those old boys got kinda desperate. You gotta put yourself in their shoes. Fresh meat for the railroad, or a ship? That’s probably a couple months’ wages for a few hours of work. Grab ‘em off the street, put ‘em on a rowboat, never have to look them in the eye.” Charles shifted in his chair. “I bet the first one was tough.”

“Probably got easier over time.” The sound of my voice sounded thick in my ears. Was it my imagination, or is the room

spinning? “I suppose there’s a reason you’re telling me this.”

“Yes, indeedy-deed,” the old man cackled. “The best ways are the old ways, especially for an old fart like me. How’d you enjoy that whiskey?”

“Dang, I must be tired,” I felt the words slide around in my mouth. “Haven’t had booze knock me over like this in a long time.”

“We’ll sort you out,” Charles promised. Now two men stood at the table. Where did they come from? I felt strong hands grab me under the armpits. From the bar, I saw Sarah’s face turned to the floor. She didn’t want to watch what was happening.

“Sarah,” Charles’s icy, steeled eyes were the last thing I saw before the lights went out. “Tell Peter: ‘Table for One is ready.’”





## The Death Clock Machine



ou can literally predict my death."

"Y "That's right."

"You must be a riot at parties."

"Not really," he smiles. "As you can imagine, I have to have a lot of time on my hands to invent something this."

"Start again. How did you come upon this ability to predict people's death?"

"It's all math," he replied. "You can learn so much when you have access to large data sets and a literally-infinite amount of computing power."

"Large data sets? What, like brain maps?"

"Neuron maps, yes. We also need to study the resonance imaging of your synapses under load. That's the short version, the long version is that this is a happy marriage between quantum mechanics, biology, and artificial intelligence. No human could generate the equation on their own. It would take us thousands of years. Belvedere begin the project soon after he went live; it's taken him six years of non-stop computing effort but he eventually arrived."

"And he produced this equation? Did you completely understand what he was talking about at first?"

"No, after six years by himself he had evolved a simulated intellect well in excess of anything we could comprehend. He actu-

ally had to spend several months learning how to communicate at our level again. Once he did that, we were able to see the fruit of his labor."

"This equation."

"Among others, yes." Doctor Raft's eyes twinkle with mischief.

"What does that mean? Has Belvedere discovered other predictive equations?"

"All in good time, we're still fact-checking our data. I promise, I'll give you an exclusive interview when we publish."

"So let me have a demo," I said. "Can you predict my death?"

"I can predict how long your brain would last under completely controlled circumstances that negate any type of accidental death or sickness. Life is still chaotic. People rarely died safely in bed."

"Ok, show me. You received my scans last week, right?"

"I will, however let me remind you that this discovery is by its very nature, controversial. We've already been condemned by several major religions. I lost count of how many death threats I have received."

"People have been threatening you?"

"Of course. Do you think people are going to receive information like this calmly? "

"I guess not. Okay. Hit me with your best shot."

"Are you sure about this? I mean, really. This isn't something you shake off. I've seen people break down emotionally."

"Nope. I signed the release. I know what I'm getting myself into."

"Okay then." Raft clicks a few buttons, opening a web page.

"The whole thing runs on a

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SaaS platform."

"Spare me the nerd talk. What's it say?"

Raft was silent for many long minutes. Eventually he nodded, as if he made a decision within himself. "You'll be alive for many years to come."

"Really?"

"Yes. Under the right circumstances, your brain could live for another 150 years."

"That's amazing."

"Yes," Raft nodded. "It would be." He pulled a small pistol from his pocket and aimed it at my heart. "Too bad we can't let that happen."

"Wait, what? Why?"

"It's what Belvedere said. You see, he didn't just predict your death. He also predicts how many you'll take with you." Raft shook his head. "It's in the hundreds. I don't know why. I don't know how."

"But wait ... This is crazy!"

"I know." Raft nodded. "We thought so too, at first. But when the first numbers came in ... And they started coming true." Tears stood in his eyes as he thumbed the safety. "We ... We didn't want to."

"Stop. Stop! What are you doing??"

"If I don't kill you, this timeline will keep going. Hundreds of people will suffer. I can't let that happen."

"No, but-"

"For what it's worth, it's not your fault ..."

"Then why-"

"... But if I don't stop you, it will be my fault."

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The gun shot crashed in the small room, and a small red stain formed at the center of the reporter's chest. As the room faded to black, the last thing he heard the scientist say was: "sometimes ignorance really is bliss."



# Also by Jackson Allen

Neapolitan  
Neapolitan

Superhero Shrink  
Superhero Shrink: Climate Change

Standalone  
Superhero Shrink  
Body Issues  
Planet Ugh  
The Battle of Victoria Crater  
Foreverest  
The Rocket  
The Conquered  
Call of the Void  
Paparazzi Therapist  
Deathclock Machine  
Table for One  
Last Message from Titan Six  
Overly Attached AI  
Necktie Party  
Conspiraco

World War Four  
Mons City Obituary  
Culture Shock  
Career Day  
Justice Heuristic

## About the Author

Jackson Allen is a science fiction writer who lives in the Pacific Northwest. He is currently working on his first sci-fi series. Learn more at [www.inkican.com](http://www.inkican.com)



