

EMPATHY BY DESIGN



ADALENE MARTIS

Advanced Reader Copy

Pin name: Adalene Martis

Email: adalenemartis@gmail.com

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Marian Keening watched as the raven black Rolls Royce turned onto University Drive. She wrung her hands and discovered they were sweating. Prometheus had given her the secrets of digital emotion five years ago. She had immediately left her job at the DARPA lab in Palo Alto, but it had still taken five years to develop an android which could not only handle language, but the digital replicants of hormones which dictated true emotional response. *I just have to convince Mr. Rothman that purposely programming fear into machines is a good idea. What could possibly go wrong?* Marian winced at her own thought. The car slowly parked in front of Schneider Hall and a robot in a black suit exited the car. It opened another car door and bowed as a man in a tailored pinstriped suit and gray hair slid out of the Royce.

“He’s here,” said Marian.

Behind her the conversation in the room stopped. A couple of chairs scrapped against the floor as Jim Rauls, the dean of robotics, and George Parsons, the head of the university’s steering committee, made their way to the window as a second man in a brown suit exited the car. They watched as Mr. Rothman and his entourage walked into the lobby below. A gentle hand squeezed Marian’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry.” Jim said with a smile, “You got this.”

A pang of guilt shot through her, but she did her best to hide it behind a smile. Jim had always been nice to her; a bit unreliable, but nice. She hoped that her crimes wouldn’t affect him too badly. Well... that was worrying too far in advance. She hadn’t committed a crime, not yet. She had to trick Mr. Rothman into funding her illegal project first.

The black-suited robot was the first to open the door to the university boardroom. It announced Mr. John Rothman, the CEO of Novotech, and his assistant Craig Morris.

Mr. Rothman had cropped silver hair, sun hardened skin, and green eyes, the color of old dollar bills. Despite his age, he was attractive. His athletic bulk shifted impressively under the fitted suit as he moved into the room with predator grace. Craig Morris, his assistant, quietly slipped through the door behind him like a brown suited shadow.

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“Mr. Rothman,” said Jim, “I’d like for you to meet Dr. Keening. She’s —”

“The person who’s been using so much of my money,” said Mr. Rothman as he shook her hand.

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, sir,” lied Marian.

“Likewise,” said Rothman, his mouth spread open, exposing a bleach white smile that was wide enough to devour her. “I really enjoyed the work you did on Siren. I never thought investing in robotics would allow me to take over such a large share of the music industry. You surprised me, Keening. That rarely happens.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“So, you can imagine how disappointed I am that, after three years and ten million dollars, you have yet to surprise me again,” said Rothman. The vicious grin never left his face as he took a seat at the end of the long oval table.

“Your investment wasn’t wasted, sir. I have a presentation that shows the specifics on what was produced.”

Marian pulled out her phone and hot-linked with the room’s projector, preparing to boot-up her slide show.

“Stop,” said Rothman as the first slide hit the wall. “I don’t want a documentary of alphabet soups that I don’t have time to understand. I want you to tell me why *I* — a man who has robots that can dance, sing, and fuck as well as any human — need *you*. And I want you to do it in a single breath.”

The already chilly room seemed to grow ten degrees cooler.

Marian looked at Jim Rauls, shock on her face. Jim averted his gaze and said nothing. She was on her own.

“W-well, you do have a lot of very useful toys,” she said, heart pounding in her chest. “But that’s all they are.”

“Go on,” said Rothman.

“The AI in currently available systems only react. They have no drive, or capacity to truly understand a human being. They are nothing more than simple guess and check algorithms, randomly finding their

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way through the world. They have been *told* how they're supposed to act, but they don't understand *why*."

"I know all this. You're boring me doctor." Rothman leaned forward in his chair, as if he was preparing to get up.

"What I have developed," said Marian quickly, "what your ten million has built, is an AI that can truly understand the *why* of human behavior and connect with people in an unprecedented and proactive way."

Rothman settled back into his chair and pressed his fingers together in front of his face, making a little temple of contemplation.

"Alright," he said finally. "Show it to me."

"That will take time."

"*Why?*"

"Uhm... well, I've built the limbic system through a series of simulations, but the final phase involves interaction with real humans."

"Explain."

"At the moment, the android is a blank slate with instincts but no life experience."

"Like a child," said Rothman.

Marian's heart jumped. That was a little too close to the truth.

"It needs to be tested," she corrected.

Rothman leaned back in his chair and drummed his fingers on the dark oak table. Then he turned to the man next to him.

"Have you gone over her documents?" Asked Rothman.

"I've looked at every page, sir. It was technically sound. Very impressive, actually."

Rothman grunted.

"How long do you think it'll take for her to finish the work?"

Asked Rothman.

"I agree with her assessment. It'll take another five years," said the man.

Rothman ruminated some more.