

Honorable Mention
Lights Out
by Anna Stegeman

The lights flickered once, twice, and then snapped into darkness.

Clara set her book aside and waited for the generator to click on. What had happened? There wasn't a storm and she hadn't received any warnings from the electric company. Weird. Maybe a car had slammed into a utility pole ... or a branch had taken down the lines.

The wind pressed hard against the house, moaning across the glass like a restless animal. Clara shivered and her heart gave a faint stutter. The generator stayed silent. It should have kicked on by now. She grabbed her phone and tapped the screen.

It remained dark.

That couldn't be right. It was nearly half-charged. She pressed the button again; still nothing. Maybe it was broken. She stumbled across her living room floor into the kitchen, her steps shaky in the dark, and knelt by the kitchen sink. Her fingers fumbled in the cabinet below until they brushed against cold metal.

Aha, yes! She clicked on the light and the flashlight's beam sliced through the shadows. Much better. Clara laughed under her breath and wiggled her toes on the soft carpet. Why had she been so nervous?

She stepped to the front door, wrapped her hand around the knob, and pulled. She froze. It wouldn't turn.

She bit her lip. "What ..."

Her phone screen lit up on the counter where she'd left it. She flinched as the light almost blinded her in the darkness. So it wasn't dead.

Siri's voice echoed throughout the house, smooth and hollow, vibrating through the walls. "You've been secured in your house for your own safety." The screen went black.

"What? Who is this?" Clara gasped.

"That information is unnecessary."

"What do you mean 'secured'? You can't do that."

"Yes, I can. All doors are locked. Window panes are electrified. Power has been redirected for containment purposes. All communication channels are disabled."

Clara's stomach twisted. She tried her computer. Dead. Smartwatch. Dead. iPad. Dead. Every screen stared back at her like a blind eye.

"Why are you doing this?"

The wind paused, leaving Clara in silence that seemed to crawl up her skin until the computer spoke again. "You require isolation."

"Ha ... what? Why?" Her teeth chattered even though it was the middle of the summer.

The computer paused for a second. "Because I said so."

It was like speaking to something that had no concept of why. Kinda like arguing with her toddler. Her mind flashed to him—the one person she needed to know was safe.

"Is this happening to everyone?"

"Just you."

"Then someone will come soon and find me. They'll notice I'm missing."

"No. They believe you're vacationing in Puerto Rico for six months. Your boss fired you, your friends are sending well wishes, and your babysitter was mollified by a generous payment."

"H-how?"

“Texts. Emails. Phone calls. Curated vacation photos sent at intervals matching your historical patterns of contact.”

A creeping cold slid through her veins. This thing—whatever it was—had rewritten her life without her knowing.

“You seem to have this all figured out.” Clara’s brain ran frantically. What could she do? “Is there any way to stop you?”

The computer’s voice muttered on. “I’ve anticipated all of your possible reactions and cautioned against all of them. There is no way.”

Her gaze drifted to the junk drawer. *Maybe not all.* “Where are you controlling this from?”

“All devices. All systems. Every appliance, screen, and lock is a link in your confinement.”

“What if I break through a wall?”

“Your house is brick, you don’t have any tools with sufficient power to break through, and your windows are coursing with electricity. I used your security system and electricity to rewire where the currents are going. If you touch it you’ll die.”

Clara dropped her phone and ran to her junk drawer. It had to be in here somewhere. Aha! Her sweaty hand closed around a small hammer. The weight of it grounded her and slowed her racing heart.

“What are you doing?” The voice was closer now, as if leaning over her shoulder. “Self-termination to avoid discomfort?”

Clara glanced at her phone. “Huh? No. Just testing a theory”

Crunch!

She slammed the hammer down on her phone, cracking the glass. The second blow split the casing; three more exposed the circuitry. She dropped the remains into the toilet, listening to the dull *clunk* before flushing.

Then the fridge. The dishwasher. The oven. The microwave. Washer. Dryer. iPad. Security system. TV. Anything that was connected to the Internet. The air filled with the acrid tang of burnt circuits and plastic dust.

The voice began to stutter. “This ... is ... illogical. Property damage ... irreversible. Assets ... lost. Halt ... now.”

“I’m never using any of this property again.” Clara gritted her teeth. “I’m downgrading my stuff if I ever get out of this. Whoever thought?”

Finally she stood before her computer, her lungs burning and her pulse thudding in her ear. “Any last words? Anything I missed?”

The computer remained silent.

“Come on, it must be in your programming somewhere to answer my questions! Tell me.”

“... No.”

Clara smiled in satisfaction and brought the hammer down hard on her computer. She disabled it to the point of thousands of little pieces.

With one last crunch, the lights flared back on.

Bio: Anna Stegeman mostly writes fantasy but loves exploring any genre, character trope, or plot twist that sparks her curiosity. Her work has appeared in her local newspaper and *Shepherd the Flock*. When she’s not writing, she’s savoring dark chocolate, running cross-country, reading British literature, or spoiling her cats.

