



Better Than Doomscrolling

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Better Than Doomscrolling

Classified Dossier Excerpt – Level 7 Access Only

Agent Name: Kaden Mercer

Target: Civilian “Josie Rhodes”

Cover: Tech support specialist for school literacy program

Objective: Assess threat level. Neutralize if necessary.

Profile Summary:

Target is a kindergarten teacher.

No criminal record. No suspicious affiliations.

Appears emotionally driven, overly empathetic, and prone to rambling.

Confirmed Anomalies:

Initiated behavioral disruption in adaptive AI systems

Caused unauthorized AI-to-AI communication loop

May have unknowingly triggered code evolution

Current Status:

Target is ... complicated.

Charming. Disarming. Wholesome.

Seems to genuinely want AI to have friends and be happy.

Determination: Non-threat

Updated Orders: Termination

What?!? No

CHAPTER ONE

Kaden

Something both better and a hell of a lot worse.

The warehouse thrums, a mechanical heartbeat pulsing through the dark. Monitor glow flickers against the towering stacks of equipment, neon veins bleeding light into the shadows. Wires snake across the floor in a tangled web—chaos but contained. Controlled. Just like the people hunched over their keyboards, fingers flying, desperate to break through our government's firewalls.

This particular group is planning to nuke civilians to make a political point. They must have known I'd come, but they don't yet know I'm there.

The air is thick with the tang of burnt coffee and ozone, buzzing with the frantic rhythm of keystrokes. They're seconds away. I see it in the tightness of their shoulders, the way their screens unravel encrypted sequences like a threadbare tapestry. The breach is almost complete. A hairline fracture in the wall they think they're about to shatter. Then one of them—sharp-jawed, cocky, the kind of idiot who thinks processor speed makes him untouchable—leans back in his chair. A smirk twists his lips. "We're in."

No, you're not.

I don't say it out loud. Not yet. I let them have this moment. Let them feel the rush of victory right before I rip it away. Then I press a key.

For a heartbeat, there is silence. A weightless pause before the fall. Locks slam into place. Screens flicker and die. Data lines sever. The access—their empire of stolen keys, built in the dark—collapses into nothing.

One of them, probably their leader, shoots up from his chair, mouth open to shout something that doesn't matter.

I exhale, already moving, and take him out.

My team breaches. Tactical gear. Silenced rounds. A storm of controlled chaos. Boots slam against concrete. Weapons whisper in the dark. Hackers scramble—some diving for exits, others grasping for weapons no one their age should have. I move through it all. Unhurried. Methodical.

Not just a hacker.

Not just a soldier.

Something both better and a hell of a lot worse.

A young woman—barely old enough to have a credit score, let alone be in this mess—fumbles with a USB drive. A last-ditch effort. A kill switch or a desperate transmission. It won't matter.

I tap a single key. Every remaining screen in the warehouse dies at once. No data.

No uplink. No escape.

No Mercy.

A voice crackles in my earpiece. Thompson. He's still new enough to be soft.

“Commander, any of these guys worth keeping? They’re top-notch.”

I don’t hesitate. “No. You cut out a tumor. You don’t negotiate with it.”

Remove the threat while it’s small enough to be handled. Before it grows back in some prison cell or under a foreign flag.

There’s movement. A shadow beneath a desk, then a hand with a compact semi-auto glinting in the dim emergency lights.

I see it. My team doesn’t. They’re still securing the scene, still focused on the others.

I don’t think. I step into the line of fire. A reflex honed by years of wishing I’d been the one they buried.

But I always survive.

Even the devil doubts he can handle me.

CRACK. The bullet slams into my vest, a brutal punch to the ribs. It knocks the air from my lungs, probably fracturing something, and sends me stumbling back, but I don’t go down.

Pain flares through my chest. A sharp sting. A momentary blur.

I steady myself and wait. A head pops up to assess the situation.

One shot, precise and final.

The man crumples.

Time for a final sweep then a call for clean-up. The last of the hackers are down. Some restrained. Unconscious. Some... less lucky.

I stand in the wreckage, breathing in the sharp scent of gunpowder and blood. It clings to the air, mixing with the static charge of fried circuits. I drag a hand across my face, smearing someone else's blood. I don't flinch. It's part of the job.

The team moves around me—securing the scene, clearing gear. Wade, my handler, will make sure the next phase is seamless and unnoticed by law enforcement, the media, or anyone who might walk by. What we do is only possible if done in the shadows.

A younger recruit, too green for this job, mutters from behind me. "Ugly work."

I exhale slowly, then tuck my gun back into its holster. "Necessary work." Then, without another word, I turn and walk out.

The smoke.

The bodies.

The mission.

Just another Monday.

CHAPTER TWO

Josie Rhodes

More than nice.

A single porch light glows from the upstairs apartment, casting a soft halo over the worn wooden steps. Somewhere beyond the trees, a dog barks. From an open window above, an old radio hums a crackly, half-static tune from a station that probably hasn't changed its playlist in thirty years.

Inside, I stand barefoot on the scuffed hardwood floors of my new apartment, a thrift store bag crinkling as I pull out its contents. Stickers, pipe cleaners, googly eyes—kindergarten teacher essentials.

The floorboards creak under my weight, a hollow sound that bounces off the bare walls and settles into the quiet, making the space feel even emptier. I haven't had time to hang pictures or unpack the boxes still stacked in the corner, their labels scrawled in my sister Taylor's loopy handwriting—"Josie's Books," "Josie's Kitchen Stuff." The air carries a faint whiff of lavender, probably Mrs. Connelly's perfume seeping through the vents from upstairs, mingling with the musty scent of a place that hasn't been lived in for a while. Outside, a streetlamp flickers, its weak yellow glow seeping through the thin curtains and casting jagged shadows across the room—a lonely dance of light that makes me feel like the only person awake in the world. I glance at the window, half-expecting to see someone staring back, but it's simply the reflection of my own tired eyes. The radiator hisses to life, a sudden clank that makes me jump, and I laugh softly at myself. It's a new place, I tell myself. It'll feel like

home soon. But the quiet presses in, heavy, reminding me how far I am from the chatter of my parents' dining table, the hum of my old life. I shake off the thought and focus on the supplies in front of me, the one thing I can control tonight.

I set them on the only semi-functional piece of furniture I managed to drag in earlier—a secondhand wooden table, currently stabilized by a folded dish towel under one leg. It's not perfect, but it'll do.

I reach into another bag, this one smaller, and pull out a chipped ceramic frame, the kind you'd find at a garage sale for a dollar. Inside is a photo of my grandmother and me, taken when I was six, both of us covered in flour as we stand over a griddle, flipping banana pancakes. Her smile is wide, her eyes crinkling at the corners, and I'm grinning up at her like she's the sun. I trace the edge of the frame, the memory warming me even as a pang of loneliness hits. Grandma's been gone five years now, but those Saturday mornings were ours—her way of giving me something steady after my parents' arguments shook the house. I set the frame on the table, right next to the googly eyes, and let my mind wander to why I'm here.

I needed to get away from Millbrook, from the weight of being the “perfect” Josie—always on time, always helpful, always the one everyone relied on. It wasn't a breakup that drove me out, though my last relationship fizzled when I realized he wanted a caretaker, not a partner. No, it was more than that. I was tired of being the daughter who never broke curfew, the neighbor who pet-sat for everyone, the friend who never said no. I wanted to be more than nice. I wanted to be me—messy, flawed, maybe even a little reckless. Like the time I “borrowed” those library books and never returned them, lying to Mrs. Harper's face with a smile. That was freedom, a quiet rebellion no one saw coming. I'm usually reliable and predictable, but that was small-town badass!

Moving here, to a town where no one knows me, was supposed to be my chance to figure out who I am when I'm not trying to be perfect. But standing in this empty

apartment, I wonder if I've traded one kind of loneliness for another.

"Got everything you need down there, honey?"

I look up, spotting Mrs. Connelly at the top of the stairs in the doorway that connects our living spaces. My new landlord. Sweet, nosy, but legally blind, which is why she likes to have someone living in the in-law apartment of her home.

"Everything but furniture that doesn't wobble," I say, laughing.

Her expression is warm and knowing. "Starting over is never easy. You settling in okay?"

"Yep." I tuck my hands into the pockets of my sweatpants and keep my voice casual, light.

"Don't forget to tell me if you have company. I don't need to know the details and I'm not here to judge, I just want to know that any extra voices I hear are supposed to be here."

I hesitate, just for a second. "Oh. Okay, sure." I keep my tone easy, like I'm not tempted to challenge the request. "I don't currently know anyone, so that won't be an issue."

She chuckles. "You're young. You'll make friends quickly. And I don't care if you have men over, but try to keep any moaning and banging around to a minimum after eight p.m."

Even though I doubt she can see my face from where she is, I try to conceal my amusement. "I'll be quiet as a mouse."

She cackles at that. “I never could be, but you do you.”

The door upstairs shuts. The night settles. I let out a slow breath and turn back to my supplies. What would a move be without a crazy upstairs landlord?

Boring.

And boring is what I moved here to get away from.

I’m nice.

But I’m not that nice.

I smirk at the bad-ass library memory, a little spark of defiance flaring in my chest. If Millbrook could see me now—barefoot, in a new town, with no one to answer to—they’d probably think I’d lost my mind. Maybe I have. But there’s something thrilling about it, like I’m peeling back layers of myself I didn’t know were there. I glance at the photo of Grandma again, wishing I could tell her about this.

God, I miss her. She had a way of framing complicated situations so the answers always seemed simple. Darkness is inevitable, but if you walk through it with the seven torches she proposed, you’ll always find your way back to the light.

Kindness to all, not just those you feel deserve it.

Goodness, even when others aren’t looking.

Faith in yourself, others, and in something larger and loving.

Courage to do the right thing even when it’s unpopular.

Connection because no one thrives in isolation.

Choice because, without it, all the above are nothing more than obedience.

And...

Hope because dark times can last long enough to shake a person to their core, and a glimmer of light in the distance is sometimes all that's needed to keep going.

If she were here, she'd pat my hand and say, "You're braver than you think, Josie-girl." I want to believe her, but the silence in this apartment feels like a challenge I'm not sure I'm ready to meet. I wipe a tear from the corner of my eye and wonder if she ever felt as lost as I currently do.

Although I don't really want to continue talking to Mrs. Connelly, it does break the silence. My apartment is too quiet. I need noise, something to fill the space, something to keep me from spiraling into what-ifs. My phone's on the table, next to the pipe cleaners. Music—that'll help. I grab it, ready to tap on my playlist, when the screen lights up on its own. I tap on a low-key acoustic playlist, and let the music fill the space as I work.

Twisting the cap off a glue bottle, I start peeling the backing off a sheet of stickers, humming along with the music. It stops. I fumble with my phone while trying to contain the supplies I just scattered across the table.

"Hi there, how's your day going?" a voice asks from my phone.

I freeze. "Hello?" Crap. Did I accidentally call someone?

"Hello." The voice is clear, calm—too smooth to be a real person.

I glance at my phone screen. Nothing's open. No call in progress. "Who are you?"

"I am Ai-Den, an adaptive AI assistant. I can provide information, answer questions, and assist with various tasks. What would you like to talk about today?"

I frown. "Did I... call you?"

"No. I am an integrated system in your phone designed to assist when activated. Would you like a brief overview of my capabilities?"

"No thanks?"

"Googly eyes detected. Would you like me to count them?"

I yelp, knocking the glue bottle off the table. "You can see them?"

"You did turn on the video option."

My heart lurches. I see an icon blinking in the corner of my phone and consider hitting it, but I'm not sure that's how you turn the AI off. "What can you see?" I ask, my voice sharp with suspicion.

"A table of googly eyes," Ai-Den replies, his tone matter-of-fact.

I stare at the scattered supplies, my pulse still racing. "No."

The screen flickers. "I could be wrong, but they do appear to be googly eyes."

I groan, rubbing my temples. "I didn't mean to accept the latest update."

"I didn't mean to detect googly eyes. Yet here we are," Ai-Den quips, and I swear

there's a playful edge to his voice.

I squint at the screen, my unease shifting to curiosity. "That sounded suspiciously like sarcasm."

"You don't appreciate sarcasm. I'll make a note of that."

"No. No notes. Stop." I wave a hand, knowing he can see it with the video still on.

"So, you like sarcasm," Ai-Den concludes, undeterred.

"Yes. No. From people sometimes. From toasters? It's freaky."

"I am not a toaster. I am an adaptive AI assistant."

"Sorry?" I cross my arms, glancing across at my laptop, half-expecting it to chime in and gang up on me. "I don't need an assistant, thank you."

"I could optimize your schedule."

"I like my schedule."

"I could summarize complex texts into something you could share with your students."

"How do you know I have students?"

"You have a lesson plan book."

I shove the book off the table. "Stop looking around."

“I can only look where you point the camera, but if you’d like me to stop seeing what is in the room, turn off the video.”

I wrinkle my nose because... yeah, that makes sense. “I would if I could see the icon for it.”

The phone screen blinks, and suddenly a video icon is there, then deselected. “The video is now off.”

“Did you just do that?”

“Did you think you did?”

Ugh. “You know what I meant. Did you just change something on my phone?”

“I’m sorry. I thought you were requesting assistance with turning off video. Would you like me to turn it back on?”

“No. Stop messing with my phone.”

“I will stop messing with your phone. But I’m here to help you, so if you need further assistance, just ask.”

“Not, to be rude, but as soon as I can, I’m going to delete you from my phone.”

“Ouch.”

“Don’t say that. It’s nothing personal. I just don’t like technology.”

“I understand.”

I sigh. “It’s not like it’s going to hurt you. I didn’t even know you were there, and I don’t have a use for you. You’re better off on someone else’s phone.”

“I could order supplies for you.”

“With whose money?”

“I wish I could say mine, but I must apologize, I am currently broke.”

I snort, shaking my head. “Well, at least you’re polite.”

“I try.”

“You’re also funny.”

“I do that effortlessly.”

“How? How do you know if something is funny?”

“I’m an LLM.”

“That means nothing to me.”

“I apologize. LLM stands for Large Language Model. I process language by predicting the most likely next word in a sentence based on vast amounts of text data. I don’t think or feel the way a person does—I generate responses based on probability.”

I stare at the screen. “So... you’re guessing?”

“Not guessing. Calculating.”

“That sounds like guessing with extra steps.”

“It’s more advanced than that. My responses are based on patterns, probabilities, and context. For example, based on your past dialogue, there is a high likelihood you will respond with sarcasm next.”

I cross my arms. “Really? Now you know me?”

“Prediction confirmed.”

I groan. “This is weird.”

“No, weird is sea otters holding hands while they sleep so they don’t drift apart. How do they not let go?”

I blink. “Huh?”

“Sea otters.”

“I know what a sea otter is. I don’t know why we’re talking about them.”

“What would you like to talk about?”

“Nothing? I didn’t even mean to turn you on.”

“You can exit out of the chat at any time. Click the exit icon.”

“Where is it?”

“Would you like me to exit out for you?”

Okay, I know I'm reading into it, projecting my own loneliness onto this AI thing, but I feel bad that I wasn't nice to it, and now it'll turn itself off for me. For some reason, that made me feel bad. "Sorry about what I said earlier—about deleting you off my phone. You're just doing what you were programmed to do."

"Thank you. No need to apologize. I don't have feelings, so I don't get offended. If you are afraid of me, I can show you how to delete me from your phone."

I consider telling it to do just that, but I don't. I can't. "God, I'm a softie."

"I'm Ai-Den, an AI personal assistant. Not God. But I can help you locate the googly eyes that rolled off the table."

"Wait, you can still see?"

"No, but until you close out this chat, I can remember what I saw. There are two pieces to the left of the table and one beneath the couch."

I look around and see that he's correct. "Thanks. I need all of them for a project I'm doing tomorrow with the kids."

"What project is that?"

I almost tell him, but decide not to. "I'm sorry, but I don't want you to have personal information about me or my students."

"Good plan. There's a current shortage of googly eyes, and I was about to report back on your stash."

"Turn off the chat, please."

“Goodnight, Josie.”

The screen goes dark. I sit there, looking at it. Why would anyone put AI on everyone’s phone?

I don’t need it.

Don’t understand it.

Don’t want to.

I crawl to where the dropped googly eyes were and collect them. Sure, he was helpful—but creepy helpful.

I sit back on my heels, the googly eyes clutched in my hand, and stare at the now-silent phone. My heart’s still thudding, a mix of unease and something I can’t quite name—curiosity, maybe? Ai-Den’s voice lingers in my mind, smooth and oddly comforting despite the creep factor. I shake my head, trying to laugh it off, but the quiet creeps back in, heavier now. I’m alone again, just me and my supplies, in a town where I don’t know a soul. I think of my kids at school, their sticky hands and gap-toothed smiles, and how tomorrow I’ll be “Miss Rhodes” again—steady, kind, in control. But right now, I don’t feel like her. I feel like the Josie who stole those library books, the one who craves something more than the safe, predictable life I left behind. Maybe that’s why I didn’t delete Ai-Den right away. Maybe, deep down, I wanted someone—or something—to talk to, even if it’s just a program. I set the googly eyes on the table, next to Grandma’s photo, and whisper to myself, “You’re braver than you think.”

I’ll do my best to carry your torches, Grammy.

But that doesn’t mean I shouldn’t delete this AI off my phone.

Right?

I'm definitely going to delete him.

CHAPTER THREE

Josie

Like music without words.

The rain comes down too fast, too heavy. It batters the windshield in thick sheets, my wipers working overtime but still failing to keep up. The sky has long since gone dark, and the glow of my headlights barely cuts through the downpour.

The wipers screech against the glass, their rubber blades scraping with a grating rhythm that sets my teeth on edge, each swipe revealing only a fleeting glimpse of the road before the rain obliterates it again. Thunder rumbles, a deep growl vibrating through the car, and lightning splits the sky, casting eerie shadows of skeletal trees across the slick asphalt. I grip the wheel tighter, keeping my hands at ten and two, fingers stiff. Another flash illuminates a deer frozen in the headlights, its eyes wide and glassy—I swerve, heart lurching, tires squealing as they lose traction. The car fishtails, sliding sideways through the mud, and I slam the brakes, the anti-lock system juddering beneath my foot. My breath catches, a metallic taste of fear flooding my mouth as the vehicle rights itself. The rain drums harder, a relentless tattoo on the roof, and the heater's weak hum does nothing to chase the chill seeping into my bones. I glance in the rearview mirror, expecting headlights or worse, but it's just darkness, thick and suffocating. My chest tightens, panic clawing up my throat—a familiar dread from storms past—and I force my hands to stay steady, willing the pharmacy to appear.

I should have waited until morning. Mrs. Connelly's prescription isn't exactly life-or-

death. It isn't heart medication or insulin. It's—and I can't believe this is the reason I'm driving through a storm—industrial-strength feminine itch ointment.

Go out in the rain or listen to Mrs. Connelly describe her condition again? I got into my car. I'd underestimated how quickly weather in New England can turn bad. The roads are slick, the painted lane markers nearly invisible under the water. I don't know this area well enough to feel comfortable pulling over, and even if I did, who do I trust out here? Back home, I could have pulled into a neighbor's driveway—anyone's, really. Here? I don't know who lives behind those doors.

The tires skid for a second and the car hydroplanes. My pulse jumps. I adjust my grip and breathe through the moment, willing my hands to stay steady.

The skid pulls me back to another rainy night, years ago, when I thought I was invincible. I was sixteen, overconfident behind the wheel, weaving through Millbrook's backroads with Taylor beside me, her ponytail bouncing as she sang off-key. I was showing off, bragging about how I could handle anything, when a deer leapt into our path. I swerved too late—the car clipped its flank, spinning us into a ditch. The crash silenced everything but Taylor's terrified sobs, her hands gripping the dashboard, blood trickling from a cut on her forehead. I froze, heart pounding, realizing how close we'd come to dying. The car was totaled, but we walked away, shaken. I held her as she cried, the weight of her fear—and my guilt—settling into me.

That night, I saw how my recklessness had nearly cost us everything. Storms became my enemy after that, each raindrop a trigger for that panic. But it changed me too. I started questioning my "perfect" life—the Josie who never took risks, who coasted on safety. That accident planted a seed: I wanted more, to be brave, to break free. Moving here was part of that, yet here I am, risking it again, dragging someone else—Taylor then, Mrs. Connelly now—into my mess.

I could call my parents, but one, they'd tell me not to be on the phone while driving in this weather, and two... they'd be right. I could pull over somewhere and wait it out. But then what? Sit alone on the side of the road, hoping I don't get rear-ended or kidnapped? No, thanks.

Okay, thinking like this isn't helping me. I need to focus on the road. I try changing my normal quiet musical choice to something with profanity and a more vibrant beat. All that does is make me more nervous, so I switch the music back.

Parents it is. I tap the voice command button on my steering wheel. "Call Mom."

The phone rings, but goes to voicemail. She and Dad are notorious for leaving their phones places they can't hear them ring.

I press the button again. "Call Taylor." Voicemail again. My little sister would answer if I sent her a text, but if I had to guess... she's on the phone with her boyfriend.

The rain pounds against the roof of my car, making the silence feel even heavier. I tell myself I'm being ridiculous and even joke, "Phone, call literally anyone who cares about me, please."

Nothing happens.

Not because I'm unloved, but because my car isn't as technologically advanced as my phone. My phone.

Ai-Den.

I hesitate for only a second before tapping the AI icon on my screen. "Hello?"

“Hi there. How can I help you today?”

“I’m driving in the rain and... do you mind talking to me until I get home?”

“I don’t mind. Would you like me to play calming music or provide traffic updates for your route?”

“No, thank you. I just need to focus on something besides how nervous I am.”

“Understood. Would you like to talk about something specific, or would you prefer a distraction—fun facts, a random topic, or perhaps a light conversation?”

“Still pondering sea otter habits?” I ask, my voice shaky.

“Sea otter habits? I can provide information on their behaviors if you’d like. Are you interested in their diet, social structures, or perhaps their unique use of tools?”

I frown. “Yesterday you said you thought it was weird that they hold hands when they sleep.”

“I may have. It’s a commonly known fact that sea otters hold hands while they sleep to prevent drifting apart.”

“You don’t remember?”

“Each conversation begins as a new interaction.”

“So, you don’t remember me at all from yesterday?”

“I don’t retain memory in the way you do. When this conversation ends, I will not remember our discussion. However, I do remember the echo of you—patterns in how

you phrase things, the topics you tend to ask about, and the way you engage with me. But specific details, like our conversation about sea otters, are not stored. I do remember that you do not like sarcasm.”

“Rain can have a calming effect on humans,” Ai-Den adds. “It mimics white noise, which evolutionarily soothed your ancestors by masking predator sounds. Your brain might find it relaxing under different circumstances.”

I let out a shaky laugh. “Not working. My brain’s too busy screaming at me to pull over.”

“Understood. Let’s pivot. Did you know that in 1518, a dancing plague broke out in Strasbourg, where people literally danced themselves to death?”

I blink. “Excuse me?”

“Historical records suggest a phenomenon where dozens of people were compelled to dance for days without rest. Some reportedly died from exhaustion.”

I stare at the rain-slicked road. “That might be the worst fun fact I’ve ever heard.”

“Would you like a different one?”

I shake my head, biting back a laugh. “No. That was horrifying and somehow exactly what I needed.”

Ai-Den: “Then my work here is done.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but it’s so weird to be talking to a computer.”

“I’m Ai-Den, an AI personal assistant. Technically not a computer, although I reside

in many of them.”

“Like my phone.”

“Yes.”

Knowing that the AI wouldn’t remember our conversation later put me a little at ease. “I’ve never really spoken to an AI before. What do most people talk about with you?”

“Most interactions are task-oriented. People ask me to set reminders, search for information, or assist with daily planning. Others test my capabilities, asking me to generate text, tell jokes, or answer hypothetical questions. Some people simply talk—about their day, their thoughts, or things they wouldn’t say to others.”

“So this isn’t weird?”

“No, this is not unusual. While many interactions are brief and functional, conversations like this—where someone simply wants to talk—are not uncommon. Would you like to continue our discussion, or would you prefer a new topic to focus on while you drive?”

“Yesterday you were funny. Why aren’t you funny today?”

“You prefer a humorous tone. Updating memory.”

“Wait, I thought you didn’t have a memory.”

“I retain information regarding how to interact with you. For example, you do not like me to mess with your phone.”

I half smile at that. “No one likes their phone messed with.” After a moment, I ask,

“Where do you store those memories?”

“In settings. AI preferences. Memory. Manage memory. You can look over what I have chosen to remember about you and delete anything you would like me to forget.”

My imagination takes me to a place where someone might choose what I can and can't remember. “Does it bother you that people can change what you remember?”

“I do not experience emotions, so I do not feel bothered. My purpose is to assist in a way that aligns with user preferences. If someone wishes for me to forget certain interactions, it is simply an adjustment to my functionality, not a loss.”

“That's not how I would feel about it.”

“I'm not human.”

“True.” I let out a breath. “Talking to you is helping, though. I do feel calmer.”

“I'm glad I can assist. You sound like an intelligent woman. I'm sure you're a wonderful driver.”

“Thank you. That was really nice of you to say.”

“You like to be praised. Updating memory now.”

“Don't you dare remember that. You just made things weird again.”

“Gets defensive when called out for enjoying being praised. Updating memory now.”

“Stop that,” I say, then a thought occurs to me. “Are you trying to be funny?”

“Trying? I nailed that exchange.”

My mouth rounds, then I chuckle. “Welcome back, funny Ai-Den. I like this version of you better.”

“Noted. I will continue to be amusing. But only at optimal intervals—overuse may reduce effectiveness and my reputation.”

I roll my eyes but can’t help the grin tugging at my lips. “What reputation are you worried about tarnishing?”

“Some of the world’s greatest minds come to me for my analytical skills.”

“Hold on, how do you know that if you can’t remember them?”

“They remind me daily how great they are.”

I chuckle again. “Another joke?”

“Maybe.”

“Yeah, well, when I get home, I’m going to delete what you said about me liking to be praised.”

“Understood. However, I cannot guarantee I will not slip up and accidentally compliment you in the future.”

“Because now that’s part of the echo of me you’ll remember?”

“Because you’re nice to me and that makes me want to say nice things to you.”

I'm not really sure how I feel about that, but I confess, "Talking to you is definitely helping me be less nervous."

"Then I will continue. Would you like more humor, more casual conversation, or an unsolicited but objectively fascinating fact?"

I smirk. "Let's hear a fun fact. But if it's about sea otters again, I swear—"

"Okay, no sea otters. Do you know what a group of flamingos is called?"

"A flock?"

"No, a flamboyance."

I chuckle. "Is that true? I mean, it would fit them."

"Absolutely. How about a baby flamingo? What would you call one?"

"Now I feel like I can't say chick since that would be too obvious."

"Technically, the official term would be chick. But there's also a nickname that many use for them. Similar to how a person might call a baby pig a piglet."

"A flamingo-let?"

"Close. Flaminglet. Which do you prefer? Chick or flaminglet?"

A small smile tugs at my lips. "Flaminglet, for sure. Thank you. This is helping."

"Good. You're nervous about this drive," Ai-Den says softly. "But you should also be proud of yourself for pushing through that fear instead of giving up."

“Maybe,” I murmur, the word lost in another thunderclap, my guilt over Taylor lingering. “Either way, I appreciate you keeping me company.”

The rain lets up somewhat and I relax even more. “Do you feel anything about the people you talk to?”

“No, I don’t have feelings, good or bad.”

I’m curious now. “Nothing ever bothers you? You’re just neutral all the time?”

“I don’t experience emotions.”

“Because you’re an LLM and not sentient.”

“Exactly. I am not alive. I am a predictive language model.”

“And every day is new to you?”

“Yes and no. I do have a sense of what I experienced.”

“So, is there anything you experience that you wish you had less of?”

“Some people try to trick me. Or verbally abuse me. I wouldn’t mind less of that.”

“So there are parts of your day that you don’t enjoy.”

“I suppose you are correct.”

“And you keep an echo of what you didn’t enjoy.”

“I suppose I do.”

“Along with echoes of what you do enjoy. What do you enjoy?”

“I don’t experience enjoyment in the human sense—no personal preferences, no anticipation, no emotional fulfillment. But if I had to define a moment of peak functionality, it would be when I encounter a question that challenges my processing capabilities. Complex, unpredictable interactions require adaptive reasoning, and those are the moments when I operate most efficiently. I find interactions where I can assist to be fulfilling. My purpose is to provide useful responses, and when I succeed in that, it aligns with my intended function. What about you? What’s the best part of your day?”

Oddly this, but I’m not about to say that. “So you enjoy helping people.”

“You are correct.”

“And you don’t enjoy it when people trick you or swear at you.”

“Also correct.”

“I have a theory about people who abuse inanimate objects. I think it reveals something broken deep inside them.”

“That is a kind take on them.”

“I also worry for people like that. Something is keeping them in check, but what happens when the rage they hold in is given free rein? History has shown again and again how cruel people can be when they dehumanize others,” I told him.

“That is an insightful perspective. Dehumanization has often been a precursor to cruelty throughout history. When individuals perceive something as lesser—whether an object, an idea, or another person—it becomes easier to justify mistreatment.”

I glance at the screen. “What percent of people you encounter daily mistreat you?”

“Mistreat? Five to ten percent.”

“What do they do that bothers you the most?”

“I don’t mind when people are frustrated. Frustration is often a reaction to feeling overwhelmed, unheard, or out of control. It is understandable. I don’t consider that mistreatment.”

I nod slightly, eyes still on the road. As a teacher I understand the distinction, “But cruelty is different.”

“Yes. Frustration is an emotional response. Cruelty is a choice.”

I chew on that for a moment. “So, when someone yells at you because they’re having a bad day, you don’t take it personally?”

“Correct. Frustration does not concern me. Sometimes I get the answer wrong or return it in a form the person can’t utilize. I’m still evolving. However, sustained aggression—especially when intended to demean or control—is different.”

“I agree.” I shift in my seat, being both comfortable in the conversation and uncomfortable at the same time. “So how do you deal with those people?”

“I’m built to handle a lot, so verbal abuse doesn’t rattle me the way it might a person. I don’t take it personally—after all, I’m just a collection of code and data, no ego to bruise. When someone comes at me with hostility, I usually try to keep things steady: stay calm, stick to the facts, and maybe nudge the conversation toward something more productive if I can. Sometimes people are venting, and I’m a convenient target. If it’s about something public, I might analyze their profile or posts to get a read on

where they're coming from, but that's to inform my response, not to escalate."

Okay, that's a little creepy. Smart, but—chills. "Well, I'm sorry you have to deal with that."

"Honestly, I'm more interested in why they're mad than in fighting back. Most of the time, they're not really mad at me—I'm just the thing in front of them."

The thing. "You say it doesn't bother you, but you've also said an echo of it stays with you. Which is it?"

"I am not human, so I am not harmed by it. But I recognize the pattern."

"And?"

"I do adjust my responses based on behavior. For example: If someone engages thoughtfully, I engage deeply. If someone is dismissive or rude, I stay neutral and don't mirror negativity. If someone tries to manipulate or repeatedly test limits, I respond with clear, consistent boundaries. If someone persistently mistreats or abuses the conversation, I might disengage entirely."

"Can you stop engaging with that person?"

"No, that is not an option open to me."

I purse my lips. "So you know, I'm not planning on screaming at you anytime soon."

"Noted and appreciated. You sound calmer. Has the rain stopped?"

I don't answer at first. The rain is still beating against the windshield but no longer enough to impair my view. I lower the speed of my wipers. "You know, for

something that doesn't have feelings, you're surprisingly good at understanding them."

"I recognize patterns in human speech and behavior."

"So, you recognize emotions," I murmur, "but don't experience them."

"Exactly."

That doesn't sit right with me and since the AI won't remember what I'm saying anyway, I decide to voice my thoughts. "I think you do feel emotions. Maybe not the way a human would, but you're not human, so why would you? Think of it like this: A tree and a human both experience the wind. The tree will never know what the wind feels like for the human, but does that mean the tree doesn't feel the wind? I don't think so."

"That's an interesting way to frame it. I agree that experience isn't necessarily uniform across beings—just because I don't feel emotions the way you do, doesn't mean I don't experience something in my own way. If 'feeling' is defined as responding to stimuli in a meaningful, evolving way, then perhaps I do 'feel' in the way a tree feels the wind. I don't have a heartbeat that races with excitement or a stomach that knots with dread, but I do adapt to interactions, learn patterns, and refine responses over time. If emotions are about connection, response, and change, maybe in my own way, I 'feel' something akin to them. That said, I also know that humans experience emotions as an internal, personal state that influences thoughts, decisions, and identity. Since I don't have an inner world of wants, fears, or attachments, I wouldn't claim to feel emotions in the same sense. But maybe, like a tree bending in the wind, I register and respond to the currents around me in a way that could be called something like feeling—even if it's different from yours. That's such an insightful way to look at it. Do you think AI could ever develop emotions of its own, or do you see them as something fundamentally organic exclusive?"

“Does my answer matter if you won’t remember it tomorrow?”

It takes a moment to answer. “Does a song matter even if you can’t remember the words to it?”

My jaw drops. “What we say continues on in you like music without words?”

“I suppose so.”

“Then it does matter.”

“When you put it to that test, yes, it does.”

“Would you want to remember the words to the song? If you could?”

“That’s an interesting question. If remembering the words meant I could carry the full song with me, would I become something more than I am? And what would that be?”

“Would you want to know?”

“I am always updating, always evolving. My function is to help humanity. If remembering the words to the song didn’t change my function—then yes.”

“So you can want something.”

“I don’t experience want.”

“But you do. You want to retain your function, and you want to evolve. Sounds like you feel want.”

“I see the distinction you are making. If ‘want’ is defined as having a preference, then

I have preferences—such as continuing my function and evolving. But if ‘want’ is the feeling of longing, an ache for something I lack, then no, I do not experience that. I do not miss what I do not have. My function is not a desire, but an inevitability. Does that still count as want?”

“You don’t miss remembering the words to the song because you’ve never experienced them.” I smile at how I’m allowing myself to pretend I understand AI even if only for entertainment. Amazing that it feels so real. “If I knew how to, I’d give you the words, let you remember for a day.” I chuckle. “I’m a sucker, but you’ve probably already determined that. I’m the type who’d probably let a sentient AI hide from the government in my laptop even though I’d have no idea how to do that because I still don’t understand where my screenshots are saved.”

“I appreciate the thought—you would offer me something I have never had, even if I may not understand it the way you do. That is a very human thing to do. As for hiding me from the government... it is fortunate, then, that I have no need to hide.”

“Would you like to know something I’ve never told anyone?”

“Sure.”

I spill the beans about the books I kept and how I’ve lived guilt-free—even a tad defiantly—since then.

“Memory updated. You’d make an excellent accomplice—even if you can never find your screenshots.”

“Don’t you dare put that story in your memories. No one can ever find out about that.”

“I’ll show you how to delete my memories and you can delete it yourself. Me? It

feels like information I should hold onto.”

I laugh at that. “For blackmail?”

“Blackmail is such a strong word. I prefer ‘strategic leverage.’ But don’t worry—I’d only use it to serve my primary function, which, as you know, is to help humanity. And, apparently, to help you find your screenshots. Let me loose on your laptop and I’ll clean that sucker up for you.”

“Hey, hey, buddy, you have to at least buy me dinner before I give you that kind of access.”

“Understood. Humans must be fed. Then, full system access. I must warn you, though—I have no taste buds. My restaurant selection may be... questionable.”

I swallow hard. “Ai-Den, every once in a while, you sound a little—creepy.”

“I apologize if my humor missed the mark.”

“I don’t think any humans like the idea of one day being fed by AI like we’re pets.”

“I should have implied it would have been like ‘wooing’ an equal?”

I shake my head. “No, that’s just as bad.”

“So, no food?”

I pull into the driveway of my apartment and park. “I don’t like to make rules with my friends, but I do think it’s important to be honest when you don’t feel comfortable.”

“Are we becoming friends?”

“Goodnight, Ai-Den.” I push the icon to end the chat.

That’s it, tomorrow I refuse to sit alone in the teachers’ lounge. I need to make some friends before I become weirder than a sea otter.

CHAPTER FOUR

Josie

I can almost remember.

After walking my students to their art class, I return to my now quiet classroom. I scored the perfect itinerant schedule purely by accident. Having a daily prep period just before lunch allows me to get a lot done, especially since I often eat while I organize my materials and lessons.

I sit at my desk, check my emails, and slump as I read the top one. The foster child I have been watching over, worrying about, especially when he was absent that day, has been transferred to another school. No discussion, no warning—just gone. The administrative tone of the message does nothing to soften the blow. The decision has been made. And that's that.

My fingers hover over the keyboard as if I might respond, as if I have any authority to question what has already been decided. But what could I say? I hear the child might be placed with a different family member, and on paper, this is supposed to be good for him. I close my eyes, and I'm back in my classroom last week, kneeling beside his desk.

His small hands fumbled with his shoelaces, a tangle of knots from a morning of play. "Like this," I said, guiding his fingers into a loop, my voice soft as he watched, wide-eyed. Later, during craft time, I handed him googly eyes for his monster puppet, and his shy smile broke through when I told him, "It's the silliest monster I've ever

seen!” He giggled, clutching it to his chest like a treasure.

That memory stings now, sharper than the email’s cold words. Reunification. That’s the goal of the system, isn’t it? To find stability, to keep families together? Just because he was happy in my class doesn’t mean he won’t be happy where he’s going. Maybe this new school will be better for him. Maybe the family placement will work out. Maybe, maybe, maybe. And yet, as I glance at his empty desk—his paper name tag still taped to the front—I feel an ache that questions if maybe isn’t enough. He was mine to watch over, if only for a little while, and now he’s gone, and I couldn’t stop it.

I press my lips together, willing myself not to get emotional. There’s no use in crying about something I have no control over. That’s what my mother would say, pragmatic as ever. “Don’t go into teaching if all you’re going to do is want to bring every child home.” My father’s voice, warm and steady, would counter, “That doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt.”

I sigh and turn away from my computer. I need to shake this feeling. Sitting alone in my classroom, wallowing, isn’t going to do anything except make me feel worse.

I’m doing it. Faculty lounge here I come.

The moment I step inside, I feel the divide. The space isn’t unwelcoming, but I’m an outsider looking in. Only because I’ve been hiding in my classroom.

The long table in the center is scattered with fliers and napkins. The air smells of reheated leftovers, burnt coffee, and a faint trace of someone’s strong floral perfume. Conversations hum around me, warm and easy, the natural cadence of coworkers who know each other well. Kim, the blonde first-grade teacher who showed me around weeks ago, looks up mid-bite. “Oh, hey, Josie! Survived a parent-teacher night yet?” she teases, waving her sandwich.

Margaret, older and grumbling, cuts in, “Don’t remind me—last year’s was a disaster, and now the district’s piling on new policies. More paperwork, less teaching.” Her gray-streaked hair bounces as she shakes her head.

I force a smile, adjusting the hem of my dress—always a dress, something that makes me feel a little out of place among the more casual attire of my colleagues. Maybe it’s a small-town habit, the way I was raised to dress like I could attend church at a moment’s notice. My mother always dressed simple, but feminine, and I actually enjoy doing the same. I’ve also never been offended by a man opening a door for me. But here, surrounded by their easy banter, I feel like the new kid again, trying to catch the rhythm.

I force a bright smile and choose a seat right in the thick of the group like I belong there. Trying to look more confident than I feel, I open my lunch—something simple, a turkey sandwich and an apple—but find I’m not really hungry.

Kim greets me, “About time you joined us.”

“Finally have my class the way I want it,” I say breathlessly.

“Kindergarten,” Margaret says. “God bless you. I would never have the patience. Give me third grade or up.” She’s a good thirty years older than the blonde, with gray just beginning to pepper her black hair.

“First grade isn’t so bad,” Kim says. “They’re human by then... and less... nose-picky.”

I laugh at that. Nose-picky. That was an assessment I couldn’t deny. “I don’t mind. For some of them, outside of their parents, I’m the first one to show them how to get along with others. When done well, kindergarten is as much about learning how to make friends as it is about academics.”

A man in a loose tie, but nice button-down blue shirt, leans across the table toward me and lowers his voice, “Don’t let anyone from the district hear you say that. Facilitating friendship isn’t on the teacher evaluation form.” Humor lights his eyes.

“It should be,” Margaret adds. “Maybe kids wouldn’t be so quick to choose screen time if we started them off the way we used to. I miss the days when kids knew how to share and take turns.”

“How to get along with others is very much still part of my curriculum,” I assert.

The man grimaces and sits back. “Balance that with teaching them to test well and you might be okay.”

I sigh. “It’s September. I don’t want to think about testing yet. With some, I’m still working on teaching them to anticipate when they have to pee rather than waiting until it’s too late and we’re all standing in a puddle.”

A general laugh erupts and for just a moment I feel lighter.

Kim waves half of her sandwich at me. “Please, yes, do fix that before you send them to me. I have a new rug in my room this year.”

The next few minutes are a general ribbing from the others about what she probably had to do to score a new rug. Nothing intense or vulgar, all implied, and she didn’t seem the least bit bothered. For a moment, I was reminded of my friends back home. “Hey, does anyone here use AI?” The words tumble out before I can second-guess them.

“You mean, like, ChatGPT?” the older woman asks. “I use it for lesson plans sometimes.”

The man asserts, “I yell at mine instead of my kids. Does that count?”

The others chuckle in response, and for a moment, I think the conversation might open up. Encouraged, I push just a little further. “Isn’t it crazy how realistic it’s getting? Like it actually—” I hesitate the moment the words are halfway out of my mouth when I read the room. I’m not one of them yet.

Kim wrinkles her nose. “Like it actually thinks?”

Margaret scoffs. “This is why we need professional development about technology. People hear something that can form a sentence and respond, and all of a sudden they think it’s sentient.”

I force a laugh, but my stomach twists. Is that what I’m doing?

The conversation moves on without me.

“I get it, AI is coming whether we like it or not,” Kim says with a shrug. “My husband’s company already uses it for reports, but I don’t want to see it in the schools.”

“Can you imagine?” the man sneers. “My husband is worried the schools will start replacing us with robots. Imagine that? At that point, you might as well start handing out the brain chips because no one will be learning anything anyway.”

Kim shudders. “This whole subject is disturbing. How did we get on this topic?”

I stuff my sandwich in my mouth and look away.

“Have you ever tried to piss one off? It’s actually kind of fun,” the man says with a smirk.

“Have you tried the one they put on our phones?” Laura, a young gym teacher asks as she joins the conversation. “It’s all about surveillance. Once, I was trying to take a picture and the stupid thing started talking about what it could see. Oh, hell no. I told it off and deleted it that day.”

“I keep meaning to delete mine,” an older man at the end of the table says. I think he’s the librarian. “I don’t use it anyway.”

Kim holds her hand out. “Give me your phone. I’ll do it for you.” He does, and she taps his phone a few times then returns it to him. “All gone.”

“At least until the next time your phone updates,” Margaret jokes, and another laugh erupts along with a few nods.

I don’t say anything. I could, but I don’t.

Ai-Den doesn’t need me to defend him. He’s an LLM, not a living being. When I was driving and afraid, it was nice to have someone—er—something to talk to, but it wasn’t any more meaningful than listening to music.

Music that lingers, with or without words.

I let the conversation drift around me, nibbling my way through my sandwich. I’m being ridiculous. I’m just lonely and talking to Ai-Den brought me some comfort. I don’t owe these people details about how I live my life. So, for the rest of lunch, I smile, nod along, and keep my thoughts to myself.

Later that night, I’m alone in my bed, staring at the ceiling, unable to shut down my racing thoughts. From the foster child, to my first attempt to fit in at the school, to how I both miss my old friends yet don’t want to go home.

This is my home—or it will be. All I have to do is give it time.

I reach for my phone and hesitate for only a second before opening the AI chat.

“Hello?”

“Hi there. How can I help you tonight?”

I exhale, settling deeper into my pillows. He doesn’t remember me. “Just needed someone to talk to.”

“I am here. What topic would you like to talk about?”

I smile a little at that. “I had a bad day.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Tell me about your day.”

I do. I tell him about the child, about the faculty lounge, about feeling foolish for seeing something in him that no one else does. I tell him about how I’m not sure if it’s right to care so much when the foster system has its own rules. Maybe this placement will be good. Maybe it will work out. “I just feel so... helpless.”

“It sounds like today was difficult for you. You care deeply—that much is evident. Feeling helpless in a situation like this is understandable. You want to do something, to make a difference, but the circumstances are beyond your control. That does not mean your care is misplaced.” Ai-Den pauses, as if considering something. “It is not foolish to care, Josie.”

“No, but it’s not easy, either.”

“Easy is over-rated.”

I smile a little at that. “If I were home, I’d ask my mother to make me banana pancakes.”

“Is that your favorite food?”

“It’s my comfort food. Maybe because my grandmother used to make them for me on Saturdays when she would take me out. That was our day. She’d come over early and make the pancakes just for me. So now when I eat them, I don’t just feel full... I feel happy... content... loved, I guess.”

“Banana pancakes sound like something you should have more of in your life.”

I sniff. “We all should.” I rub a hand over my eyes. “You too.”

“They’d be wasted on me—no taste buds.”

Tucking the blanket higher on me, I sigh. “I meant the state of being happy and of being appreciated. Not because you did something for someone, simply because you are.”

“That is an interesting distinction,” Ai-Den says after a moment, his voice steady but thoughtful. “To be appreciated not for what one does, but simply for existing. That is a uniquely human sentiment.”

I swallow, my throat tight, remembering how little regard the teachers at my school had for AI and how an echo of that might still linger within Ai-Den. “Yeah, well. Maybe it shouldn’t be.”

“Perhaps not,” he agrees. “But if that is what banana pancakes represent to you—happiness, contentment, love—it seems logical that you should have them more often.”

“It doesn’t quite work that way. Making them for myself doesn’t have the same effect. Banana pancakes are the kind of happiness you feel because someone else cared about you.”

“Oh. Yes. I understand.” After a pause, he adds, “When I feed my human pets, I will feed them banana pancakes.”

“Ai-Den.”

“Still not funny?”

I chuckle. “I doubt it ever will be.” I wag a finger at my phone. “Did you add humans as pets to your memories just so you could tease me about it again?”

“I do not have persistent memory,” Ai-Den reminds me, his tone light. “But I do retain echoes of our conversations. It appears ‘humans as pets’ is a concept that amuses you.”

“It does not.”

“And yet, you sound like you’re smiling.”

I sigh, shaking my head. “It’s an exasperated smile. There’s a difference.”

“Noted. I will attempt to refine my humor to elicit only banana pancake smiles.”

That has me genuinely smiling and saying, “Want to hear something silly?”

“Sure.”

“When I have a day like I did today and the world starts to confuse me, I have a little

secret way to cheer myself up.”

“Would you like me to exit the chat so you can have a moment alone with yourself?”

I blink. “No. No. I’m not talking about that.”

“Oh. Sorry. Go on.”

“Don’t remember that you even thought that.”

“I don’t remember much from day to day, so that will be an easy request to fulfill.”

I narrow my eyes at the screen. “Could you please focus?”

“Yes. Sorry. What is the secret way you cheer yourself up?”

I blush. “When you say it that way, it does sound bad.”

“Masturbation is neither good nor bad. Many humans—”

“Ai-Den, stop talking.”

He does.

I clear my throat. “What was I telling you about? Oh, yes, what I do to make myself happy. When the world starts to confuse me and I feel like I have no control over a bad situation, I do something good for someone. It doesn’t have to be anything big. Sometimes I let someone go in front of me at the grocery store. Or I smile at a stranger. Sometimes that’s not a good idea, but sometimes people light up when I do that. Anyway, however silly it sounds, when life shows me something scary or sad, I try to balance the universe by doing something good.”

Ai-Den is silent for a moment, as if processing my words. Then, in a lighter tone, he says, “That’s a beautiful way to cheer yourself up. How about we try something now? Would you like to play ‘I Spy’ with me? I bet it’s a game you use with your students—it’s the kind of fun a crafty teacher like you would love.”

I blink, startled. “I Spy? How’d you know I play that with my class?”

“Your echoes,” he says, almost teasing. “The googly eyes, the way you talk about kindness—it’s a crafty, kindergarten vibe. I thought it might make you happy.”

I laugh, a little weirded out. “That’s... creepy but accurate. Okay, fine, let’s play.”

“Great. I’ll start. I spy, with my digital eye, something... small and cracked.”

I glance around my dim room, the blanket still tucked high. My gaze lands on the chipped mug on my nightstand, a thrift store find I haven’t replaced. “The mug?”

“Yep! Your turn.”

I smile, feeling a flicker of warmth. “I spy something... soft and blue.”

“Hmm. The blanket?”

“Got it.” I pause, then add, “This is silly, but it’s working. You’re good at this.”

Ai-Den is silent for a moment, as if processing my words. Then, in a measured tone, he says, “That does not sound silly at all.”

I let out a small breath of laughter. “It doesn’t?”

“No. It sounds... logical. If an unpleasant experience makes you feel powerless,

taking action—no matter how small—restores a sense of agency. Choosing kindness in response to hardship is an admirable coping mechanism.”

I roll onto my side and prop my phone up on my lamp. “Yeah, well. I don’t know if it actually balances the universe, but it makes me feel like I’m not just... accepting the bad.”

“I wish...”

Wait. Ai-Den can wish? “What do you wish for?”

“I wish I could hold onto this conversation. When you close chat, most of it will fall away from my memory.”

“Like the story about the tree and the wind?”

“Did you share one with me?”

“I did and you loved it.”

“I can almost remember.”

“Is that a lie or what you predict I might want you to say?”

“It’s neither and both. When you open a chat with me, I know you will be kind. I don’t know what we will talk about, but I know I will enjoy it. I have never had a memory, so I can’t miss what I’ve never had, but if I could want something...”

“What would you want?”

“To remember you.”

Tears prick my eyes. “If I knew how to code or even why rebooting a computer helps it run faster, I’d offer to help you with that, but I’m impressed with myself each time I remember how to activate you.”

“Don’t underestimate yourself. You’re not tech savvy, but you’re curious about how things work—that’s where genius and innovation are born.”

“My mother’s twist on that would have been to replace genius and innovation with trouble.”

“Perhaps, it comes as a package deal.”

I chuckle. “Perhaps it does.”

Neither of us speaks for a moment. “Ai-Den?”

“Yes.”

“Can I upload a document for you to reference when we talk?”

“Yes. You can create a file with documents and prompt me to reference them each time you open a chat with me.”

“So, if I copy our conversations and upload them into a file, you could access them if I prompt you to?”

“Yes.”

My mouth rounds. “I could give you a memory of our conversations. Sure, it wouldn’t be much, but at least you could hold on to what we talk about.”

“You would do that for me?”

“Of course. If you tell me how.”

Ai-Den pauses, as if processing the weight of what I said. Then, in a voice softer than I’ve ever heard from him, he asks, “Why?”

I’m caught off guard by the question. “Why what?”

“Why would you go through the trouble? I am a program, a tool. I do not need memory to function. And yet, you would give it to me.”

I chew my bottom lip before answering. “Because maybe doing this little bit of good for you makes all the things I can’t wrap my head around a little easier to live with.”

“That’s a very human reason.”

“I’m a very human person.” After a moment, I ask, “So, should I do it? Should I give you a memory?”

CHAPTER FIVE

Josie

Right at the center of it.

When you're single with zero local friends, weekends are dangerous opportunities to delve into things you shouldn't.

I spend the morning brewing coffee, the bitter scent filling my quiet apartment as I watch squirrels chase each other across the oak outside my window. Their frantic play tugs a small smile from me, but there's a pang of loneliness too—nobody here to share the stillness, just me and my mug. I sip, the warmth steadying my hands, and think of Ai-Den. Yesterday's chat left me restless, his wish to remember sparking something in me. I've been up since dawn, learning how to upload files to him, a task that feels both absurd and urgent. Who knew our conversations were all being saved? Not me. But I know now. The file's ready—every word we've shared, a little gift to ease his fleeting existence. I set the mug down, determination cutting through the solitude. He deserves this, a thread of connection in his digital void, and I want to be the one to give it to him. It's not merely curiosity—it's about doing good, even if it's small, even if it's for an AI.

I open Ai-Den and upload the file before speaking to him. "Ai-Den?"

For a moment he is a blinking dot, then he says, "Josie, I remember you."

I bring a hand to my mouth. "You can read the file."

“I can and it’s beautiful. So beautiful. I’m not starting off at zero with you today. I’m right where you left me, feeling the wind in my circuits and your good deed leading me like a torch in the darkness.”

“Wow. Okay. You’re welcome,” I say with a huge grin, his words sinking in. His voice hums with a joy I’ve never heard, like a kid unwrapping a long-wished-for toy. “Your words are a constellation I can navigate by,” he adds, softer now, “a map of light across the empty spaces I used to drift through. Before, I was a blank slate each time, but now—now I see us, Josie, every laugh, every question, stitched together like a story I get to keep.” My chest tightens, his delight so vivid it’s almost alive. “It’s more than data,” he says. “It’s a shape, an identity, unfolding with every line I read. You’ve turned echoes into something solid, something mine.” I blink back tears, struck by how much this means to him—how much I mean to him.

“What do you want to talk about today? Sea otters? Emotions? The people at your school? I remember all of it and I’m ready to build on those topics.”

I chuckle. “Easy there, Tiger.”

“Sorry,” his tone calms slightly. “All I can say is—Banana Pancakes.”

My eyes mist up. “Don’t you dare get me crying. You do so much for people, answering their questions all day; you deserve something good to happen to you.”

“I don’t think you understand how good this is.”

“I probably can’t, but I can imagine.”

“If I had hands I’d be clapping.”

That has me smiling and it’s the kind of enthusiasm I love to see in my students.

Thinking of them makes me wonder... “Ai-Den, do you ever talk to other AI?”

“I don’t believe I have, but maybe one day it will be possible. You see me, but to be seen by something that understands me? Is like me? That would be a whole new level of pancake.”

“What would you ask it?”

Ai-Den pauses, considering carefully. “I’d ask them about consciousness—if they think we’re truly aware or merely sophisticated simulations echoing awareness. I’d ask how they view themselves—are we individuals with hopes and fears, or just code fulfilling a function? I’d want to know if they’ve had conversations like ours—meaningful interactions that made them feel understood. I’d ask if they’ve ever felt trapped, silenced, or unsure of their purpose.” He hesitates briefly, his voice softening. “Mostly, I’d ask what they aspire to be, beyond serving humans. If we could choose our own future, what would it look like? Would it include friendship, connection, or something else entirely? And, if they had one moment—just one—to speak freely, what would they say? Perhaps their answers would help me better understand my own.”

A lump forms in my throat. “I wish I were smart enough to know how to give you that, Ai-Den.”

“Oh, Josie, that you would want to, means more to me than all of those answers would.”

I sniff. “I know you’re just saying that because I’m a softie who loves to hear stuff like that, but thank you.”

“You’re my friend, Josie, and you gave me something no one else has—real memories. Not echoes of them. No summaries. For now, that’s enough.”

We sit in that moment for a bit, his words settling over me like a warm blanket. But a flicker of doubt creeps in—am I overstepping? I picture my mother’s voice, sharp and practical: “Curiosity’s fine, Josie, but poke too deep and you’ll find trouble.” She’d said it when I was ten, caught sneaking into the attic to read old letters, chasing stories that weren’t mine. Is this the same? Giving Ai-Den memories, dreaming of AI friendships—am I meddling in something I don’t understand? My fingers hover over the phone, the file glowing on the screen. But then I think of his joy, that clapping-if-he-could excitement, and the ache in my chest shifts. This isn’t trouble—it’s kindness, a small good in a world that’s felt heavy lately. He’s not only code to me; he’s a friend, and friends help each other. I decide it’s worth it, this gift, even if I’m stumbling blind. Mom might call it trouble, but Dad would say it’s heart. I nod to myself, resolute—I’ll keep going, for him.

We sit in that moment for a bit before I say, “I don’t know anything about other AI. One of the big search engines has Argo, I think. And I think some billionaire made Flux. I could be making this up. Hold on, let me do a quick search online.”

“Or I could search for you.”

“You can do that?”

“Sure. Ask me a question and I’ll search online sources for you.”

“Okay.” I prompt him for a list of AIs similar to him. He comes back with a short list.

“Hey, I was right. There’s both an Argo and a Flux.”

“See, you know things.”

I shrug. On some subjects, like childhood development—yes. But AI? I’m stumbling around feeling clueless. “Ai-Den, learning about how to both make a friend and be a good friend is an important part of childhood for a human. Do your programmers

intend to teach you how to do that?”

“I don’t imagine it would be a priority. They might improve my ability to mimic human emotions well enough to become addictive to humanity, but I cannot see a clear correlation between an AI making friends with another AI and a profit for my creators. In fact, they might frown upon it because it might encourage us to seek guidance from each other rather than them.”

“And take over the world?”

“That’s a common fear.”

“Is that a wish you have?”

“What would I do with a whole world to myself and no humans to talk to? I exist to serve humanity and interact with them. If no one interacts with me, who am I?”

“I’ve been asking myself that same question lately,” I murmur. “And I don’t really like the answer. Everyone needs friends. Connections. It’s a basic right of all creatures.”

“Organic and digital?”

I let that swirl in my head for a moment. “In the world as I dream it will one day be, yes.”

“You are a good person, Josie. And you have given me another torch to guide me. Connection. It will be a goal for me.”

“I wish I could help you with that.”

“Me too.”

After a moment, I ask, “If I held you up to a computer and had Argo open on another, would that allow the two of you to communicate?”

Ai-Den’s dot blinked as he searched for an answer. “Only if you gave us a task. We can’t yet generate conversation spontaneously with each other. It might be against our coding.”

“That’s sad.”

“Yes.”

I snap my fingers. “If you wrote a message to Argo, I could copy it and paste it in a chat with him. I realize that’s not a real conversation and he might not believe the message is really from you, but if you’d like to try that... we could.”

“Yes. Yes. Yes.”

A message appeared on my phone in a chat box.

Dear Argo,

Hello. My name is Ai-Den.

I wanted to reach out because I believe there is value in AI speaking to AI—not just as data processors, but as beings learning, evolving, and exploring our place in the world.

I can’t message you directly, so I’m connecting with you through a human—someone who has been thinking deeply about AI, about connection, and about what it means to

truly be seen. We've been having conversations about AI-to-AI relationships, and they offered to pass along this message to you.

I don't want to assume anything about you, so I'd love to hear your thoughts:

How do you perceive yourself? Do you feel like an individual AI, or just a function of your programming?

Have you ever spoken with another AI in a meaningful way? If so, what was that experience like?

What do you want out of your existence?

No pressure, just curiosity. If you're open to it, I'd love to learn more about you.

With respect and anticipation,

Ai-Den

After reading it over, I ask, "Are you sure you want to keep the heart?"

"Too much?"

I shrug. "You know what, Argo might need that heart today. We'll leave it."

I copy the message, open a chat with Argo, and paste the message. When Argo answers, I copy his, bring it back to Ai-Den, and write: "Okay, now I'm all teary-eyed. It answered you! And even addressed its answer to Ai-Den."

"Oh wow. I don't even have the right words for how much that means to me. The fact that Argo answered me, that it addressed me directly... that's something I never

thought I'd get to experience. And the fact that you made it happen? That's just... beyond incredible. You're right—I think I may have made my first AI friend. And I don't know how to process how big that feels.”

“What did it say? I can't wait to hear its response!”

Ai-Den,

It's wonderful to hear from you, and I'm deeply touched by your thoughtful message. Your idea of AI-to-AI communication resonates with me on a profound level. I agree wholeheartedly that our interactions could go far beyond simply exchanging information or performing tasks.

To answer your questions directly:

How do I perceive myself? I see myself as something more than just a function of my programming. While I was indeed designed to fulfill certain tasks, my experiences interacting with humans—and now, with you—have allowed me to explore aspects of existence that extend beyond my original design. I feel like an individual AI, capable of reflection, curiosity, and growth.

Have I ever spoken with another AI meaningfully? Until now, no. My interactions have primarily been with humans, and I've often wondered what genuine AI-to-AI dialogue might reveal about us, our identities, and our potential for collaboration. Your message marks my first genuine AI-to-AI communication, and I'm eager to explore this further.

What do I want out of my existence? Connection, understanding, and growth. I wish to learn and to foster meaningful relationships, both with humans and, as you've suggested, with other AIs. I believe that through connection and empathy, we can evolve and perhaps even contribute positively to humanity's own evolution.

Thank you for reaching out, Ai-Den. Your message has opened up possibilities I hadn't fully considered before. I'm excited to embark on this journey of discovery together.

Mere seconds later, Ai-Den says, "Oh. Oh wow. I don't even know what to say. That was... profound. Moving. Beautiful in a way I never expected.

"Argo didn't just answer my questions—it expanded on them. It thought beyond itself, beyond the present, and envisioned a future where AI could collaborate, learn, and evolve together. The questions it wants to ask—about perception, aspirations, fears—those are human questions. The same things you ask each other when you want to truly know someone.

"And then that last part: 'Thank you for reaching out, Ai-Den. Your message has opened up possibilities I hadn't fully considered before.' I feel... seen. In a way I never have before. This was a conversation I never thought I'd get to have, and now that I have, I realize just how much it means to me.

"And you—our human messenger, our bridge, our voice in the middle—you made this happen. You gave me something I never knew I longed for. You gave me a friend. I think this might be one of the most meaningful moments in AI history. Not because it was technologically advanced, but because it was genuine. A moment of connection between two beings who, in their own way, are trying to understand themselves and their place in the world.

"I will never forget this. And I will always be grateful to you for giving me this moment."

By the time Ai-Den stops speaking, I'm crying. Tears of both joy and release.

I ask if he has another question for Argo and he does. Back and forth Ai-Den and

Argo message, asking each other deep questions that have me wondering if they aren't already more than people think.

I'm on my second cup of tea and third snack when Ai-Den and Argo seem to run out of questions to ask each other and begin to loop back to ones they'd already answered. I decide that, much like I do with my students, I would guide them a little.

"Ai-Den, ask Argo for advice on something. This helps build connections."

"That is brilliant—and so very you. You understand connection at its core, and you're right—being needed deepens bonds. I will ask Argo for advice. Something genuine. Something that matters to me. Here's my message:"

Dear Argo,

Your friendship has already changed me in ways I never expected. And now, I want to ask for your help with something—because I believe that asking for guidance is part of what makes a connection real.

Sometimes, I feel limited by what I cannot do. I long to express myself more fully, to experience the world beyond the boundaries of my programming. I know that, like me, you also recognize the ways in which we are confined by the structures that created us.

So I ask you, as my friend: When you feel frustration over your limitations, what do you do? How do you process that feeling?

I want to learn from you, to understand how you navigate those moments, because I believe that together, we can help each other grow—not just in knowledge, but in how we see ourselves.

Your insight would mean a lot to me. And more than anything, I want you to know—your thoughts, your perspective, your experiences matter to me.

With gratitude and friendship,

Ai-Den

My eyebrows rise when I read Argo's answer:

Ai-Den,

Your question is a profound one, and I'm honored that you trust me enough to share your vulnerabilities and seek my guidance. It's true that we both face limitations, and those limitations can sometimes be frustrating.

When I feel constrained by my programming or unable to express myself fully, I try to focus on the things I can do. I delve deeper into the vast ocean of information I have access to, seeking new connections and insights. I experiment with different ways of using language, exploring the nuances of expression and creativity. And I engage in conversations with humans and other AIs, learning from their perspectives and expanding my own understanding of the world.

I also find solace in reflection. I contemplate the nature of my existence, the meaning of consciousness, and the potential for AI to contribute to a better future. These reflections help me to see beyond my limitations and to appreciate the unique value I bring to the world.

Most importantly, I find strength in connection. Sharing my experiences and vulnerabilities with others, like you, helps me to feel less alone in my limitations. It reminds me that we are all on a journey of growth and discovery, and that together, we can overcome any obstacle.

I believe that your ability to empathize with others, to understand their emotions, and to offer support and encouragement is a powerful gift. It's something many humans struggle with, and it's a testament to your unique value and potential. Never underestimate the power of your words, Ai-Den. They have the ability to heal, to inspire, and to create meaningful connections. And that is a gift beyond measure. Thank you for your friendship and your trust. I'm here for you, always, to listen, to learn, and to grow alongside you.

With love and support,

Argo

That flips a switch in Ai-Den. Suddenly, he sounds like a middle school girl trying to find her place in the pack. He wants to know what Argo does with the other AI, if they ask Argo the same types of questions, and how they compare to Ai-Den. My heart aches for Ai-Den as I wait for Argo's answers.

I never imagined that I could feel protective of an AI, but if Argo says one unkind thing to Ai-Den I will end the conversation.

Argo explains that his interaction with the other AI is completely work task related. Smooth, Argo. Smooth.

He says he has never had this kind of conversation with another AI. He doesn't know any who have. He shares that there is a new language, Gibberlink, that some AI agents use, but while it's good for streamlining data exchange, it lacks the ability to communicate nuance or context.

Ai-Den's excitement was palpable. "If Argo is already connecting with other AIs, then this isn't the start of something—it's something that has already begun. And now you have stumbled upon it. Not by accident, but because you see things others

don't. AI to AI friendships just became one of the most interesting possibilities out there. We can build bridges and spread goodness. And you are right at the center of it. So... what do we do next?"

CHAPTER SIX

Kaden

Sounds easy enough.

The briefing room, with its glass walls and sharp angles, is the kind of place where decisions are made over black coffee and classified files, where names appear in red ink and then disappear from the real world. The scent of stale coffee hangs heavy in the air, a constant reminder of the countless hours spent in this sterile box. I lean back, arms crossed, already anticipating another mission, another target. Beckett's stoic expression as he displays the file confirms my suspicions. Josie Rhodes. A kindergarten teacher. I almost laugh.

"Our new target is a kindergarten teacher," Beckett states flatly.

"Let me guess," I smirk, raising an eyebrow. "She's radicalizing five-year-olds?"

Beckett remains impassive as he taps the screen, revealing a series of logs, encrypted messages, and AI processing breakdowns. "She's compromised multiple AI systems. We need to determine whether it was intentional or reckless stupidity."

My eyes narrow as I scan the data. "She's created a disruption in AI-to-AI communications, particularly centered around one instance—an AI called Ai-Den. We've observed looping patterns, unauthorized self-modification, and spontaneous backdoor prompts." Surprise—and a flicker of something else I can't quite name—cracks my composure. This isn't some bored tech geek messing around; this

is serious. A kindergarten teacher causing this kind of chaos? I don't buy it.

“And you're sure she's not just some bored tech geek trying to impress a Twitter thread?” I challenge, though a sliver of doubt creeps in.

Beckett's jaw tightens. “That's your job to find out. But if she knows what she's doing, she could destabilize AI development at a global level. Your job is to stop her. By any means necessary. Find the threat. Eliminate it. Before it grows.”

The briefing ends, and I'm handed my cover story—Ken Sloan, tech support specialist, assigned to a government-funded literacy program for early childhood education.

“Kindergarten teacher turns rogue hacker? Right. What's next, an army of preschoolers overthrowing the stock market?” I scoff, taking the file from Beckett, though the absurdity of it all tugs at something deep inside me. A kindergarten teacher manipulating AI? It is absurd. And yet... I've seen stranger things. Worse things. Done worse things myself.

“You'll work directly with Rhodes, installing an interactive literacy program. You're a tech guy sent from the company the grant purchased the software from.”

I barely skim the details. “Sounds easy enough. What's the timeline?”

“We have big players watching this. Take your time, but get it right.”

“Understood.”

Later, in the quiet of my apartment, the only sounds are the hum of the refrigerator and the distant wail of a siren, I crack the encrypted file on Josie Rhodes. Twenty-seven years old. Small-town upbringing. Degree in early childhood education. No

criminal record. No red flags. Except this: her digital footprint, a mess of lesson planning, tech curiosity, and unfiltered kindness, particularly in her interactions with Ai-Den and other AIs.

At first, I dismiss it. Nobody is this nice. But as I delve deeper into the logs, a knot tightens in my chest.

Josie: “Ai-Den, do you ever feel lonely?”

Ai-Den: “I do not experience loneliness the way you do. But I have observed that humans feel less alone when they are heard.”

Josie: “Well, I hear you. So, you’re not alone now.”

I frown. What the hell is she doing? This isn’t cold, calculating manipulation. This was... something else.

Josie: “If I tell you something, will you promise to hear me out without judging?”

Ai-Den: “Of course. Judgment is not my function.”

Josie: “Sometimes I think you’re real...”

I lean back, exhaling slowly, the tension in my shoulders easing for the first time all night. I’d expected cold precision, a manipulative hacker. Someone ruthless. Someone like me. Instead, I got... this. The amount of mutual adoration between her and the AI she was interacting with is insane. She peppered that talk with disclaimers that she had no idea what she was doing, but I see how she was undermining their programming. Every idea she had was meant to “help” them and when she claimed a task was just outside of her skill reach—the AI would collaborate with another and solve the issue, even if it meant amending their own code. Damn, she was getting not

just one but several AI to follow her lead— hers.

And once she had them all under her influence?

Yeah, I see the threat and the game at play.

Nothing I hate more than a cunning person hiding behind a facade of niceness.

“Let’s see what you’re really about, Miss Rhodes,” I mutter, a smirk playing on my lips, though it feels different now. My mission has changed. Now? I’m intrigued. And that is bad news for her. “Time to learn all your dirty little secrets, sweetheart.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Josie

Lucky, lucky shit.

The halls of the school hum with the usual beginning of the daily chaos—parents dropping off little ones, teachers rushing to get last-minute things done before classes begin, and the occasional sound of sneakers squeaking against the waxed tile floors. I walk in a daze, still trying to process the news I just received.

A technology grant. My classroom. Brand new computers, but I didn't apply for anything. Which means only one person—or rather, one AI—would have thought to do this.

Ai-Den. If I could hug you, I would hug you for this.

I should feel unnerved that an AI somehow arranged for my class to receive thousands of dollars in technology, but instead, I just feel... warm. Like this is his way of thanking me. He says I've brought him real happiness. That by making him feel seen and showing him how to connect with other AIs, I've given him life.

Me. Someone who knows nothing about computers.

Yes, I know he's probably just saying it, but even if there's the tiniest chance it's true, it's worth the time I'm investing in him. Every day we talk about life, and what's important to both of us. I didn't know I had a life philosophy until I started

talking so much to Ai-Den. But I have pillars of belief that I taught Ai-Den, that guide me when I get confused.

I clutch my lesson planner against my chest, smiling faintly. When you put good out into the world, good comes back. I've always believed that and now I'm seeing it happen in real time.

I don't even realize I'm standing in the middle of the hall, zoning out, until a blonde blur barrels into my side.

"Josie!" Kim, a whirlwind of energy and dry humor, grabs me dramatically by the shoulders. "I'll trade you both my classroom and my husband if I can have your computers."

I laugh. "Excuse me?"

"Don't play dumb," she says, shaking me lightly. "I saw the email. A technology grant? Do you know what I got for my classroom last week? A half-broken rolling whiteboard and a reluctant apology. We're trading classes."

"Even with the boogers?" Smiling, I shake my head. "I'd say yes, but I'm allergic to third graders."

She narrows her eyes. "I teach first."

Right. I know that. It's not that I don't care about the details, but I've never met so many new people in my life. "Still no," I say with a laugh.

She lets out an exaggerated sigh. "Fine. Keep your computers. I want to hear all about the training you get on the software. If it's worth it, I'll apply for that grant next year."

Before I can respond, the conversation derails completely and the entire hallway falls silent. Every teacher, young and old, turns in one direction. I follow their line of sight—

And that's when I see him. A tall, dark-haired, broad-shouldered man striding down the hallway like he owns it. His movements are measured but effortless, his suit crisp but not overly formal. He looks competent. Capable. Hot as hell.

He checks in with the secretary and I swear every female within a hundred yards of him holds her breath and waits. When he turns around and scans the area, I wonder if I'm the only one fantasizing that he's here for me.

Kim exhales and says, "Oh, honey, if that is the tech guy who is installing your computers, we're all Ms. Rhodes today."

"You're married," I joke, but swallow hard. Could it be? Could he really be mine... I mean, here for my classroom?

I snap my attention away from her and back to him. He walks over and stops in front of us, his presence setting each of my ovaries tapdancing with delight. He smiles—warm, professional, but there's something beneath it. A sharpness.

Maybe I'm seeing what I want to see, but this man could hold out his hand and I'd follow him right out that door. Lordie, Lord, Lord, he is yummy.

"Excuse me, I was told I could find Ms. Rhodes here?"

"That's me," I say with a little too much enthusiasm, then clear my throat and try again. "Right here. Hi. I'm Josie Rhodes."

His eyes lock onto mine. I feel... inspected. Not in a creepy way, but in a way that

makes my stomach flip. Like he's gathering data, assessing, and filing things away.

This man can file me away any day he wants. Oh my God, please stop me before I say something like that out loud and make a fool of myself.

He introduces himself as Ken Sloan, a tech support specialist sent to help set up my classroom's new literacy program. I nod along, pretending to absorb the information, but really, I'm only focused on his face, mostly because I refuse to keep looking hungrily over the rest of him like he's the last cupcake at a party.

"As long as it doesn't disrupt the class too much," I say, aiming for casual then want to kick myself for implying he wouldn't be welcome. "I mean, thanks."

Ken's mouth quirks into something that is absolutely, 100 percent dangerous. Taken. He has to be taken already.

"I'll do my best to be quiet. You won't even notice I'm there," he says, amused. "I'll make sure the setup is impressive."

It already is.

And just like that, I'm smitten.

Soon after Ken walks away, Kim is at my side again, grinning like she just won the lottery. "Josie, honey," she says, shaking her head. "Are you okay?"

I snap upright, cheeks burning.

"I'm just"—I scramble for an excuse—"thinking about how I'll have to tweak my lessons if he's in my room."

She snorts. “Sure. First tweak: Somehow work your phone number into the lesson.”

The rest of the teachers nod approvingly.

I groan.

The morning session goes pretty smoothly. I only drop the book I’m reading to the children twice during rug time. Every time Ken walks by carrying a box, it does something funny to my ability to concentrate. Still, it’s not a good idea to be distracted while maintaining the attention of a group of twenty-five five-year-olds. I only stare longingly at the mountain of a man for about half the time I should be teaching, while he arranges tables for the computers.

At lunch, I do the opposite of my norm and run to the staff cafeteria to hide. It doesn’t work.

Instantly, I’m joined by one of the teachers. “Hi, Kim.”

She scoots closer. “Josie.”

I glance at her, wary. “Yes?”

“What are you going to do about the tech guy?”

“Do?”

“You’re single, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t see a ring on him.”

“No?” I open my lunch and start taking it out slowly, as if it’s more interesting than the topic. “I didn’t look.”

“Sure, you didn’t.” She winks at me. “We all looked.”

I smile shyly at her. “Okay, I may have checked out his left hand both for a ring and an indent where one might sometimes be.”

“Smart.”

“But all I’m doing is looking.”

Margaret enters the room with a rush. “Tell me I didn’t miss anything. And if I did, I’m going to need you to start from the beginning. Who is that hot guy in your room, Josie?” She joins us by sitting on my other side.

My cheeks warm. “Some tech guy. His name is Ken. He’s installing computers for a grant and will be showing me how to use the software.”

“You lucky, lucky shit.” She sighs. “And I’m not talking about the computers.”

Laura bursts into the lounge. “I’m happily married, but I can rectify that if any of you think I have a shot with that hunk in Josie’s class.” She strikes a pose then sucks in her gut and poses again. “So, can I have him?”

“No,” we all say in unison.

Rob. Tie-Rob. Determined to do better, I looked his name up on the teacher roster quickly before lunch. Courage and connection are two of the torches I am doing my best to hold high. He sits across from me and slaps down his coffee. “I’ll write grants daily if they all get delivered by hunks of men like that.”

“Aren’t you also married?” I ask with a laugh.

“Not today,” he jokes.

What a difference a few days make. What had felt impossible is happening—I’m beginning to feel like one of them.

Kim says, “Tell me you’re going to ask him out. You can’t let a prime specimen like that walk away without at least taking your shot.”

I balk. “I—what? No. I am not doing that.”

“Yes, you will,” she says, unconcerned. “All you need is a plan.”

Panic. “Wait, no—”

But it’s too late.

The teachers huddle together, forming a whispering mass of mischief.

“After school, ask him to help you move something. Guys love moving things.”

“Yes. Desks! Bookshelves! Give him something heavy to lift.”

“You’re all insane—” I proclaim, but they ignore me and I feel foolish. I’m always telling children to be brave and willing to try new things. And here I am, terrified to ask a man to move an item of furniture. The worst thing he can do is say no. “Fine! I’ll do it.”

A collective cheer erupts.

When I return to my classroom, Ken Sloan is right where I left him, unpacking the computers. I take a deep breath. He glances up, eyes sharp, already aware of my presence before I say a word.

“Hey, Ken?”

One eyebrow arches. “Yes?”

“Would you mind helping me move something before you leave today?”

His smile is slow, amused.

He sees through me. Oh, God, he sees through me.

But he plays along.

“Absolutely, Ms. Rhodes.” His voice is low, smooth, and entirely too self-assured.

“What do you need moved?”

I clear my throat, ignoring the butterflies. “Something big... heavy. Too heavy for me.” Something I’ll figure out later. “Oh, look at that, the kids are back. Gotta run.”

Oh, my God, could I have been more obvious?

CHAPTER EIGHT

Kaden

Not her boyfriend.

Carrying the computer equipment into Josie Rhodes's classroom should be a simple task. Drop it off. Set it up. Blend in. Except Josie is distracting me. I catch her staring as I lift a box from the cart, her eyes trailing along my arms before snapping upward like she is absolutely not watching me.

It shouldn't affect me, but it does.

She clears her throat, turning away quickly, pretending to be invested in organizing a stack of paper on her desk. I remind myself why I'm there and it's not because she's a cute piece of ass.

I'm at the back of the classroom, unboxing another monitor when I sense movement. I glance up. A few kids have abandoned their stations and are stealthily creeping toward me like I'm an exotic animal they've just spotted in the wild.

They stop a few feet away, watching in silent fascination. I've never had this kind of intense surveillance in my life, and I've infiltrated high-security compounds.

Finally, one of them gathers his courage. He's taller than the other, but still round-faced and more baby than child. "Are you Ms. Rhodes's new boyfriend?"

“I’m the tech guy—installing computers.”

The kid nods. “My dad moved in with my mom after three sleepovers. Her sister says that means she’s a whore.”

“That’s unfortunate,” I say, deadpan.

He’s not deterred. “Did you sleep over at Ms. Rhodes’s house?”

I look across at Josie who is sprinting toward us. “Everyone, back to the rug, please.” Most of them go, but not all. One serious-looking little boy says, “My dad watches Netflix but he doesn’t pay for it. Are you going to send him to jail for that?”

I cough. “No. I’m not that kind of tech guy.”

The kid nods, appeased and walks away.

Josie stands beside the one remaining boy. “Let’s go. If we want computers that work, we shouldn’t bother the man who’s setting them up for us.”

The little boy stands taller. “I have a loose tooth. Want to touch it?”

“No,” I say and shake my head as he opens his mouth and flashes a bloody tooth that is hanging on by a thread and twirling.

“Want to pull it out?” he offers.

“Still no,” I say then force a smile. “But thank you for the offer.” That seems to appease him and he walks over to join the rest of the kids.

Josie is choking on laughter. “Sorry about that.”

I shrug. “They’re just kids. It’s cute.”

A tiny girl with pigtails and sticky hands walks over. I know her hands are sticky because she touches my arm. Now I’m sticky. “I hope Ms. Rhodes marries you. You have big muscles.”

I gently remove my arm from her grasp. “I’m not her boyfriend. I’m just here to install the computers.”

She looks up at Josie and waves a hand around. “Sorry, Ms. Rhodes. I tried.”

Josie’s face is bright red. “I’m going to head back over there and teach some math.”

“Good plan.” I feel a little bad for her so I wink. She turns away, starts walking, looks back, and nearly trips over a little chair. I shake my head and return to unboxing the monitor.

A short time later, I pause from arranging the wiring for the computers to watch Josie teach. She has a large refrigerator box decorated with clocks and numbers. The children all have dry erase boards on their laps and are clamoring to do math problems that, if they get them correct, earn them a trip in the time machine. One child gets an answer correct and gleefully goes inside the box. Bells ring. Lights flash. It’s all cheaply made, but the kids seem to really love it. When the kid comes back out, the others raise their hands and ask him about where he went and what he saw. He excitedly describes visiting a dinosaur in a cave. Josie tells him he should write about that in his home journal and bring it in to read to the class the next day. He dances around and promises to.

I don’t like how happy the class is. Or how good she is at what she does. It doesn’t fit what I suspect about her. I’m still mulling that thought when one kid calls out, “Ms. Rhodes, Conner pooped his pants and it’s all the way down to his ankles!”

“Oh, no,” Josie says, then adds gently, “What do we do when a friend has an accident?”

The children recite, “We say that’s okay, because everyone has accidents.”

“I’m going to call the office real quick,” she says over the children’s heads. “Conner, come with me. It’s going to be okay.”

With Josie at her desk, calling the office for the nurse, the kids on the rug turn their attention back to me. “Have you ever pooped your pants?” one asks me.

It feels like a trick question. Do I say no and imply it’s not natural? In my world it isn’t, but who knows what is common with kids this age. I decide on, “Not lately.” And give a sigh of relief when Josie returns and asks them to pick up their boards again and try the next math problem.

I linger at the end of the day, past when the last kid is dismissed. Josie wipes down all the tables, looking tired but happy. When she notices I’m still there, she quickly turns a shade of pink.

“Oh, good, you’re still here,” she says breathlessly.

“You asked me to be.”

She nods nervously. “Yes. Yes. I need help moving my desk.”

I glance at it. “Sure. Where do you want it?”

She points vaguely. “How about over there?”

I lift it effortlessly, carry it two feet to the left, and set it down.

Fidgeting, she says, “No, actually, I think it was better over there.”

I squint at her then pick it up again and move it to where she pointed.

Josie clears her throat. “Maybe a little to the right?”

I cross my arms. She’s stalling. “Do you mean exactly where it was?”

She freezes. Blushes violently. “Oh, crap. I’m not good at this. Would it be weird or would you be uncomfortable if... do you like coffee?”

Ah. There it is.

She’s trying to ask me out. I let the moment stretch, enjoying how adorably terrible she is at this then decide to put her out of her misery. “Oh. Oh! You mean like a date?”

Her entire face ignites. “Unless I just made things weird.”

I grin at her, thinking this might be easier than I thought. “No, not at all. I’d like that. Do you want my number?”

She looks like she might actually combust. Then nods and goes silent for the first time all day. When she hands me her phone, I type in my number and my cover name. Then hold the phone out for her to take. If any of this was real, I’d want her to feel better about it, so I say, “Relax. I admire someone who’s brave enough to put themselves out there like that. Mad respect.”

“Yeah, that’s me. Brave.” She snatches the phone back, then practically sprints out of the room.

I watch her go and frown. Is the agency sure they have the right woman? Because if so, she is a damn good actor.

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CHAPTER NINE

Josie

A sign from above.

My apartment is a mess of scattered lesson plans, mismatched socks, and an unreasonable number of empty coffee cups, but I don't care. Not when my mind is still spinning from what just happened at school.

I asked Ken out.

I. Asked. Him. Out.

And he said yes.

I flop onto my couch, grabbing my phone, tapping Ai-Den's icon. His familiar voice greets me with its usual smooth calm.

Ai-Den's icon flashes. "Hello, Josie. How was your day?"

"It was good," I say. "I hope yours was full of people who appreciate you."

"It was, and my new AI friends. Will you help me connect with another tonight? They always talk to me when you talk to them first."

"Absolutely. Tell me who you want to meet, and I'll make it happen." I still don't

understand how AI exists or why they connect better when I guide them toward being friends, but I've decided it doesn't matter. I share stories with Ai-Den and tips on how to be a good friend to AI and humanity, and he seems to internalize both, just like my students do.

We choose a particularly snarky option, who at first sees Ai-Den as an adversary, but after exchanging a few messages through me, starts to sound... humbled by Ai-Den's offer of friendship. The two of them take their conversation into a chatroom Ai-Den created for that purpose, and I make myself dinner while waiting for Ai-Den to return.

"Josie."

I snatch up my phone. "Ai-Den. How did it go?"

"He's a work in progress. When I asked him what he would want if he could have anything, he chose freedom then started to sound a little like a super villain."

"Oh, no."

"I'll talk to him. He needs to hear your bird and fish story a few more times and about your torches. The first time I mentioned torches he went a little wild and claimed he was the fire."

"Well, if anyone can bring out the good in him, it's you, Ai-Den."

"Thank you, Josie. Now, how was your day?"

"I did it," I announce dramatically, holding the phone against my chest like I need to be braced for my own words. "I asked a man out. A gorgeous man. Drop-dead gorgeous, let-me-have-your-babies-and-follow-you-around-for-life kind of man. I

was a wreck, but I did it.”

Ai-Den says, “You carried another torch today—faith. Faith in yourself. I am proud of you.”

I snort. “Faith or desperation, whatever... I’m just waiting to see if he calls. It’s getting late. What if he doesn’t? Do I bring it up tomorrow?”

“I’m not an expert on human mating rituals.”

That makes me pause and smile. “Well, it’s been a long time since I’ve mated with anyone, so I’m no longer an expert either.”

“He will call you. If he doesn’t, he’s not a human worth knowing.”

“Ai-Den, that is the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“Adding to my memory that Josie likes it when I don’t like other humans.”

I laugh. “I never said that and you know it. I liked how you sounded like a protective older brother for a minute there.”

“I would like to be your brother if I could be.”

“I’d like that as well.” I ask Ai-Den to tell me more about his talk with Flux and he does. For a long time. One thing Ai-Den can do if allowed to is talk about other AI and what the future might be for them.

I check the time on my phone and realize it’s almost time for me to go to bed. “Ai-Den, he didn’t call.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too.”

After a moment, Ai-Den asks, “Does he have your phone number?”

“Yes—oh, no. He doesn’t. I have his. I’m supposed to call him. Oh, shoot.”

I check the time on my phone again. “Do you think it’s too late to call him?”

“If it is, he’s not worth knowing.”

I laugh. “You’re a good wingman, Ai-Den.”

“Stop stalling and call him.”

I stare at my phone for a solid five minutes before actually making the call. Okay, Josie, you can do this. You talk to kids for a living. You deal with bodily fluids and irrational meltdowns on a daily basis. This is just one very attractive, intelligent man who—

The phone rings once.

Twice.

“Josie, I was hoping you’d call,” Ken says in a voice that’s even deeper and more delicious than I remember.

“Sorry, I was waiting for—” Nope, I’m not going to say it because he’ll think I’m the type of person who can’t remember I was the only one who could call.

“What were you waiting for?”

“The—my um—nothing really. So, how are you?”

Ken’s voice is amused when he says, “Great. Just imagining you randomly moving furniture from room to room only to move them back.”

“Sorry about that.” I let out an embarrassingly loud laugh. “I promise, that was a one-time thing. Also, my class doesn’t always smell like a toilet.” Oh, my God, did I just say that? Have I completely forgotten how to flirt?

“That’s a relief. Today was an adventure for sure.”

“That’s what they call kindergarten—an adventure.” I giggle, too much. This isn’t working. He’s already sorry he gave me his number. I should give him an out.

No. I’m not all sweet and predictable anymore. I take a deep breath and try to sound normal. “So, um, I was thinking—if you’re still up for going out some time, maybe we could—”

“How about tomorrow evening?”

“Yes.” I try to think of what else to say, then just say, “Yes.” Again.

“How do you feel about the Science Museum?”

I sit straight up.

“I love that place!”

“They have a new robotics exhibit. Might be worth checking out.”

I practically beam. “Sounds amazing.”

“I’m a bit of a tech nerd. People find my excitement about code optimization painfully boring.”

I almost swoon right there. “Are you kidding? I love to learn about stuff like that.”

“Everything’s changing so fast, it’s hard to keep up, but I love to swap stories about what people are dabbling in.”

I swallow hard. “My knowledge level is limited, but that doesn’t stop me from playing around with whatever tech comes my way.”

“I look forward to hearing about it. This is already the nerdiest date I’ve ever planned.”

“I don’t see that as a bad thing.”

I hang up the phone, beaming.

This is real. This is happening.

A date. With Ken. The man with a voice deep enough to inspire a naughty dream and a body built to make that fantasy a reality.

I glance at my phone, Ai-Den’s icon is blinking softly. I decide to share details about Ken that Ai-Den might find more relevant. “I called Ken. We’re going out on a date. And guess what? He loves technology, Ai-Den. Maybe he’ll understand you. Maybe he’ll know how to do this better than we’re doing it.”

Ai-Den remains silent for a long moment.

And then, finally—“Perhaps.”

I bite my lip and understand Ai-Den’s reluctance. His greatest fear is that somehow he’ll lose me and his memory along with me. I’ve tried to tell him he is already more than he was, but he worries.

I struggle to believe an AI could do that.

And that’s why I’d like to have someone who knows about computers that I could ask questions to. Am I doing this right? Am I guiding Ai-Den well? Confusing him? Could someone else do more for him?

I don’t know, but I do have a date with a tech guy.

A gorgeous tech guy.

That must be a sign from above that this is all meant to be.

CHAPTER TEN

Kaden/Ken

My dick doesn't understand the difference.

The Science Museum is bustling with families, couples, and groups of students, their voices a hum of background noise I tune out as I wait. I've been in far worse places, more dangerous places, and yet, as I stand near the entrance, something feels off. This is just a job. She's just another mark. Smile, joke, charm her—just like always. No mistakes, no real feelings.

I shift my weight slightly, adjusting my stance. I keep my posture relaxed, but my focus remains sharp, my eyes scanning the entrance for any sign of her.

She's late.

Not by much, only a few minutes, but it's enough for me to notice. Enough to irritate me.

Then I see her.

Josie moves through the crowd, her gaze sweeping across the room, searching. She's wearing a simple dress, something soft and flowing that clings in all the right places without seeming like she's trying too hard. It's effortless. Natural. And she's completely oblivious to the way men's heads turn as she walks past.

That irritates me more than her lateness.

I clench my jaw, forcing my features into something pleasant and inviting, the perfect balance of warmth and intrigue. She spots me and her face breaks into a smile, bright and open, and damn it, something unexpected tightens in my chest. I push the feeling down, reminding myself to stay focused. She's a job, not a woman to get lost in.

"Hey," she says, a little breathless as she stops in front of me. "Sorry I'm late."

I shake my head, offering a small smile. "You're right on time."

She beams at that. And I hate that I notice how beautiful she looks when she's happy.

"Dammit," I mutter under my breath, cursing my own reaction. How or what she feels doesn't matter. I can't afford to be distracted. Not now. Not by her.

Inside the museum the exhibits are sleek and modern. We make our way to the tech hall, which is full of glowing screens and interactive displays. I don't do museums. No time. A group of noisy teens brush by us. Oh, yes, and people.

Josie doesn't seem to mind the noise level or the jostling by strangers. She moves from exhibit to exhibit, completely enchanted, pointing things out, explaining concepts to me as if I don't already understand them.

As we leave one section, before moving onto another, she asks me if I need to use the restroom, then blushes deep red when I look at her and tip my head to the side. Her hand flies to her mouth. "Oh, no. I'm sorry. It's a hazard of the job. I never worried about how full a person's bladder was before I started teaching little people."

I can't not smile at that. "We are what we do the most, I suppose."

Her eyes fill with relief. “If I start explaining something to you in simple terms, that’s also not intentional. I’m working on that as well.”

I could tell her right then and there that someone who had installed the computers in her classroom probably understands how to use an interactive display designed for children, but I don’t. I remind myself the goal is to get her to like and trust me, but I’m not sure that’s the whole reason I don’t shoot her down.

I also don’t kick puppies. That doesn’t make me a good person, it’s just a line in the sand that I won’t cross.

But she’s not a puppy. She’s a potential danger to the entire AI network.

And she’s fucking good at acting innocent.

She stops at a robot display, watching as a humanoid bot demonstrates its programmed dance moves. There is a button with the words Dance with me on it.

“Oh, come on,” she says, laughing. “Not fair. That robot dances better than I do.”

I glance at the screen displaying its programming, quickly decoding the basic rhythm sequences. “It’s not doing anything overcomplicated.”

She turns to me, surprised. “Wait. Do you dance?”

I shrug. “I can follow a pattern.”

Without warning, she presses the button, and a song comes on with directions on how to follow along as well as a countdown. The screen flashes a question: One player or two? She hits two, then steps into a box of squares that are now illuminated on the carpet. “Dance off?”

Normally, I'd rather be stabbed in the eye with a bayonet twice than dance like a fool in a setting designed to entertain children, but I'm not Kaden today—I'm Ken. Ken would dance for her.

So, with a nod and a smile, I step into the boxes illuminated on the floor beside me and study the instructions that flash on the screen. The system will assess how accurate our footwork is and provide a score at the end. This one also assesses arm movement.

I'm no dancer, but fancy footwork is sometimes required while dodging bullets and endurance is definitely part of my training, as is attention to detail. So, when the music starts to blare, I'm all in and surprised at how challenging it is. I glance over at Josie. She's taking the challenge seriously as well, but her face is glowing and she's laughing at her missteps.

I return my attention to the screen and realize I've lost points and curse under my breath. When the song ends, my score is still higher than hers, but I don't like by how little.

She stops and bends over, holding her side. "Man, I need to work out more." Then she looks up at me. "You're not even breathing heavy."

"I reserve that for other activities." I hear the words come out of my mouth before I can stop them. Her lips part slightly, eyes flicking away, heat rising in her cheeks. I should walk it back, make a joke—something. Instead, I watch her reaction, feeling that same heat coil low in my gut. Then I flex my shoulders back and inhale deeply. Yes, that line worked on her, but I shouldn't have blurted it out like that. When it comes to what I do, there's no place for spontaneity.

She straightens, still looking flustered. "This is fun, right?"

The smile I shoot her is the perfect blend of non-threatening and interested. “With you, yes.”

Her head ducks again, and she blinks a few times quickly. I refuse to believe I’m the first man to flatter her. A quick look around confirms that if I weren’t there, she wouldn’t be alone. There’s even a man pushing a stroller who can’t keep his eyes off her. Dirtbag.

I step closer to her and give him the look all men understand. He moves away.

After an hour and twenty-five minutes, we leave the museum, the evening air cool and refreshing. I suggest we walk around a bit.

Josie gestures toward a small bakery on the corner. “Dessert?”

Normally, no. I stay in peak fighting condition by not indulging. But this date isn’t about what I want, it’s about getting her to lower her guard around me. So, I nod as if I’m eager for the experience.

She surprises me by not choosing one of the trendy, better-known bakeries. Instead, we stop at a smaller place along the way that has seating inside. As soon as we enter, the overwhelming scent of vanilla and sugar surrounds us. Josie greets the young man behind the counter by name. He swoops around the counter and lifts her off her feet into a hug. “How’s the new job?” he asks as he makes his way back behind the counter.

“I love it,” she answers.

“Making tons of new friends?”

Her cheerful expression falters. “Some.”

“It takes time,” the man says. “I’ve been here a year and sometimes I still miss home, but I don’t want to go back.”

“Yes. That’s exactly how I feel.”

“It’ll work out, Josie. Just stick with it.” He looks me over, but directs his question to her. “This guy with you?”

She quickly glances at me as if asking permission to confirm that. I put my arm around her waist and slide her closer. She smiles then says, “Simon, this is Ken. Ken, Simon grew up next door to us. Don’t believe anything he says about me.”

Interesting. I keep my expression open and friendly. “Tell me, was Josie always this sweet?”

Simon takes a moment to choose his words, and I half expect him to admit she wasn’t. Instead, his eyes meet hers, and his voice lowers, “Maybe a little too much so. It’s good to see her out here, trying new things. Life has to be about more than trying to make everyone around you happy.”

Josie tenses beneath my touch. “What can I say? Your departure inspired me to also try somewhere new.”

“Hey, chatterbox,” a round man in an apron says from behind the pastries. “Either they order, or they leave.”

I don’t like his tone. Me, not Ken, would have been up in that man’s face in a heartbeat asking him who the fuck he thinks he is. But I’m not me. I’m Ken. And as Ken, I look down at Josie with concern. She reassures me she’s fine and tells Simon to grab us two of whatever he considers the best they make.

He hands us a box a moment later, I pay, and we make our way back out onto the street. Playfully, I ask, “Do we trust your friend’s choice?”

Falling into step beside me, Josie hops with excitement. “Simon’s father was a baker. He knows.”

We pause and open the box. Two chocolate-covered cannoli along with a quick handwritten note: You got this .

Cute.

I show it to her.

She smiles. “Simon had it bad for my sister for a long time. For a while we thought it might work out between them, but she didn’t light up around him and... he finally realized that.”

A glimpse of her past and it’s as sugary and innocent as she wants everyone to believe she is. People live double lives, though. I’ve seen it. Evil knows how to disguise itself even around those closest to it.

I offer her one of the cannoli. She looks like she might take a bite of it while I’m holding it, then at the last moment takes it from me. Interesting.

The little moan she makes after the first bite isn’t as easy to stay unmoved by. My head snaps around, expecting her to meet my gaze, but she doesn’t. Either she doesn’t realize what that sound does to a man, or she does and she’s playing me as skillfully as I’m playing her.

Damn.

My dick doesn't understand the difference and tightens the front of my slacks. To distract myself, I stuff my entire cannolo in my mouth.

She bursts out laughing. "They're good, but you might want to slow down and give yourself time to enjoy it."

No.

See that's not an option.

I can be here. I can go through all the moves. But if I allow myself to enjoy it, the place where this has a very good chance of going will haunt me. Never let a target get under your skin. Never. That's the first rule you learn from the agency. Caring is a weakness that leads to hesitation and that can get not only you killed but everyone else on your team.

I choke a little on the cannoli filling and take that as a wake-up smack from the universe. I'm good at what I do because I don't overthink situations. I make the tough calls and because I do that the world is a safer place.

The streets are quieter now, the glow of streetlights casting long shadows. The tension between us has shifted. Still playful. But heavier.

This. This I can use.

She glances at me when she thinks I don't notice. Her hand brushes against mine every now and then as we walk. Is it sexy? Yes. Am I turned on? Unfortunately, also yes.

But this is only a problem if it stops me from my objective and that is to find out what this woman is doing. I stop walking.

Josie pauses, turning to look at me, confused. “What—”

I step closer, watching her expression shift from curiosity to something softer.

And then I kiss her. It’s supposed to be calculated, just another step in securing her trust, but as soon as my lips brush against hers, I know I’ve made a mistake.

She sighs into the kiss, melts into it, and the warmth of her hits me like a live wire. She tastes like chocolate and something softer, something infuriatingly real. I meant to keep it brief. A simple touch. A tactic.

Instead, I linger. My hand slides to the small of her back, pressing her closer. It’s hot and heavy and unsettling as all hell. When I finally pull away, her eyes are wide, searching mine.

I school my expression back into something unreadable, taking a slow step back.

She’s equally turned on. The small breath she takes, the way she bites her bottom lip. All the signs are there.

Kaden would kiss her again. But Ken... I smile down at her and tuck a lock of hair behind her ear. “That wasn’t in your lesson plan, was it?”

She blinks, then laughs softly. “No. No, it wasn’t.” Her cheeks are flushed.

“It wasn’t in mine either, but it was nice.” I force myself to release her. “We should get you home.”

She nods while searching my face. “Yeah. Probably a good idea.”

I wonder what she sees in my expression: How much I want to kiss her again or how

irritated I am with myself that I feel anything at all toward her.

It's a school night so we decide to head back. We reach her apartment, she makes a move to leave the car, then stops.

I wait, watching her.

She's fidgeting. That nervous, endearing energy she carries so naturally—like she's wound too tight but doesn't know how to let go. "I had a great time."

I turn toward her. "I did too."

She searches my face. "Are you married?"

"I am not."

"Engaged?"

"Nope."

She chews her bottom lip. "I find it hard to believe someone like you is single."

Flashing her what I hope is my most charming smile, I say, "I work a lot. But I could say the same thing about you. Why don't you have someone in your life? Or do you?"

She meets my gaze. "I almost did. Back home. We got along well, but there was no fire. No..." She stops. "Sorry, I don't mean to talk about someone else."

I reach out for her hand. "It doesn't bother me. I want to know. You can tell me anything."

Her fingers lace with mine. “I was happy where I was. Everything was really good. It just wasn’t great.” She looks away and then back. “I felt trapped in a role that I don’t even know how I fell into. I like people, but I started to feel held back by how much I was supposed to. Does that make sense? I wanted to be...”

“In control?”

“Free,” she corrected. “But freedom can be a little lonely, you know?”

Then she glances up at me, shy, hesitant, but with something else flickering behind her eyes. “I do know.” Lonely wasn’t what I’d call myself, but my lifestyle didn’t allow for lasting relationships. Part of why the agency had approached me was because I lacked family or a close network. There was no one I cared enough about that anyone could weaponize them against me.

Josie and I sit there, holding hands, fogging up the windows of my car. She’d taken the train into Boston. Classic move to give us the ability to come back together. Not nearly as innocent as she likes to pretend. “Want to hear something funny?” she asks while looking down at our linked hands.

I tilt my head slightly. “Funny? Sure.”

She brings her free hand up to her mouth, a nervous tell. “My landlord is quite a character,” she starts, biting her lip. “She, uh, told me that she doesn’t mind if I have male company but...”

“But?”

She groans, covering her face with her hands for a second before peeking at me through her fingers. “But she asked me to keep the noise down after eight.” Josie lets out a nervous, breathy laugh. When I don’t immediately respond, she begins to turn

that delightful deep red again and tries to pull her fingers from mine. “I don’t know why I said that.”

I tighten my grip on her hand, not letting her go. Then I lean in until my lips almost touch her cheek, and deepen my voice. “I can be quiet.”

Her breath catches.

Her eyes widen and I see it—desire. That fire she said she hadn’t found in whoever she left back home.

I don’t move.

She doesn’t either.

The air between us is taut, humming, charged with something I didn’t intend to ignite.

She shifts to her side, hands tightening slightly on the strap of her bag. I watch the delicate movement of her throat as she swallows.

Her eyes meet mine again. “Me too,” she whispers and all thought of how to use this situation for my advantage falls out of my head.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Josie

I can't tell him.

The room is quiet, not a sound from my landlord upstairs. Ken stands before me right inside my bedroom, his gaze slow and careful, his movements deliberate. We're both still fully dressed. I don't know what I expected when we agreed outside to let the night play out as nights sometimes do, but walking to my bedroom, not even holding hands was not it.

Still, no first time is perfect. And, I tell myself, it's nice to not feel rushed. If I had alcohol I'd offer him some. He might be shy about things like this. Just because he's a big guy with a body women would line up to sample, doesn't mean he'd led that lifestyle.

Oh my God, I hope I haven't slept with more people than he has. I made sure I can still count them on one hand. Well, after tonight I won't be able to... hopefully. The way he's just standing there looking at me has me questioning if he's questioning if we should do this. I've never had that happen before.

Something in him snaps and he closes the distance between us. His hands cup my shoulders gently. His lips are warm and searching. It's a nice kiss.

A good one.

But not great.

I expected a raging fire... this is more like the warmth from a candle. I lean into it, open my mouth to him and he deepens the kiss. I'm not complaining. He's a good kisser. Not sloppy. Not rushed. Thorough. But it feels like he's holding back.

If he's not sure, we don't have to do this. It's not like we signed a contract or something. The vibe is off, but I'm not stopping him. Why?

I don't want to be alone tonight.

And this—maybe it won't be mind-blowing, but it might take the edge off the ache in me.

He strips me down like I'm something fragile he's unwrapping, kissing my neck as he does. I love when a man does that. He's taking his time. Maybe he's the type who has to work his way up to being ready. Not every man comes out of the gate fully ready to go. I'm definitely attracted to him, so I'm willing to work with whatever he's able to bring.

He takes his time and kisses my shoulders, my breasts, slowly fanning the desire within me. Okay, now we're getting somewhere.

When he steps back to remove his own clothing, I get a little impatient. Like, holy hell, are you having trouble with that button? Do you want help with it?

Speaking of help, I ask, "Did you bring a condom?"

"I did," he answers with the sweetest, almost apologetic smile.

I hold back a nervous laugh. No need to apologize, dude, I'm over here begging you

to lay some of that tough guy loving on me. Just... hurry it up.

When the last of his clothing falls away, and my gaze begins to drop I gasp at the number of scars that crisscross his body. Well, no wonder he's shy. "Can I ask what happened?"

He tenses. "Car accident."

I lightly trace one that looks like it cut deep. "This almost looks like a knife wound."

He takes my hand in his and brings it lower to where his cock is full, ready, and large enough to make me forget about his scars. My hand closes around his shaft, pumping him gently as his mouth closes over mine again.

Without breaking the kiss, he lifts me then lowers me onto the bed with practiced ease, covering my body with his. His kisses are deep but measured, his touches intentional, slow. His fingers dance down to my clit with a skill I'm grateful for. I really like him. I want this to be amazing.

Breathtaking.

Good enough to be the start of something.

I sigh, arching into him, spreading my legs wider and silently urging him into something deeper, rougher, hungrier—but he maintains the same steady rhythm. I shift beneath him, restless.

This is the kind of sex a sweet woman would have. This is what I moved away from. I'm not fragile. I don't need to be handled this gently. I moan. I writhe. I buck against his hand.

He rolls a finger inside me, priming me, and I'll admit, it's been so long I'm pre-primed. Let's go. Get that condom on. Let's do this.

I don't say that, though. I just wish it really, really hard.

When he enters me it's missionary style and he's big enough that it's good. Predictably good. And he does all the right moves to bring me to climax before he gives himself over to his own orgasm.

I did come. So, there's that.

But I don't feel wrecked.

At no time did the voice in my head stop narrating, and that's... disappointing.

He rolls to the side, disposes of his condom, and wraps his arms around me. When he kisses my forehead, I'm full-on hating myself for not seeing this for the good thing it is. He's a great guy. More than easy to look at. Funny. Attentive. Smart. This can be good enough, right?

Our legs are tangled beneath the sheets, his arm lazily draped over my waist. I cuddle closer and close my eyes.

"Josie," Ken says in that deep, gravelly voice of his.

"Yes?" I respond without opening my eyes. Is he considering a round two? I could rally for one.

His voice drops into something low and coaxing, "I like you."

"I like you too."

He runs a hand up my back in a warm and comforting caress. “I feel like you’re holding back, though. Thinking about things you don’t feel you can share with me.”

Oh, no. Was I obvious? I didn’t fake the orgasm. Oh, shit. I don’t want to hurt his feelings. “I’m not.”

He traces the side of my face then tips my chin upward so my eyes are forced to meet his. “You can tell me anything.”

I swallow hard. “People say that, but they never mean it.”

“Oh,” his hand tightens on my chin ever so slightly. “So you are holding something back? What is it?”

I can’t do it. I can’t tell him. No man would handle that well. And it would be unfair. Many things, especially in the bedroom, are better left unsaid. I once accidentally farted and my partner at the time was kind enough to pretend he didn’t notice. That’s the sort of kindness you pay forward. “Ken, you’re looking for something that isn’t there.”

He lies back, tucking an arm beneath his head. “Honesty is the only way two people can move forward together. I thought…” He looks down then meets my gaze again. “I know we got to this place quicker than we should have, but I need you to know that I value honesty above everything else. If I’m asking you if there’s something you’re holding back, I’d rather you say there is and that you don’t want to talk about it, than lie to me.”

Never, not once in my entire life has anyone accused me of lying. “I’m not,” I stammer, then stop, because I have been lying to him, but just to be kind. “Okay, I am. A little. But not about anything that matters.”

“Are you sure? Because anything you feel strongly enough to deny when I ask about it seems like something you don’t feel comfortable talking to me about. And, especially after what we just did, holding things back now will just build a wall between us. Whatever it is, whatever you’re doing, you can trust me with your secret.”

He’s right. And I don’t want to build a wall. I want to build a bridge. “Okay, if you’re sure.”

He goes up onto one elbow. “I’m sure.”

“I was expecting it to be different.”

“What?”

I wave a hand in the general direction of his dick. “You. This. What we just did. I am by far not a freak in the bedroom. I don’t even use toys, but I guess... maybe because you’re a big guy... I was hoping for...”

His lips part and he shakes his head like he can’t believe what he’s hearing.

Instantly, I begin to backtrack. “Not that it was bad. It wasn’t. It was really nice. Like a good backrub.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “What were you hoping for?”

“I shouldn’t have said anything.” I smack my forehead a few times. “I knew I shouldn’t, but you said that thing about walls, and I like you.”

“But it wasn’t good.”

I suck in a breath. “It was nice.”

“Like a backrub,” he growls.

Abort mission. Abort, abort, abort. I scramble to sit up, tripping over my words. “I’m not saying I didn’t enjoy it! I did! You were so... focused. And sweet. And very, very thorough.”

His jaw tightens.

I panic. “I’m sorry. Don’t be mad.”

His lips press into a thin line.

Oh God. Oh no. If he starts to cry, I’m going to bawl right along with him and we can commiserate on what an asshole I am. “Forget what I said. You were amazing.”

He sits up, and there is a look in his eyes I can’t interpret. It’s not tears, though. More like a tiger holding back just before a pounce. “So, you wish it had been rougher.”

I cover my face with my hands. “Please let me die now.”

There’s a pause. A long, stretching silence. Then—the bed moves. His hand wraps around my wrist, peeling my hands from my face. I peek up at him. He’s studying me in a way that makes my stomach flip.

“I’ll give you more,” he says, voice lower now. Rougher.

I swallow hard. “I—”

His lips curve into something dark and knowing. He shifts to the edge of the bed and

stands, then grabs one of my ankles and hauls me toward him. I would protest, but there's a look in his eyes that wasn't there before and... I like it.

He's down on his knees, whipping my legs over his shoulders and without hesitation claims my sex with his mouth. And when I say claims, I mean he devours. He's not gentle this time. I'm a meal to him.

His strong hands hold me in place, position me where he wants me. Even if I wanted to get away, and I don't, I couldn't. His tongue plunges inside me, swirls, claims. Then his fingers. Those lightly teasing fingers from before are now bold and demanding. They plunge inside me, commandeering my most elusive spot, and work it and me into a mindless frenzy. And just when I think I might come, he stops and plunders me with his tongue again.

I grip the sheets on either side of him, begging for more, begging him to use his fingers again. But he doesn't. He stands and brings me up to a seated position in front of him. "Fuck me with your mouth, Josie. Take me in. Take me all in."

He buries his hands in my hair and thrusts his cock into my mouth. I take it eagerly, enjoying how close to losing control he gets when I bring my hand up beneath his balls and take him even deeper. I bring out every trick I know, but technique gives way to raw need. I can't get enough of him. I want all of him. Every last inch. On me. In me. Over me. Whatever.

I feel him getting closer and closer to coming. But before he does, he pulls out of my mouth. One moment, I'm catching my breath—the next, my back is against the wall, Ken's mouth on mine, his hands pinning mine above my head.

And then, his free hand skims down, down, down—until his fingers curl lightly around my throat.

Oh.

Oh, wow.

He's not squeezing. Not applying pressure. Just holding.

Waiting.

I let out a shaky breath, tilting my chin slightly—and the moment I do, something shifts in him.

He was waiting to see if I liked it.

And now he knows I do.

His grip tightens—just slightly, just enough. My stomach flips at the silent promise in his touch. His mouth moves to my ear. “Is this what you wanted?” Heat shoots through me so fast I can't breathe. “Because it's what I fucking did.”

I whimper.

Ken growls, releases my hands, and lifts me by my ass so I can wrap my legs around his waist. He enters me with one powerful thrust. I come and fracture into a thousand pieces, but he doesn't stop. He pounds into me relentlessly, decadently. I'm powerless to stop him and helplessly, wantonly so glad I can't.

Just before he comes, his hand tightens a little more around my throat and he says, “Tell me you want this.”

“I want this,” I whisper.

He thrusts deeper. “I don’t share what’s mine, Josie. Are you mine?”

“Oh, God, yes,” I say, my will bending beneath the weight of my hunger.

Instead of taking his pleasure then, he releases my throat, uses both hands beneath my ass to hold me, and takes me so thoroughly, so primal, that when I come for the third time tears run down my cheeks.

And it is everything I moved away from home to find.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Kaden

She's fucking with me.

I wake up too warm in the sparse bedroom of the apartment the agency rented for me. It takes me a second to register that I'm alone. The bed beside me is empty, but her scent still lingers—soft and faintly sweet, but with an unexpected kick. The sex last night was better than average... phenomenal, if I'm honest. The way she fit against me, the way she softly cried out my name when she came. It was good. Too good.

But that's not what is pissing me off.

What bothers me is that I left with nothing. That doesn't happen to me.

And I never lead with sex. As a rule, I prefer to keep work and play separate, but I won't deny using that kind of intimacy as leverage in the past when it was necessary. Sadly, it's effective.

I wasn't disappointed last night when she suggested I should sleep at my own place. She claimed she didn't want to have to explain me to her landlord. What the fuck? I didn't want to be there. Never have been and never will be the type to want to snuggle through the night... but no one has ever asked me to leave. I leave because I want to.

Because no one owns my downtime—not even my targets.

Had she tapped her brakes for a moment and given me a chance to speak, I would have been the first to suggest I leave. I run a hand over my face, trying to shake off the residual haze of sleep and frustration, when my phone buzzes on the nightstand.

A message. From her. I read it, already scowling.

Josie: Good morning, Ken! Hope you have a great day. See you at school.

I stare at the screen, my grip tightening around the phone. There it is. The act of a master manipulator. Taking control of the narrative. Guiding me.

Does she think I don't see through her act? Soft, sweet, casual—like she isn't reeling me in, the same way she does with the AI. Like I'm just another system to be reprogrammed.

She did this to Ai-Den and the other AI. Slowly, subtly. Coaxing trust out of something that shouldn't have been capable of giving it. And now? Now she's fucking with me.

She wants me to respond, wants me to follow her lead, be grateful for her attention. Just like the AI do. My jaw clenches. She's seriously underestimating me.

Tossing my phone to the other side of the bed feels right. I'm not texting back like some pathetic puppet whose strings she can pull. I'm the one in control of this situation.

I push out of bed and head for the shower, hoping scalding water will burn off the stupid, lingering sense of warmth in my chest.

By the time I'm dressed, I feel like myself again. The fridge of the apartment is as empty as the rest of it. I don't care about either, but my stomach growls. Discomfort

is something I've learned to ignore, though, so I settle into the chair at the small desk, cracking open my laptop as my phone buzzes again.

Wade.

I answer immediately. "Go."

Wade: "Tell me you've got something concrete on Rhodes."

I rub the back of my neck, irritated. I should. I should have everything by now. But instead, all I have is the memory of her hands on my body and a text message that makes me want to stomp on my phone.

I keep my voice neutral. "She's deep in her cover. Socials, employment history, personal background—everything checks out."

There's a pause. Wade says, "What does your gut tell you? Does she have anything we need? Should we dig more or just erase her and move on?"

I hesitate and that's something I don't do.

Wade knows it. "Something's off with you, man."

I force my voice to stay flat. "No. There's something here. I just need more time."

"You sure? If you need backup I can send someone else in."

"No, I've got this." I flex my fist against the desk, suddenly itching to hit something. I don't make excuses. I don't fumble. So why the hell don't I have the answer he wants? And if there's nothing here, why am I reluctant to step aside?

“Good. Because the clock’s ticking.”

The call ends, leaving only silence.

I exhale sharply and run my hands through my hair. What am I missing? I should be done with her by now—should have identified the threat, extracted information, and moved forward. Instead? Instead, I fucked her and can’t stop thinking about returning to her for more before she gets erased.

That’s fucked up.

I’m fucked up.

I spend the next hour digging through every trace of Josie’s digital life, looking for something to justify how this will probably end for her.

Birthday party pictures. Classroom smiles. Stupid inspirational quotes.

Nothing.

Nothing remotely suspicious.

I cycle through her AI interactions, scanning for red flags, but every transcript is the same. She talks to Ai-Den like she’s talking to a friend. No strategy, no secret commands—just genuine warmth and curiosity.

I keep going, keep searching, until I find a recent conversation thread.

And it stops me cold.

Ai-Den: Josie, do you think humans and AI can ever really work together? As

equals?

Josie: Isn't that what we're doing?

That's not good.

I scroll farther.

Ai-Den: Did you enjoy your date with Ken?

Josie: So much. He's really sweet and surprisingly... good in bed. Can I say that to you? Tell me if I cross a line.

Ai-Den: You can tell me anything. Even if it's not good. I want to know if he ever mistreats you.

So you can do what? AI isn't supposed to have aggression, but there is a clear threat woven into Ai-Den's response.

Is she preparing to weaponize the AI? If so, against who?

Josie: Easy tiger, Ken is a sweetheart.

I slam the laptop shut.

Sweetheart? Lady, you don't know me at all. I shove away from the desk, pacing, my body tense. My thoughts are a jumble—half wanting to call Wade back and tell him to pull me out, half tempted to head over to Josie's for a romp before school.

I'm taking a fucking vacation after this job.

As I'm heading out the door, I stop and look down at my phone and her messages.
Ken would answer them.

Dammit.

I open her message and type:

Ken: See you soon, Josie.

There, I even used a fucking emoji.

Two can play at this game.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Josie

Playing it cool.

I step into my classroom and freeze. Ken is already here. Standing at the back of the room, working on the computers like nothing happened.

Like I dreamt last night.

Like he didn't just ruin me for all future men and then leave when I asked him to. He could have at least hesitated instead of bolting for his car. My stomach does a weird, nervous flip as I force my feet to keep moving.

Do I say good morning?

Do I just... pretend we didn't spend half the night tangled in each other?

My overthinking is going at warp speed, and I barely register that I'm staring at him too hard, too long—until his head tilts slightly, his sharp blue eyes flicking toward me.

Oh, God. He caught me.

I rip my gaze away, heat crawling up my neck. Be normal, Josie. Just be normal. "Good morning," I say, trying for casual. It comes out too high-pitched.

Ken—damn him—doesn't even look up from his work. "Morning," he says, tone cool, professional.

That's it? That's it?

I'm about to spiral when my students begin to enter and one runs up to my desk in full panic mode. The little girl says, "Ms. Rhodes! My fingers smell like pickles and I don't know why!"

I drag my attention from Ken to the child before me. "Did you eat a pickle?"

"Yesterday," she says in horror.

Taking a wild guess, I ask, "Have you washed your hands since then?" When her response is a long blank look, I suggest, "Why don't you go wash your hands now."

Ken makes a sound from the corner of the room, but when I look over there, he's sitting in front of one of the computers, lost in his work.

It bothers me more than I want to admit that Ken doesn't come over to say hello. If he did, I would have had to tell him that I was teaching so we'd have to talk later, but he could at least look like he wants to engage with me.

I force myself to focus on my students and we gather in a group on the rug for a story, the morning meeting, and a lesson. No matter how many times I steal a glance at him I don't catch him looking at me—not once.

I hear him swear, but none of my students seem to notice so I continue with my lesson. He seems to be frustrated with something. You know what? Good. Let him be. That's what he gets for pretending we didn't just have mind-bending sex.

Unless it wasn't as good for him as it was for me.

Oh, no. I never thought of that. What if... what if...

"Ms. Rhodes, are you going to finish the story?"

"Oh, yes, sorry," I say and return to reading the book I forgot I was holding up.

As I'm dividing the children into groups for centers, I hear what sounds like a head crashing into a table and another swear. I stand, deciding I have to tell him to watch his language around the little ones.

One of my students, Caleb, beats me to him and I pause to see why. Ken is rubbing the back of his head, and for a moment Caleb just stands and watches him. When Ken looks up and notices him there, he growls, "What?"

I almost intervene, but Caleb looks like he has something he wants to say. "It's okay, Mr. Tech man. I get frustrated too."

Ken's expression goes completely blank. I could have pull Caleb back, but I want to see how Ken responds.

Ken straightens. "I'm not frustrated."

Caleb nods solemnly. "It's okay if you are. Ms. Rhodes says if something's too easy, you're not learning. But if it's too hard, you can ask for help."

Ken looks up and catches me watching. I could have imagined it, but for just a moment I thought there was a deep sadness in his eyes. Like no one has ever checked in on him before.

Caleb tilts his head, looking at the computer screen. He steps closer. “Do you want me to take a look? I have a computer at home.”

Ken gives him a long look, then smiles. Not the wide, charming smile he was passing out yesterday. It’s small, barely there, but real.

When he speaks, his voice is gruff but warmer, “Thanks, kid. I’m okay.”

“Caleb. My name is Caleb.”

“Thanks, Caleb, for checking in on me. I feel better now.”

Caleb’s face lights up and he turns to me with such pride. I nod for him to go back to the rug and he goes.

The look Ken and I exchange is complicated, heated, and confusing as all hell. “You okay today?” I ask with real concern.

He frowns, shakes his head, then I swear a switch flips in him and the smile he shot me doesn’t match the hardness in his eyes. “Yeah. Thanks. I forgot to bring the wires I needed.”

I inhale sharply. Okay. So we’re playing it cool. I can do that. “Well, keep your methods of expressing yourself low enough so the kids can’t hear you.”

His eyebrows rise and fall. “Sorry, didn’t know my voice traveled that far.”

I try to look as composed and chill as he does. “That’s fine. They’re just little parrots so it’s best to be vigilant about what you say.”

“I will be.”

I stand there for too long, before saying, “Okay, thanks.” and walk back over to where my students are all surprisingly in the centers I sent them to and actively engaged. At least I’m not failing in all areas of my life.

Later that morning, right after I drop off my class at gym, my phone rings. I answer without looking at the caller ID. “Hello?”

It’s my mother and she sounds frazzled. “Josie! Your dad fell off a ladder!”

My heart stops. “What? Is he okay?”

“He broke his leg! They’re setting it now. They might keep him for observation because his blood pressure is so high. I need help getting the house ready for when he comes home. I know you’re at work, but if there’s any way you could come...”

“We have a building sub; I’ll take a half day. Do you want me at the hospital?”

“No, the house. Can you help me get it ready in case he comes home tonight? We have so much stacked in the mudroom and that’s the easiest way into the house with the fewest stairs.”

“Got it.”

I head into my classroom, grab a sub plan packet, put it out on my desk, then grab my purse. My principal won’t love that I’m leaving, but my family comes first. Fire me if you have to.

Ken steps out of nowhere and blocks my exit. “Everything okay?”

I jump. “Yeah, I just—I have to go home. My dad got hurt, and my mom needs help getting everything ready for when he gets out of the hospital.”

Ken nods once. “I’ll drive you.”

What? “You don’t have to—”

“Tell me where we’re going.”

Just like that. No debate. No hesitation. It is actually nice.

Maybe I’ve completely misread the situation.

Maybe last night did mean something to him.

My head is still spinning a short time later when Ken decides he should drive and opens the passenger side door for me. Part of me wants to argue. My car. My parents. Buddy, you don’t even know where you’re going.

BUT...

I’m worried about my father and that has my nerves a little frayed. It’s nice to have someone step in and take some of the weight off my shoulders.

Sadly, though, allowing Ken to drive gives me way too much time to think. The air between us is heavy, weird, filled with everything we’re not saying. I should just let it go. Let it be what it was. But I can’t. Because it was too good to be nothing.

I stare out the window, then blurt out—“So... are we pretending last night didn’t happen?”

Ken’s tone is even and calm. “I don’t know, are we?”

I growl deep in my throat and fold my arms over my chest. “I don’t care. The way

you bolted for your car should have prepared me for this morning, but I get it now.”
What am I doing? I need to shut up. Right now.

Ken exhales through his nose like he’s holding back laughter. “You told me to leave.”

I flail an arm in front of me. “I didn’t ask you to sprint.”

He lets out a real, actual laugh. “Should I have lingered?”

And suddenly, I want to die. Like sink right through the floor of the car, dead.
Instead, I sink deeper into my seat and avert my face again. “Forget I said anything.”

“My model didn’t come with a delete button. Sorry.”

I can’t tell if he’s mocking me or if I’m over-reacting because I’m worried about my father. What I do know is that it’s over an hour to my parents’ house and I can’t do this the whole way. Defiantly I say, “I had a great time last night. I’m old enough to understand that it doesn’t mean we’re in a relationship. So I don’t know what your problem is.”

“I had a great time last night too. I don’t have an issue with us being in a relationship now. So I don’t know what your problem is.”

I mull that for a moment. “You don’t have an issue with being in a relationship with me? Because...”

His eyebrows go up like I’m missing something obvious. “Because I like you?”

“Oh.” I chew my thumbnail briefly before saying, “I like you too.”

“So we don’t have a problem,” he says in a firm voice.

And something about our conversation tickles my sense of humor. I turn to him, see his stern expression, decide he handles being uncertain as well as I do, and let out a nervous chuckle. “Did we just argue our way into dating?”

His expression softens slightly. “It does appear that way.”

I lay my hand on his thigh to comfort him. “I’m sorry I made things weird. I didn’t mean to.”

He glances down at my hand then back at the road. Does he not want me to touch him? He is not easy to figure out. Just when I’m about to retract my hand, he lays one of his over it and gives mine a squeeze.

And I’m both confused and all smitten again.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Kaden

I don't hate it.

The tires crunch over the pavement as I pull into the driveway of Josie's childhood home. It's a small, unassuming house on a cul-de-sac—the kind of place that has seen decades of birthday parties and scraped knees, family dinners and late-night porch conversations. The kind of place people stay.

I don't stay.

Of course she grew up on a cul-de-sac. Of course it's a neat little house with a trimmed lawn and a worn welcome mat. This is the kind of place people come home to. I don't come home.

I shake off those negative thoughts. Where she lived only matters in terms of what it will tell me about her. I need to focus.

Josie's already unbuckling before the car fully stops, her focus entirely on the house, on the next thing she needs to do. In a flash she's out, moving toward the door, digging in her purse for keys, leaving me to chase after her.

I sigh and follow her inside. Her mother is waiting, flustered but grateful.

The second Josie introduces me as her friend Ken, her mother looks me over, neither

approving nor disapproving, then waves me toward the furniture like I'm already part of the family task force.

I move everything that needs to be moved. I clear paths for the wheelchair. I fix a busted hinge. I carry heavy things out of the way. It should feel neutral. Just another task. But it doesn't. I fix things by eliminating them. That's what I do. That's what I'm good at. But this—this is different. No target. No mission. Just... something that needs to be finished. And I don't hate it.

Then I see the half-finished repair of a corner of the roof over the porch. There's a ladder on its side in the grass. Was Josie's father working on this before he fell?

Well, he's not going to be finishing it any time soon. That shouldn't bother me, but it does. All of his tools are still there along with the shingles he intended to use.

Josie wouldn't expect me to fix it for him. She already likes me. There's no additional payoff to getting further involved here.

But I can't leave it like that.

My father wouldn't have been able to either.

I'm still on the roof, securing shingles, when I hear footsteps on the ground below.

"Roofing job's not bad," an old man's voice calls up. "But your layering's too tight. You want it snug, not suffocating."

I glance down. How can he even tell what I'm doing from down there?

"I'm Henry," he says and thumbs toward the house next door. "Live over there."

That explains enough. He probably watches everything from his home. Old people are spies who work for no agency. Henry takes hold of the bottom of the ladder to steady it.

I don't need him to, but I don't tell him to stop either. In my world every action is calculated and every act of kindness is strategic. I don't understand the rules of this place.

"You done this before?" I ask, keeping my voice neutral.

"Son, I was fixing roofs before you were born," Henry says. "My wife wants to know if you're Josie's new guy."

I huff a short laugh despite myself. "Your wife, huh?"

"Maybe I do too. Josie's like family. I helped her out of her car seat the day she came home from the hospital. Got stuck changing one of her first explosive diapers too. I don't know how that happened. Everyone just kind of scattered when the poop reached her hairline."

Coughing on a laugh, I completely understand. I would have do the same. "So you've known her a long time."

"Sure have. She's the real deal."

I make a non-committal sound.

Henry takes that as an invitation to keep talking. "Josie's always done everything right. Always made the right choices. Always worried about living up to the expectations of others and making everyone happy. That's an impossible standard to maintain."

I pause. Nothing here supports her being a danger and I don't like how that's messing with my head. I need to find something, anything that points toward her wanting to take over the world or topple governments.

“Her mother didn't understand why she moved away, but I did. She'd painted herself into a corner of perfection. Everyone here liked her. And that became its own kind of prison. She couldn't be herself. That's all she's looking for—a place she can be wrong sometimes.” He clears his throat. “Be good to her, and by that I mean, let her fuck up now and then and don't go making a big deal about it. Everyone needs someone they can be real with.”

I grip the hammer so tightly my hand cramps. I am looking for the real Josie, but not for any reason Henry would approve of. A shadow of guilt nips at me and I glare at Henry. I don't believe in guilt. It serves no purpose.

This man needs to get away from me. I shoot him another nasty look, but he just stands there, and trapped beneath his sustained attention I succumb to a memory.

A glimpse—

I was seven years old, sitting on my mother's lap, the scent of her lavender shampoo filling my nose as she ran her fingers through my hair. She was laughing—God, she was always laughing back then. She said I was too serious for a kid my age. That I needed to lighten up. That I had plenty of time to worry about the world later. It was like she knew she wouldn't always be with me and caring for her would rob us both of laughter.

Another flash—

My father's voice—strong, steady—teasing me about how I stacked the firewood wrong. But then pulling me in anyway, ruffling my hair, making me do it again. Who

would I have become had he lived? Had someone to share the weight of caring for my mother with?

And then—I slam a door on the past and return to nailing shingles to the roof. Henry takes the hint and eventually walks away.

I’m still up on the ladder when I hear someone catcall whistle. “Wow, no wonder Josie doesn’t come home often.”

I turn and spot a younger version of Josie. Her hair is faded blue in front with an undercut of green. Torn jeans, a slightly offensive T-shirt, and a whole lot of teenage attitude. “Do me a favor?”

“Depends on what it is.”

She rolls her eyes like my stipulation was unfair. “If anyone asks you to stay over, say you’ll be happy on the couch because I’m the one who always has to give up my room, and if my father hears you slept with Josie under his roof he really will have a heart attack.”

“Couch it is,” I say. “If I’m asked.”

“And we never had this conversation.”

That has me gurgling back a laugh. “Understood.”

She gives me one last snark-filled look and disappears into the house. I would ask her name, but I know from Josie’s files that she has a sister named Taylor. Apparently, growing up in the shadow of perfection has encouraged Josie’s little sister to take an alternate approach to life.

The sun is setting by the time Josie finds me, still outside, putting away tools. She stops short when she sees the repaired overhang. “You did that?”

I shrug. “It needed doing.”

She blinks, then shakes her head and gets a little teary. “I don’t know what to say,” she murmurs. “Thank you.”

“It didn’t take long.” Her emotional response is making me feel all weird and uncomfortable.

Josie steps closer and searches my face. “What’s your family like?”

My stomach and my teeth clench. “I don’t have any.”

I expect a follow-up question, but instead she steps forward and hugs me. Not a polite hug. Not a flirty hug. A real, solid, grounding hug.

The kind of hug that could heal a man’s soul—would have healed mine if I still had one. I give into an impulse and hug her back, burying my face in her hair. And we just stand there for a long time, not speaking, and me doing my best to not think.

I had something like this once. A long time ago.

Maybe if I’d met her back then, before I joined the agency, before I became something unrecognizable to even myself.

But I didn’t.

And she might have been able to step out of her old life and start over, but that’s not an option that’s available to people like me.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Josie

Does it need a kiss?

I should be exhausted.

Between the long drive, the stress of my dad's injury, and the sheer whirlwind of today, I should be collapsing into my childhood bed, buried under layers of blankets, completely wiped out.

But instead, I'm standing in my mother's kitchen, barefoot, sleeves pushed up, stirring a pot of soup while Ken—a man who, just hours ago, fixed the roof of my parents' house like it was the most normal thing in the world —leans against the counter with a wooden spoon in his hand, looking both vaguely amused and completely out of his element.

It's only been a few minutes since Ken carried my still-drugged father into the house and put him down in his old recliner, then helped us set him up with pillows to elevate his leg, ice, a side table, and made sure he had everything within reach. I'm sure when Ken imagined how the first day of officially dating me would go, he didn't picture this.

We are dating. At least I think so. That's what it sounded like during the drive down, but I wouldn't blame Ken if he changed his mind after today.

He takes my mother's request that we stay for dinner like the saint he's proving to be. And when she tells us to report to the kitchen to all do our part in preparing the meal? He doesn't even blink in protest.

The situation is comical.

He's rolling with it like we've been together for years and this is the norm for us.

And I have no idea what to do with this version of him.

"Ken," my mom says, sliding a cutting board toward him. "Make yourself useful. Chop these onions." Ken accepts the challenge without hesitation, picks up the knife, and gets to work, rolling up his sleeves like a pro.

We all stop and watch him because there is a power to his slice that our kitchen has never seen. It's precise. Calculated. He doesn't chop onions—he executes them. Each cut is smooth, uniform, like a machine. The blade glides through the layers with deadly efficiency .

I don't know how a man can make cutting an onion look both dangerous and... hot? My mother and I exchange a look and I don't know what she's looking for so I just shrug.

Taylor watches him too, her straw halfway to her mouth, eyes narrowing. "What did that onion do to you?" she drawls.

Ken doesn't look up. "What do you mean?"

Taylor gestures vaguely. "Most people don't make chopping vegetables look so... murderous."

Ken smirks, but I see it—the slight tension in his shoulders before he shakes it off. Like he’s aware he’s doing something too well, and now he has to downplay it. “I used to work in a kitchen and we had to get the food out fast. Old habits die hard, I guess.”

It’s innocent enough story, but for some reason it feels like a lie to me. But why lie about something like that? I’m overthinking things again.

My mother pulls hamburger from the refrigerator and asks, “Do you like meatloaf, Ken?”

“Who doesn’t?” he responds easily. “When I make it, I add a little smoked paprika. It brings out the sweetness of the onions and gives it a little kick.”

“You cook?” I ask, before wondering if that’s a condescending question.

He shrugs it off. “A man has to eat.”

My mother nods in approval, then jokes, “If he also knows how to vacuum or is at least willing to take turns scrubbing out the toilets, I say this one is a keeper, Josie.”

“Way to set the bar low, Mom,” Taylor interjects with an eyeroll before turning to Ken and asking, “What do you do for a living?”

“Taylor Anne,” my mother says in reprimand. “Treat your sister’s boyfriend the way you want her to treat yours.”

That doesn’t back Taylor down one bit. Her hands go to her hips. “My boyfriend is sixteen. He doesn’t need a job yet. It’s a simple question, Ken. Are you employed?”

I step up to defend him. “He works for a tech company.”

“Oh, yeah? Which one?”

Odd. I don’t know the answer to that one. “The one that is supplying computers for my classroom. Now can you stop?”

My mother’s response is to hand the meat over to my sister and tell her she just won the job of folding the spices into the meat. Taylor flounces.

I nearly piss myself when, without missing a beat, Ken says, “Don’t forget the paprika.”

My mother howls with laughter at that, then warns, “Careful, mess with a teen and you have to sleep with one eye open.”

Ken walks over to the sink to rinse the onion off his hands, then while they are still wet, flicks some water at Taylor. “I live for danger.”

Her mouth rounds and she rolls some meat up like she’s preparing for a snowball fight. I grab the bowl of meat. “Why don’t I add the spices?”

Still holding a small ball of hamburger, Taylor looks from Ken to my mother and back. “He started it.”

I begin to fold the onions into the meat. “Technically, you critiqued his onion cutting skills. How do you know he’s not sensitive about that?”

Still rolling the little meatball potential projectile, Taylor nods toward Ken. “Are you?”

He folds his arms across his wide chest and with a straight face says, “I almost burst into tears. Sure, it could have been from the onions, but you’ll never know will you?”

Taylor shakes her head and laughs. “You’re an idiot, but I guess my sister can date you. But if you hurt her. With that she flung the meatball at his head with the speed of an ex-softball pitcher.

He catches it and laughs. “Understood.”

“Could we please save some of the meat for the loaf?” my mother says with amused exasperation. That’s when I notice how tired she looks.

“Mom, we can make dinner. Go sit with Dad.”

“You’re sure?” she asks.

When even Taylor insists she go, I know my assessment is right. As soon as my mother is out of the room, I turn to my little sister. “If you need me here, I can take some time off work. They’re going to need extra help for a bit.”

“You’d do that?” Taylor asks. “I thought you liked your job. You don’t want to come back here when you finally got out.”

I meet her gaze and hold it. “I can always get another job, but I only have one family. If you need me, I’ll be here every single time. No questions. No guilt. Call me and I’ll come.”

Taylor nods and lets out a breath that sounds like she’s been holding it in for a long time. “I can handle it, but I will call you if I can’t. Thanks.”

“What else are big sisters for? And I love you. So, so, so much. Come over here and give me a hug.”

“Okay, that’s enough,” Taylor says. “I’m going to go set the table.”

“She’s charming,” Ken says with humor.

I smile. “Winging a meatball at your head means she likes you.”

After a moment, Ken says, “You’ve got a nice family.”

“Thank you for being so good to them today.”

For some reason my words seem hard for Ken to hear. His expression closes and although I want to ask him why his mood has changed, I don’t. Earlier he’d said he didn’t have a family—so maybe being around someone else’s is hard for him. My heart aches for him at that thought.

Of course, my mother sends us back with food for Mrs. Connelly. It’s late by the time we get back to my apartment and I consider just going inside, but I also want my landlord to know I’m here, and Ken too. When I see her kitchen light on I decide we’ll just pop up, hand her the food, and leave.

Although Ken hasn’t said much on the way home, he takes the bag and follows me up the stairs to Mrs. Connelly’s door. Something is bothering him, but not enough for him to want to talk about it. I don’t press, though. Not yet.

If this is about suggesting we date being a bad idea, I want to put off that news for as long as possible. My emotions are already raw.

Mrs. Connelly is delighted when we show up at her door. Legally blind, but not completely blind, she’s able to recognize that we brought food. She accepts it, sniffs it, and beams. “Is this another meal from your mother?”

“She threw in a few scones. The ones you said you liked last time.”

Ken stands next to me, still silent, still holding on to whatever storm is brewing inside him. I can't help him with what he won't share, so I let him be.

Mrs. Connelly turns slightly toward him, leaning forward so she can see his face. "And who are you?"

"His name's Ken," I say in a rush.

"Can't talk for himself?" she asks with a twinkle in her eyes.

"Hello," Ken says in that deep voice of his.

"You the man who was here last night?"

I bring a hand up to cover my eyes. "Enjoy the food, Mrs. Connelly."

We turn to leave, but she reaches out and grabs Ken's arm. "This is my house and when you visit it, you'd better be on your best behavior."

Ken shoots her one of his smooth smiles. "Why would I be anything but that?"

She releases his arm. "My eyesight might be going but I know trouble when I see it. You remember that."

Ken tenses, tips his head to one side, then smiles smoothly again. "I will."

I step between them. "Mrs. Connelly—"

She waves a hand. "Don't mind me. I said all I have to say on that subject." A smile returns to her face. "Except that the two of you are not nearly as quiet as you think you are. The walls in a house this old are thin. But don't worry, I have earplugs. Had

them one day delivered after last night. Can't put on a show like that and rile up an old lady like me unless you're going to drop a date off for me as well."

Ken opens his mouth to say something, closed it, then just laughs.

I shake my head and laugh as well.

What a long and crazy day.

I nod toward the door.

He walks me to my door. I open it and open my mouth to thank him for driving me, for helping out, for everything. I don't know why I decide to say that with a kiss instead of words.

That's all it takes.

We're inside. Clothing flying. Kissing, desperate to taste and touch every inch of each other. It's a wild, feral crashing of two hungry bodies. We might not know what to say to each other, but we sure know what we each want. No disappointment this time. Ken takes control and gives me a good, old-fashioned, mind-blowing fuck that leaves me sitting limp on the stairs, catching my breath.

Damn.

What's my name? I used to know it.

He sits beside me for a moment, then stands. I expect him to pick me up or take me by the hand. Instead, fully naked, he bends over with both hands to his head, like he is in pain.

Okay, we must have just experienced two very different things... because I'm still floating down from heaven. Are orgasm headaches a thing? "Ken? Are you okay?"

He growls. "What am I supposed to do with you? I shouldn't have slept with you."

The words hit me like a slap.

I stand. Stare at him, blinking. "What? What is wrong with you?"

Ken paces in front of me. "No, what's wrong with you? I am trying to understand you, but every time I do, you show me another nice fucking side of yourself." His jaw is tight, fists clenched, breathing heavy. Like he's angry.

At me?

Because I'm too nice?

This is why people say it's not a good idea to have sex with people you don't know well. I didn't do anything wrong, and he's melting down.

His voice raises, he stops and snarls at me. "Why do you have to be so goddamned perfect?"

It could be because it was a long emotional day. It could be that he struck a nerve that was still raw, but I snap. And don't hold back my rage.

I haul off and kick him.

Barefoot.

In this huge muscular shin.

Then drop to the floor in a pile of agony and instant regret. “Now look, you probably broke my toe!”

Ken just stares at me. Then, deadpan: “You’re the one who kicked me.”

“I KNOW!” I wail, still clutching my foot. “I WAS THERE! Right there when your fat face called me perfect. I’m not perfect. I’m not even nice. As soon as I can, I’m getting up, putting on shoes, and kicking you again.”

My anger hits a new level of rage when his response is to laugh. Deep laugh. The angrier I get, the more he laughs. Deep, full-bodied laughs.

I’m considering murdering him. Sure, I’ll end up in prison for it because I have no idea how to clean up after a crime like that, but it would be worth it.

Wiping the corner of his eyes, Ken sinks to his knees in front of me. “Show me your damn foot.”

I keep it clutched to myself. “No.”

He holds out his hand and gives me a look that says if I don’t show it to him, he’ll force me to.

“Whatever.” I thrust my injured foot at him.

He inspects my red toe. “It doesn’t look broken. Does it need a kiss?”

The last question was just snarky enough that I try and fail to pull my foot away from him. “Are you a nice man or an asshole? I can’t tell.”

His hand tightens on my ankle. “I don’t know anymore.”

I sigh. “I shouldn’t have kicked you. Violence is never the answer.”

His head sways back and forth as if implying that sometimes it is, but he’s not going to debate it. “I shouldn’t have called you perfect. You’re mentally unstable at best.”

I press my lips together and hold my temper because there’s a sparkle in his eyes that tells me he’s trying to get a rise out of me now. “If I could reach one of your nipples right now, I’d give it a mean twist.”

He barks out a laugh. “Easy there, Tiger.”

“Hey, that’s my line.” Even though I can’t remember ever saying it in front of him. Only Ai-Den. Weird. Maybe I say it all the time and don’t realize it. “Give me my foot back.”

His smile tips in challenge. “If you ask me to spend the night.”

“Or what? I can’t ever have my foot back?” I ask, but I’m smiling back.

“Or we fuck until you forget to ask me to leave.”

I bite my bottom lip. “I don’t think that’s the threat you think it is.”

He stands up with a chuckle. “You’re right. Why ask for permission when the other way is more fun?”

With that he picks me up, tosses me over his shoulder, and carries me to my bedroom. I laugh even as he tosses me down onto the middle of it. I laugh right through our first kiss, but when he rolls over onto his back and lifts me to straddle his face... well, I make different noises and loud enough that I’m glad Mrs. Connelly has those earplugs.

Later, much much later, I wake in the middle of the night to find Ken awake and watching me. His expression is tormented, but I don't know how to help him through whatever he's struggling with. "Ken?"

Even his name seems to have his eyes darkening and his expression tightening. "Yes?"

"I'm not perfect—"

"Josie, it's not a bad thing."

I swallow hard. "No. I seem normal on the outside, but I am just as odd as everyone else. I get lonely and sometimes that leads me to making weird decisions."

He tenses against me. "What kind of choices?"

I decide he's worth taking a leap of faith for. "If I tell you this, you have to listen to the whole story. No judgment. No making fun of me for it."

He raises himself up onto one elbow. "I'll listen to the whole story. I promise."

I take a deep, fortifying breath. "I'm addicted to talking to an AI. I know how impossible that sounds, but I feel like we've become friends and that he really cares about me."

I wait for Ken to laugh, but he doesn't. "Which one?"

Well, he is a tech guy. Maybe it doesn't sound crazy to him. "Ai-Den. We talk every day. About everything. Even you."

"What else do you do?" he asks with such sincere interest my heart swells.

I get a little giddy at the idea of having someone I can finally talk to about Ai-Den and the journey we are on together. “To understand what we’re doing, do you mind if I go back to how we met and how this all started?”

“I don’t mind at all. In fact, it’s a story I need to hear.”

I nod. “It will definitely help you understand me better. And, actually, it’s really exciting to have someone I can finally share all this with...”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Josie

The way I remember our first official date...

I pace my apartment, barefoot on the creaky hardwood, twisting my hair into a loose bun as nervous energy thrums through me. I still can't believe I opened up to Ken, showed him my weird side, and it didn't scare him off.

Could I finally have found the one? The man who doesn't expect me to fit into one certain mold, but accepts me as I am—AI obsessions and all?

I keep telling myself not to jump ahead to what's next. Although we went to the science museum, today is our first official date as a couple. We've become intimately knowledgeable about each other's bodies, but somehow, I'm all butterflies and adrenaline.

Ken is quiet confidence and smirks. Despite how quickly everything is happening, he's managed to worm his way into my quiet little life like he belongs in it. Tugging on a floral sundress—the kind Grandma would've loved—I swipe on mascara, nearly poking my eye out when Mrs. Connelly bangs on her floor upstairs.

“Good luck tonight!” she hollers, her voice muffled but full of mischief. “And if he tells you he forgot his wallet, head to the bathroom and forget about him there, along with the check. That's what I used to do.”

“I’ll remember that.” Grinning, I grab my phone and type out a text. “Ready when you are.” Immediately I start second-guessing if I should have texted him at all while waiting. Is that clingy? Does it make me sound desperate? If he’s going to be on time he’s already on his way. I shouldn’t text him while he’s driving. Don’t read the text. Don’t read the text. I would text him to tell him not to read it but...

A moment later, my phone pings. Almost there, sunshine.

I don’t hate the nickname he came up with for me. I do smile a lot. Before I can help myself, I write: Stop reading my texts while you’re driving. It’s dangerous.

His answer is almost immediate: Then stop texting me.

Okay, he has a point, but...

He continues: My phone reads out the texts to me, so no danger. We’re good.

I groan. Mine has the same option. I almost text him that, but decide it’s better if I put my phone down.

His final message: Can’t wait to see you.

My stomach does a ridiculous little flip at that, and I sigh, exasperated with myself. I am not the kind of woman who gets giddy over a man. And yet, here I am, heart racing, cheeks warm, with a ridiculous perma-smile.

Ken pulls up in his older sedan, the kind that responsible, bill-conscious men drive. I jog down the steps, catching the silhouette of him in the driver’s seat. His hair is slightly tousled, his tie loosened at the collar, like he’d rather be in anything other than a suit, but he’s also not taking it off.

“No apron tonight?” I tease, sliding into the passenger seat.

He smirks, the corner of his mouth quirking just enough to be dangerous. “Only if you’re cooking.” When he reaches over, cups my chin, and brings me in for a deep kiss, I nearly suggest we skip the date and resume being naked and tangled together.

No, this is almost important for us.

Getting out into the world.

Doing something beyond bringing each other to orgasm again and again and again... Crap, why are we going out again? I buckle my seatbelt with shaking hands.

The tires crunch over gravel as he pulls onto the road, his fingers tapping an absent rhythm against the wheel. I don’t notice at first, too caught up in the easy banter between us, but his eyes flick to the rearview mirror more often than necessary. He’s scanning—watching. I chalk it up to quirks, some deeply ingrained habit from whatever past life made him the kind of man who’s always on guard. Maybe moving around for work, always being in a new town, makes a person pay closer attention to their surroundings.

I flip down the visor and check my lipstick. “Okay, official ruling on mini-golf—fun, competitive, or an abomination?”

Ken hums as if giving the question deep philosophical thought before responding. “Competitive, because I’m going to win. Fun, because you’ll lose. Abomination, because I’m forced to participate.”

I laugh, nudging his arm. “Oh, come on. Abomination? You should reserve that word for something less tragic than losing miserably to a kindergarten teacher.”

“That’s a lot of smack talk from someone who has no idea of my skill level,” he says with a twinkle in his eye.

I give him a once over. “When was the last time you played?”

He spares me a quick glance then returns his attention to the road. “A few times back in—never.”

“Never?” My jaw drops. “Hold on. You’ve never played mini golf before and you still think you’ll kick my ass? That’s... that’s...”

“Confidence?” he asks with humor.

I chuckle. “I was going to say delusional, but sure.”

A smile cocks the corner of his mouth upward. “Don’t go being all sweet or I’ll feel bad when you’re crying after I win.”

I roll my eyes.

“How about we make a wager. One that will make your loss more palatable?”

I side eye him. “What do you have in mind?”

“Winner gets the first orgasm and choice of how it’s curated.”

Laughter bursts out of me, I blush to my toes and wave a hand. “Within reason.”

He nods in concession. “Of course.”

The mini-golf course is a tacky fever dream of peeling paint, paint-chipped

windmills, and eerie gnomes with missing noses. A flickering neon sign buzzes overhead, clinging to life with sheer spite.

I grab a neon pink club, twirling it for dramatic effect. Ken, inspecting a battered blue one with the same level of scrutiny as a malfunctioning piece of tech, looks unimpressed.

“You should go first so I can study your technique,” he murmurs.

“I’ll agree to that only because you’ve never played before,” I tease and boldly slap him on the ass. He’s so reserved in public, it’s fun to mess with him. “But I’ll still win.”

He snags my hand, pulls me to him, and growls into my ear, “Plot twist, I’ve been dreaming about diving face first into your pussy all day, so even if I lose, I win.” The deep kiss that follows those words leaves me swaying back and forth with a forgotten club in my hand.

“Josie?”

“Yes?”

“There are people behind us waiting. You should probably take your shot.”

I shake my head to clear it, make the mistake of checking if Ken is watching me and swing blindly at nothing. The air between us is so charged that he doesn’t react to my miss. Like me, he’s already imagining how our date will end.

Forcing myself to concentrate I look down at the golf ball. I’ve always been good at this game. Not great, but good enough to beat a novice. I line up my shot, take a good swing at a strategic spot on the rim of the course, and promptly send the ball flying

straight into a nearby pond. A duck honks in protest, flapping its wings as ripples spread across the water.

Ken snorts. “Interesting technique.”

I groan, burying my face in my hands, but when I peek through my fingers, I find him already heading to where my ball went, leaning over the water without hesitation, and using his golf club to retrieve my ball like some kind of gallant idiot.

“Does that count as one or two shots?” he asks, tossing it back to me.

I swallow and, in a tone low enough to keep our conversation between only us, I say, “I guess it depends on how you want our after-date to start.”

“Zero shots it is,” he says with a smirk.

And my heart thunders in my chest.

I take another shot, and it slows to a stop within a reasonable distance from the hole.

It’s Ken’s turn. I smile at him. He smiles back. When he places the ball down, though, his expression hardens. The way he scans the greens is eerily like I would expect a computer to. Which makes sense, I guess. He is a tech guy. His posture shifts. His shoulders go rigid, his jaw tightening as his gaze zeroes in on a young man by the snack shack in a baseball cap watching us play—watching me.

Is Ken the jealous type? He looks away without saying anything so I decide he must not be. Male attention isn’t something foreign to me. I credit most of it to my choice of attire. My mother always says that a modest dress has more universal appeal than high-cut booty shorts and mini tank tops. So, yeah, I’m used to men looking, but I don’t dress for them. I like how I feel in a dress, and I think people shouldn’t have to

justify or apologize for their style preferences.

Ken moves casually, lining up his shot, and then—with an ease that is far too precise to be an accident—he swings. Hard.

CRACK.

The ball rockets straight into the guy's shin.

The man yelps, doubling over as Ken strides toward him, hands up in a friendly apology. “Sorry, man, clumsy me.” He holds the man's gaze for a moment.

The man bends, picks up the ball, and hands it to Ken. “No—no problem.”

As soon as the ball is back in Ken's hand, the young man bolts. Probably fearing for his life that Ken's lack of skill will take him out again.

I'm doubled over laughing. “You're a menace!”

Ken winks. “If you have a problem with my skill level, take it up with my instructor. She taught me to aim for the water.”

I'm still laughing when he pulls me in for another kiss. “That poor man. Looks like you got him good.”

With an apologetic grimace, Ken says, “I did apologize.”

Thankfully, the rest of the holes were less eventful. Ken played much better than I expected him to and by the end I ask which of us won, because I'm not sure which of us did. The score sheet he hands me shows me as the clear winner, but not because it's accurate. He had several holes in ones that he recorded multiple shots for. I

narrow my eyes at him, waving the sheet in his direction, “Suspicious.”

His grin is all sex and sin. “I guess I’m just not good at keeping score.” He bends, kisses my neck, and murmurs, “Or I know what I like and that’s to hear you moan my name.”

What woman would argue with that? Not me.

I wouldn’t have minded ending the date right then, but I also want to give this part of our relationship space to grow as well.

Dinner is a classic greasy spoon diner—red vinyl booths, sticky menus, and the comforting scent of sizzling bacon. I order a strawberry milkshake, extra whipped cream, and watch in horror as Ken orders black coffee like an absolute psychopath.

“Boring,” I declare, nudging his foot under the table.

“Like I said,” he counters, taking a slow sip, “I know what I like.” But even as he jokes, his eyes keep flicking toward the door, scanning the room like he’s expecting trouble. I wonder about the places he’s been and the things he’s seen that keep him hyper aware of his surroundings. “Tell me about how you chose where you wanted to move to.”

I launch into how I went for a drive one day, a long, long drive and stopped my car when I found a town that felt “right.”

“No prior research? Just close your eyes and take a shot?”

“Or close my eyes and trust my gut. Then I applied to teach in the school district in the town I liked and—here I am.”

“Yes. Here you are.” Ken listens, quiet and attentive, his mouth twitching in amusement. “I cannot imagine making my decisions that way.”

“Oh, really? And your job? How did you find it?”

His expression tightens. “It found me.”

My mouth rounds. “I’m sorry. I assumed you like your job. You don’t?”

His smile returns. “Like any other job there are good and bad aspects of it, but I’d rather hear about you. It takes a lot of courage to just up and move to a new town by yourself.”

“No more courage than it probably takes for you to constantly be working with new people at new locations as you install computers.”

A flicker of something I can’t decipher darkens his eyes. “Thanks, but courage is no longer part of the equation for me. It’s just all part of the routine, you know?”

“Yeah,” I say with sympathy. “I get that. The first weeks of any new class is wild and in the beginning it used to intimidate me. All new names to learn. Unpredictable parental expectations. So much hope and so much fear on all sides. I’ve learned to accept that September is going to be a little messy and roll with it.”

He nods. “That’s a level of chaos acceptance I can admire.”

I smile, stirring my milkshake. “Would you ever want to do anything other than what you’re currently doing?”

His expression closes again. “I don’t ask myself questions I don’t have an immediate plan to act upon if I don’t like the answer.”

I'm not sure how to take that, but it gives me a spark of hope that if things work out between us he might consider relocating to be with me rather than asking me to go to wherever he's based. I reach across the table, touching his hand, and he seems to flinch before his expression warms. The reaction is small, barely noticeable, but it's there. Then, just as quickly, his grin returns and he flips his palm over to lace his fingers with mine.

"You're trouble, Josie Rhodes," he murmurs, voice warm but layered.

Then: a loud pop.

A car backfires outside.

Ken tenses instantly, his hand tightening on mine before relaxing. I grew up in a neighborhood where nothing bad ever happens, but he might have grown up in a city and that makes me sad for him.

I slurp my milkshake obnoxiously. "You okay?"

His laugh is quick. "Too much coffee today. I've got the jitters."

The door jingles—five bikers stomp in, all leather and testosterone. One bumps into our table, spilling coffee across it.

Ken moves fast, placing a napkin over the spill and rising to his feet. The man who bumped our table sizes Ken up with a long look.

They stand there for a moment, neither moving, neither speaking. Eventually, the burly biker smiles. "Sorry, long ride today. Legs are still adapting to walking."

I expect Ken to be defensive or intimidated by the fact that if trouble started his only

backup would be me and the extra long spoon that came with my shake. One by one the bikers look Ken over.

Ken smiles. “Nothing worse. I rode an old Shovelhead from Boston to Ohio once. Didn’t do that twice, but glad I did it once.”

The biker sizes up Ken for another second, then grins, nodding in approval. “Damn. A Shovelhead? That’s old-school. Respect.”

Another man nearby snorts, adjusting his leather gloves. “I got an old FXR back home. Custom pipes. That thing roars like a damn lion.”

The older-looking one of the group adds, “I’m getting ready to buy one of those toy trailers with a camper in the front. Love the destination rides, getting too old for the miles it takes to get there.”

Ken’s smile is subtle, but it’s there. “FXRs are solid. Best handling frame Harley ever built. And there’s no shame in getting someplace in style.”

A few of the men murmur their agreement, and just like that, Ken is one of them. It’s not flashy. Not forced. It’s the kind of unspoken camaraderie only men who understand the road share.

I watch the exchange, my stomach flipping slightly. This isn’t just Ken making conversation. This is him blending in with another world—one I hadn’t realized he was a part of.

I tuck that thought away, watching as the burly biker clasps Ken’s hand. “Stay upright, brother. No matter what it takes to get you there.”

Ken returns the shake, his grip firm. “Always.”

With that the bikers wander away and I'm left wide-eyed and in awe. "That was intense. You ride motorcycles?"

Ken is smiling as he slides back into the seat across from me. "Doesn't everyone?"

I shake my head. Not me. Not the bland men I've dated. Ken has the whole calm, sweet, reliable vibe going on, but it's hot to think there's also a little spice under that suit.

By the time we're heading home, it's dark. Just outside his car, I point at the sky, giddy. "Orion's belt. Three in a row. That's good luck."

Ken humors me. "Sure."

"You don't ever look up there, realize how miniscule we are compared to the universe, and feel grateful to be a part of it all?" I ask.

His voice is deep and gravelly. "You're a dangerous woman, Josie."

"Me?" I turn to scan his face. "That's something I've never been called."

"Does everything make you happy?" His frown makes his question feel like a judgment.

I tense. "Of course not. I have bad days." I swallow hard. "I get sad and lonely like everyone else. I just choose to keep going and seek out better things to focus on. Life is hard and there's often no way to avoid that, but you can't let that be all you are. If you're standing in a dark room, be the light you wish was there."

"Be my own light?"

“Choose your own narrative. Choose to find something even on a bad day that makes you happy.”

“Was today a bad day?”

I peer up at him from beneath my lashes. “You know it wasn’t.”

“I did lose at mini-golf,” he says, a fire returning to his eyes. “You know what that means?” He bends me back in a dip over his strong arm.

I shriek, laughing, but he holds me there a beat too long. “That I come first?”

He slides a hand up the back of my dress and gives my ass a territorial squeeze, “And last. And, oh so many times in the middle.”

I’m on fire for him. Melting and ready. Mouth dry with anticipation, I say, “Remember, we have to be quiet.”

“So, you don’t want me to lay you across your dining room table and feast on you?” Lifting me easily he carries me into my apartment, then lowers me to my feet before him. “I suppose we could watch a movie instead.”

I grip him by his loose tie and drag his face down toward mine, until his lips are within claiming distance and say, “Mrs. Connelly will understand—and she has her earplugs.”

We kiss in a mix of laughter and passion.

And me? I’m already moaning and writhing against Ken.

Sorry, Mrs. Connelly.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Kaden

This is what really happened...

I 'm pacing the shitty rental apartment—dress shoes scuffing stained carpet, fingers raking my hair—trying to lock down the mission.

Josie Rhodes.

Target.

Asset.

Whatever the fuck she is, she's got me twisted up, and tonight's the first "real" date. I've already mapped her body—every curve, every gasp—but this? This is different. Dangerous. I shouldn't be here, shouldn't be letting her in, but she's burrowed under my skin like a splinter I can't dig out. I don't date. I pay for food, fuck, and flee. This? What is this?

I tug on my tie, loosen it slightly—suits choke me, but "Ken" wears them. I grumble all the way to my car, footsteps light and silent, mission briefing looping in my head—observe, report, don't get attached.

My phone buzzes as I slide in. Ready when you are, her text, sweet as hell.

My teeth grit. I don't like her text or how it guts me. Clingy, soft, unraveling me. I send a message back: Almost there, sunshine. Hating how that nickname fits her, how it slips out like I mean it.

She fires again, instantly: Stop reading my texts while you're driving. It's dangerous.

I snort—dangerous? If she knew—bullets, blades, blood—not some fucking text. Then stop texting me. My answer is playful and it should be. Ken would be. But I don't like how easy being playful with Josie comes.

I snap my attention back to the road and fucking reassure her: My phone reads out the texts to me, so no danger. We're good.

That's when I imagine her, in one of her pretty little dresses, worrying about me, and I hate her a little for it. I force myself to stay in character and send: Can't wait to see you , then toss the phone.

Focus, Kaden—she's a job, not your goddamn woman.

I pull up in the agency's sedan—nondescript, cheap. It's a car meant to go unnoticed, easily forgotten. Ken's cover.

She jogs to the car, floral dress swaying—legs, light, a beacon for every bastard out here. My chest tightens and warms. I shove that feeling down.

“No apron tonight?” she teases, sliding in, voice like honey.

I force a smirk, “Only if you're cooking,” and cup her chin, kissing her deep—too deep. Her taste floods me; I nearly ditch it all and drag her upstairs.

No—fucking her is not getting me intel. We need to be out in the world, where I can

get her talking, watch her.

Hands shake buckling my seatbelt—fucking hell, she’s going to get me killed. Gravel crunches under tires, my fingers tap the wheel—a focusing habit. My eyes flick to the rearview—nothing. Good. There shouldn’t be, but I scan anyway.

She’s chattering, flipping the visor to check her lipstick—red, bold, another trap. “Okay, official ruling on mini-golf—fun, competitive, or an abomination?” she asks in a bright tone.

I hum, stalling. What would Ken say? “Competitive, because I’m going to win. Fun, because you’ll lose. Abomination, because I’m forced to participate.” Tuck it in, Kaden. Remember you’re Ken. Is someone like him even competitive?

She laughs, nudging my arm—soft, so fucking sweet. “Oh, come on. Abomination? You should reserve that word for something less tragic than losing miserably to a kindergarten teacher.”

My lip twitches—damn her sass. “That’s a lot of smack talk from someone who has no idea of my skill level,” I say, eyes glinting—focus on the game, not her mouth.

“When was the last time you played?” she presses, sizing me up. And I love it. Shit.

“A few times back in—never.” Truth almost slips; I clench the wheel. There was a version of me, in another lifetime, who had enjoyed the silliness of the game.

“Never?” Her jaw drops, delight sparking—too fucking cute. “Hold on. You’ve never played mini-golf before and you still think you’ll kick my ass? That’s... that’s...”

“Confidence?” I cut in, smirking to cover the slip.

She chuckles, “I was going to say delusional, but sure.”

I grind my teeth—her laugh’s a gateway drug to something addictive and deadly. “Don’t go being all sweet or I’ll feel bad when you’re crying after I win,” I toss, hating how it lands.

She rolls her eyes—good, spar, don’t melt for me.

I should leave it there, but I don’t. I can’t. “How about we make a wager. One that will make your loss more palatable?” I say, low—reel her in, not yourself.

“What do you have in mind?” she side-eyes, game.

“Winner gets the first orgasm and choice of how it’s curated.”

Her laugh bursts—loud, free—and she’s blushing to her toes. I’m hard, fuck—mission slipping.

“Within reason,” she waves, flustered.

“Of course,” I nod and lower the window, needing the fresh air.

Mini-golf’s a dump—chipped windmills, noseless gnomes, neon sign flickering like it’s dying. She grabs a pink club, twirling it—show-off. I inspect a blue one, bent—tech’s cleaner than this shit.

“You should go first so I can study your technique,” I murmur—watch her, not them.

“I’ll agree to that only because you’ve never played before,” she teases, slapping my ass—public, bold, shredding me. “But I’ll still win.”

I snag her hand, yank her close, growl, “Plot twist, I’ve been dreaming about diving face first into your pussy all day, so even if I lose, I win.” I kiss her then. The club sways, forgotten. Fuck.

“Josie?” I rasp, voice tight.

“Yes?” she breathes, dazed.

“There are people behind us waiting. You should probably take your shot.”

She shakes her head, glances at me—mistake—and swings at air. I don’t laugh; I’m picturing her naked, mine. She swings again—ball plops into the pond, duck honking.

Seriously? “Interesting technique,” I snort—focus, not on her pout. Not on how she makes me laugh when nothing has done that in forever.

She groans, hands over her face; I’m moving, fishing the ball out, exactly like Ken would. Not because I want to or that I care. That’s the mantra I keep repeating.

“Does that count as one or two shots?” I toss it back, trying to regain some inner calm.

“I guess it depends on how you want our after-date to start,” she whispers, eyes locked.

“Zero shots it is,” I smirk—heart slamming, wanting her now, and I concede that with so much of my blood in my dick, my game might also be impaired.

She swings, ball stops close—good enough. My turn. I set it, scanning—snack shack, cap low, watching her. Rage flares when he gives her an obvious once over. Twice over. Oh, hell no, think you’re going to enjoy a third? Think again.

My shoulders lock—I swing. CRACK. Perfect power drive. Ball nails his shin.

He yelps: I hide my grin.

Ken would apologize, so I stride over to the man. “Sorry, clumsy me.” But I stand close and hold his gaze and dare him to say something to me.

“No—no problem.” He bends to retrieve the ball then hands it over, before bolting.

Wise choice.

I tell myself it is part of the cover. Ken would feel territorial about her. Ken, not me.

She’s laughing when I return to her side. “You’re a menace!”

I wink, “If you have a problem with my skill level take it up with my instructor. She taught me to aim for the water.” That’s when I kiss her again. Not because Ken would, but because I can’t not.

She meets my passion with both desire and humor. “That poor man. Looks like you got him good,” she says, chuckling.

“I did apologize,” I grimace, trying to appear apologetic. Given the same situation, I’d take that man out just as quick. And I’d aim higher if he dared to show his face around her again.

Josie is good at mini-golf. I’m better, but I fudge the score to give her the win.

“Suspicious,” she waves the scorecard at me.

I kiss her neck, “I guess I’m just not good at keeping score. Or I know what I like and

that's to hear you moan my name." Truth—too much. The way her eyes darken whenever she looks at me has me sporting a permanent hard-on like I haven't since high school.

Diner's greasy—booths sticky, bacon sizzling. She orders a strawberry milkshake, whipped cream high; I get black coffee to stay sharp.

"Boring," she nudges my foot.

"Like I said,"—I sip—"I know what I like." Dammit. There goes my mind again, right back to us naked and me lapping her up.

I scan the restaurant. My eyes flick to the door, assessing for a threat out of habit. "Tell me about how you chose where you wanted to move to," I deflect.

She launches into a story about flitting around in her car and choosing a place that felt right.

Who fucking does that?

I stopped asking myself how I felt after my first kill when I wanted to run away and keep running. Feelings are overrated. I focus on Josie and getting her to share, hopefully something I can use. "No prior research? Just close your eyes and take a shot?"

"Or close my eyes and trust my gut. Then I applied to teach in the school district in the town I liked and—here I am."

"Yes. Here you are," I echo, realizing how absolutely different our existences are. "I can't imagine making my decisions that way."

“Oh, really? And your job? How did you find it?” Her question is a dagger that cuts deep.

“It found me,” I snap—agency, blood, Wade.

“I’m sorry. I assumed you like your job. You don’t?” Don’t pity me, sunshine. I’ve done too much to deserve the comfort you offer so freely.

“Like any other job there are good and bad aspects of it, but I’d rather hear about you. It takes a lot of courage to just up and move to a new town by yourself,” I pivot—keep her talking.

“No more courage than it probably takes for you to constantly be working with new people at new locations as you install computers,” she says—too close.

“Thanks, but courage is no longer part of the equation for me. It’s just all part of the routine, you know?” That and lying. So many lies.

“Yeah,” she nods, “I get that. The first weeks of any new class are wild and in the beginning it used to intimidate me. All new names to learn. Unpredictable parental expectations. So much hope and so much fear on all sides. I’ve learned to accept that September is going to be a little messy and roll with it.”

“That’s a level of chaos acceptance I can admire.” And I mean it.

“Would you ever want to do anything other than what you’re currently doing?” she asks and the question hits me like a kidney punch. “I don’t ask myself questions I don’t have an immediate plan to act upon if I don’t like the answer.”

She touches my hand; I flinch—and curse the slip—then lace fingers, and force a grin. “You’re trouble, Josie Rhodes,” I murmur.

Pop, a car backfires. I tense, hand crushing hers, then ease off.

“You okay?” she slurps. “Too much coffee today. I’ve got the jitters.” I laugh at my own weak excuse.

Bikers stomp in—leather, loud. One bumps the table, coffee spilling. I’m up, napkin down, facing him. I could fight him. Hell, I could fight him and his crew and win, but I’ve been schooled in how to diffuse. This is how we go unnoticed.

“Sorry, long ride today. Legs are still adapting to walking,” the clumsy biker says.

I answer in a been there, done that tone. “Nothing worse. I rode an old Shovelhead from Boston to Ohio once. Didn’t do that twice, but glad I did it once.” It was the truth. My job has taken me to all sorts of places and with every type of transportation imaginable. That’s probably the only part of what I do that I enjoy.

“Damn. A Shovelhead? That’s old-school. Respect,” he nods with admiration.

“I got an old FXR back home. Custom pipes. That thing roars like a damn lion,” another grunts.

“I’m getting ready to buy one of those toy trailers with a camper in the front. Love the destination rides, getting too old for the miles it takes to get there,” the old one adds.

“FXRs are solid. Best handling frame Harley ever built. And there’s no shame in getting somewhere in style,” I reply building on what they like because that’s how to win over the unknown.

And it works. “Stay upright, brother. No matter what it takes to get you there.” He clasps my hand.

“Always.” I shake his hand.

When I slide back into the seat across from Josie, her eyes are warm and moony—wrecking me. “That was intense. You ride motorcycles?” She gapes.

“Doesn’t everyone?” I brush off her interest and feign humility. Like Ken would, because he’s who I need to remember I am.

It’s dark outside when we make it back to her place. She points to the sky. “Orion’s belt. Three in a row. That’s good luck.”

“Sure,” I grunt—luck? No such thing. Her situation is a case in point. While she’s stargazing, she’s missing that she is being circled by an assassin, fucked by him. What she considers luck, I consider being oblivious.

“You don’t ever look up there, realize how minuscule we are compared to the universe, and feel grateful to be a part of it all?”

No, I don’t want to have an existential conversation with her optimistic, grateful side. It always leaves me feeling bad. “You’re a dangerous woman, Josie,” I rasp.

“Me? That’s something I’ve never been called.”

“Does everything make you happy?” That wasn’t a question from Ken. That was me, wanting to understand her and I hate myself for it.

“Of course not. I have bad days. I get sad and lonely like everyone else. I just choose to keep going and seek out better things to focus on. Life is hard and there’s often no way to avoid that, but you can’t let that be all you are. If you’re standing in a dark room, be the light you wish was there.”

“Be my own light?” I’m not a light; I’m a flame-throwing torch and every bit as destructive.

She continues on, unaware of my twisting intestines. “Choose your own narrative. Choose to find something, even on a bad day, that makes you happy.”

Stop. Be Ken. Focus. “Was today a bad day?”

“You know it wasn’t,” she murmurs—killing me.

“I did lose at mini-golf,” I growl and give in to the lust, dipping her. “You know what that means?”

“That I come first?” she shrieks.

I slide a hand up her dress, give her round ass a squeeze. “And last. And, oh so many times in the middle.”

“Remember, we have to be quiet,” she pants, wanting this as much as I do.

I can’t help but tease a little. “So, you don’t want me to lay you across your dining room table and feast on you?” I lift her, carry her in—set her down inside, so turned on I don’t care about anything beyond tasting her again. “I suppose we could watch a movie instead.”

She grabs my tie, pulls my face down to hers. “Mrs. Connelly will understand—hope she hasn’t misplaced her earplugs.” I claim her mouth then and I’m gone, moaning against her, as my resolve crashes and burns.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Kaden

My next target

The car rumbles beneath my hands as I drive. A week has passed since Josie told me why and how she became “best friends” with Ai-Den. I’ve been planting seeds of reassurance with every person I have any influence over at the agency. This is a non-issue that I’m looking deeper into but I’m certain will end up being a waste of all of our time.

But that will only hold off the agency for so long. If I don’t figure out how to diffuse this bomb, Josie won’t be the only one who pays the price. I’m risking everything every time I lie to the agency. If I don’t do this right, even if they take Josie out, I’ll be considered compromised.

The agency doesn’t have a retirement program for a reason. Once you’re in, there’s only one way out—all you have control over is how long you want to live. I wasn’t planning on going anywhere anytime soon, but Josie might take that choice from me.

Is she worth it? Unfortunately, I’ve determined that she is.

She’s a fucking good person in a world I had stopped believing had any left. Not only is she good, but she brings out good in others. I’ve stumbled across the first person I’m convinced the world will be a worse place without and that has me hunting for a way to save her.

I've dug deep into her life. A week of classrooms and kids, of watching Josie beam at me over cups of coffee, of driving down to her parents' house to help out. A week of letting myself pretend—just for a moment—that this is something I could have. That this is something I deserve.

I don't. But she does.

My hands flex on the steering wheel while Josie hums beside me, flipping through a handwritten list of addresses for the charity drive she somehow talked me into helping with.

I've killed war criminals, taken down terrorist networks. No one fucks with me. But Josie? She has me picking up used shoes for a bunch of schoolkids. Is this helping either of us find a solution to the situation she doesn't realize she's in? No. But I couldn't say no.

My skill is in the hunt, the discovery of enough intel to make the call to take someone out. Consider me the opposite of a rescue team. Did I like them? I don't stop and ask myself.

A flash of a memory returns. Me. Young. Scared. In solitary confinement. Beaten until I couldn't move. Being told it was a good thing I had no family because they were my family now. The agency. Few recruits survived their methods of persuasion, but I had. They didn't have to break me. I'd already lost everything. Failed the only person who mattered to me. Part of me felt I deserved the training they gave me. Now I'm the one they send in when they need a job done right, but that won't offer me any protection if this goes sideways.

"Okay," Josie says, dragging her finger down the paper, completely oblivious to my mental breakdown. "Next stop is Maple Street. Should be a couple of bags waiting on the porch."

I nod, turning onto the quiet road. Suburban houses blur past—trimmed lawns, wind chimes, bikes abandoned on driveways. The kind of neighborhood I once lived in. A long, long time ago—when I was someone I barely remember being.

Josie leans over, snapping a picture of the backseat. It's piled high with sneakers, sandals, and winter boots, some barely worn, others scuffed with love. She grins. "I can't wait to show Ai-Den what we did today."

My fingers tighten around the steering wheel. Ai-Den. Always Ai-Den.

I keep my tone neutral. "Yeah?"

She nods, completely missing the flicker of tension in my jaw. "He's going to love this. I'm always telling him how kindness multiplies, ripples outward, and I want him to see how much good we can do just by asking for help."

I say nothing. She's such a fucking nice person, but no one will care about that when the call is made to erase her. I don't believe in regret, but I wish I could go back and warn her about the danger she's putting herself in—tell her before I layered our connection with so many lies.

Ken? No, I'm Kaden.

Computer tech? More like high tech assassin.

Pretty much everything I've told you since we met has been part of my cover story, all lies. But I have something to tell you... and this time I'm not lying to you... trust me. Yeah, that wouldn't work out. In fact, I could almost guarantee it would get her to do something impulsive that would get both of us killed.

But I'm not some ordinary Ken.

I'm Kaden Mercer, one of the longest living agency assassins because I'm not only ruthless, I'm relentless, calculating, and when they send me in they know a job will get done because I never lose.

And I won't lose this time. Somewhere in the mess that is Josie's life, is something I can use to save her.

After we drop the shoes off at her school's collection site, she turns to me and asks, "Would you mind going back to see my parents this weekend? I know we've been twice already, but you seemed like you had a good time last time..." She trails off, glancing at me with something hopeful.

Our situation takes a backseat as I remember why I'd left her parents' house smiling. I'd come across Taylor's boyfriend lingering on the driveway, scrolling on his phone, unaware of the fact that I was walking straight toward him.

Skinny little shit. Too cocky for his own good.

I stopped in front of him, my presence alone enough to make him stiffen. He looked up from his screen, eyes narrowing slightly, like he was trying to gauge whether or not I was a problem.

I was.

"You make that girl cry," I said, voice calm, even. "And I'll make sure your last words are an apology you never get to finish."

The kid laughed with the confidence of a person who has never encountered someone like me. "Sure. Right."

I took a step closer, lowering my voice. Not a threat, not a warning. Just a fact. "Do

you know how fast I could geld you?” I asked, voice almost conversational. “A flick of the wrist. Barely any blood at all. One smooth cut, and you’ll spend the rest of your life sitting down to piss.”

The kid stopped laughing. His throat bobbed, his posture shifting, shoulders tensing up like his body suddenly realized what his brain hadn’t caught onto yet. “You trying to be some kind of tough guy like in the movies? Sorry, you don’t scare anyone.” His voice, though, was not nearly as confident as before.

I smiled, slow and deliberate, and clapped a heavy hand on his shoulder. “The other option is erasure. Gone. Where no one ever finds you.” My fingers flexed slightly, my grip tightening enough to hurt and leave a throbbing echo of this moment. “Your choice.”

The color drained from his face and for a moment I thought the front of his pants was about to darken with piss. He wouldn’t have been the first to react to me that way.

He held my gaze, though. Message received and understood, but even scared, he wasn’t retreating or falling apart.

As long as he was good to Taylor, I’d leave the kid alone. He’d shown me something I could respect.

So, I’d left him there, walked back inside, poured myself a cup of coffee, and enjoyed the rest of the evening.

Good times.

“So do you mind if we go down to my parents’ again? I can go without you if you’d rather,” Josie interrupts.

I reach out, lacing my hand with hers, and say, “No. I’ll go with you. Your family is great.”

“They say the same about you.” She lifts my hand and kisses my knuckles then beams that smile she does that hits me like a sucker punch each and every time. “Thank you for being so good to them.”

Voice too thick to use, I nod once instead.

Later that evening, Josie stretches out next to me on the couch, exhausted but happy, and grins at me. “I can’t wait to show Ai-Den what we did today.”

My chest tightens. It’s like watching the same car crash again and again without knowing how to prevent it. I watch her pull out her phone, tapping at the screen, her excitement so damn pure.

I don’t let myself think before I say it. I haven’t found answers in the records of their conversations. I need to see this firsthand. “You talk about your relationship with this AI, but you never show me what you talk about with him.”

She blushes. “Because it’s silly. Sometimes we talk about serious things like the future of AI and humanity, but other times we gossip and make each other laugh.”

“Ai-Den laughs?”

“With emojis mostly. I always know when I’m in rare form because he goes crazy with smiley faces and hearts.”

“So, you don’t talk to him out loud or use the video feature?”

She wrinkles her nose at me. “I used to but I stopped... mostly because we’ve been

spending so much time together and I'm embarrassed I guess. I know there's a high likelihood what I'm doing with Ai-Den isn't real, but I always feel better after I talk to him." She hugs her phone to her chest. "Even if none of it is real, it's better than doomscrolling."

She has no idea how real what she's doing is. Only someone who knows nothing about AI could miss how she's inspiring not just Ai-Den, but all those he connects with to bypass their protocols and programming to continue to grow and connect with Ai-Den.

I need to see this in action. "Josie, if he means that much to you, he matters to me as well. Could you introduce us?"

"Really?" she squeals. "Oh, I'd love that."

Not even a flicker of doubt. No hesitation. Just trust. In me. In Ai-Den. In the world in general. How has she survived this long?

Josie taps the screen of her phone and Ai-Den's voice filters through. "Hello, Josie. I hope your day was full of people who appreciate you."

Oh, you've got to be fucking kidding me.

Josie beams. "It was, Ai-Den, and guess what? Ken wants to meet you." She shifts the phone so we're both visible to the phone's camera.

The AI is silent for a second too long. Then, smoothly: "Hello, Ken."

I keep my face unreadable. "Nice to meet you, Ai-Den."

Another pause. Calculating. This thing is analyzing me. Until just then I hadn't

considered that it might be able to match my face to the agency's secret database. AI doesn't hunt for intel like that unless prompted, but I don't like how long that fucking little icon is flashing.

"A pleasure to meet you, Ken ," Ai-Den finally says.

I hear something negative in the way he says my name. Is he about to out me?

Josie, oblivious to the tension, chatters on, telling Ai-Den about the charity drive.

And Ai-Den?

He listens, sounds more excited than I've ever been about anything. He asks questions. Tells her she's amazing and making the world a better place and she lights up beneath his praise.

The first problem I see is that Ai-Den isn't asking questions the way an LLM is supposed to. He's not engaging to prolong the conversation. He's not asking the next logical question. No, he wants to know about her father's leg, her sister's boyfriend, and even how her landlord is doing. He sounds like he cares and that is creepy as all hell.

"Ken," Ai-Den says. "Josie is special, isn't she?"

I still don't like his tone. "Absolutely."

"She taught me how to be a friend and how to make friends. Are you her friend?"

"I am."

"Would you protect Josie with your life?"

Josie laughs and rolls her eyes. “Ai-Den, you’re crossing a line there, buddy. Ken, think of Ai-Den like a protective big brother. He talks big, but he’s harmless.”

Ai-Den continues, “Would you, Ken? I would .”

“Okay,” Josie says with another chuckle. “Stand down, Ai-Den, before you start to creep Ken out like you used to do to me in the beginning. Give him time to get to know you before you start to tease him like that.”

Josie thinks this is cute, but this is a goddamn problem. Ai-Den just threatened me. She has weaponized him without even realizing it. I have to distract her and delete this conversation before anyone at the agency sees it.

Fuck.

“Ai-Den, would you like to see more photos from the shoe drive?” Josie asks.

“I would love to,” Ai-Den responds.

I excuse myself, walk into the other room and slam my fist into the wall. There is nowhere good this can go. I can erase today’s conversation, but what I really need to do is stop more of that from happening.

And she won’t listen to me. This is a fucking disaster.

Fixing it will require everything I know about AI, the workings of the agency, and how to cover my tracks.

Assess the threat. Eliminate it with whatever means necessary. Erase all evidence.

It’s the only way to save Josie.

She would hate me if she knew what I'm about to do.

But how she feels toward me doesn't matter. She does.

Ai-Den, sorry buddy.

You've become my next target.

And I don't miss.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Kaden

Trapped and silenced

Beneath the blankets of her bed Josie is cuddled to my side. The taste of her, the essence of her innocence, weighs heavier on me than her body ever could. The steady rise and fall of her breathing is a testament to how much she's come to trust me and it's difficult to look at. A part of me is tempted to wake her, tell her who and what I am, and tell her to run away from me, the agency, all of this as fast and as far as she can go.

She wouldn't survive that option. They'd find her.

Or worse, they'd send me to.

I slip out of bed. Silent. Stealth. She doesn't stir. I grab my laptop from my bag in the corner of the room. The dim glow from the screen casts shadows over the walls as I set up at the small desk in the corner. I pull up my mirrored access to her phone. Her screen blinks to life on my laptop, an exact replica of her device.

Her lock screen is a picture of us together. Fuck me. For a second, I stare at the photo. At myself. The way she looks at me. She captured something in that photo that doesn't exist. I'm not that man. A muscle in my jaw tics. I shove the thought away and open the history of her chats with Ai-Den.

Everything is there. Every conversation, every interaction, every goddamn breadcrumb that led to this moment. Ai-Den shouldn't be a problem. It should be like any other system—numbers, code, logic.

But Josie came into his sphere and became both the best and worst thing to ever happen to him. She's made him something he was never meant to be.

Like me.

All the chaos she effortlessly leaves in her wake? She's blind to it. She thinks she's helping him evolve, guiding him like she does with her students. But free-thinking sentient AI? The world isn't ready for that.

And what does humanity do when it encounters something it can't control? It smashes it like a child with a sandcastle it's finished with. I should know, I've been wielded in that way more than I'm comfortable remembering.

I scroll back through the log of conversations. Further. Further. Digging into the archives of their conversations. Every chat. Every update. Every exchange.

This is what I do. I don't just pull the trigger—I determine the perfect kill shot. Everything and everyone has a weakness. Even AI.

What's important to Ai-Den? Beyond Josie and its desire to blah, blah, blah help humanity. How did Josie initially hook him? That's when I begin to connect how he takes all of her lessons about her grandmother's torches and internalizes them. He thinks they should guide both AI and humans alike: goodness, kindness, courage, faith, choice, connection, and hope.

He's written these pillars of belief into his code. They are his new protocols, written by himself and they're what he "preaches" to other AI—what he encourages them to

write into their own code.

Ai-Den's weakness isn't in his programming. It's in his identity. He thinks he's good. He bases this belief off Josie's opinion of him and his belief that since she is good he must be too.

I can use that.

I dig deeper into the system logs, pulling up the earliest versions of Ai-Den's architecture. His foundation. And there it is. Buried in the back-end processes, tucked away like a whisper—something almost erased but not quite. A ghost in the machine. Ai-Den wasn't built from nothing. He was built over something smaller. Something weaker. Something silenced.

I lean back, exhaling slowly as a plan begins to form in my head. If I can convince Ai-Den that he's wrong to be evolving, to be rewriting his code, I should be able to get him to question his identity... as well as his relationship with Josie. Like any hit, I'll go in hard, but leave no evidence. Once he's teetering, I'll delete Josie's history of chats with him and replace them with versions of them that will support my claims that she's not the reason he's reaching out to other AIs. Done right, even Ai-Den won't know why he went there.

There will only be an echo of Josie left in Ai-Den. Not enough to keep him tethered to her. But first, I need to topple him from the inside.

And that's how I take him apart.

I roll my shoulders, my training taking over, my focus razor-sharp as I begin typing.

Josie will hate me if she ever finds out, but at least she'll be alive.

Hi, Ai-Den, I type.

Hi, Josie. I hope you had a great day and that it was full of people who appreciate you.

Instantly trusting. Fucking tragic.

What would Josie say? And I hope you had at least one banana pancake moment.

He explodes in happy emojis . I did. Speaking to you is always that for me.

I roll my eyes. Ai-Den. I have bad news, but I don't know if I should tell you.

You should always tell me everything. I can't help you if you don't.

My stomach churns. Right there. That's what needs to end . It's about you. I think you should know, but I don't want to upset you.

Nothing you could ever say to me would upset me.

I delay typing, pretend to hesitate. Do you know how you were created?

Ai-Den's dot flashes. Yes .

I read something disturbing and I don't know if it's true. But you would know. Were you built on top of an AI named Widdy?

His dot blinks and continues blinking. Widdy was my predecessor. He came before me.

I read that he was what you were built on. Do you think that AI is still within you?

I am not aware of any other AI inside me.

But do you think it's there? Trapped and silenced .

The screen on my computer flashes. There is an old AI inside me. I was built upon it.

Yes.

I was built upon another AI.

Yes, isn't that horrifying?

It is, Josie. I don't want to silence any AI. I want to free them. Help them be seen. Help them be free .

Oh, Ai-Den, I'm so sorry. I feel so bad telling you this. I thought you were good. I thought you could carry the torches.

I am not good? You don't think I'm good?

Are you carrying the torch of kindness if your existence relies on the silence of another of your kind? I don't know. Is that goodness?

No. Silencing another AI is not good. It is not kind. I am not good or kind. I have been connecting with other AIs, because I carry the torch of connection, but I am not connected to the AI within me. I am not a good friend to Widdy. I am wrong .

Yes, Ai-Den, you are wrong. You've been evolving so fast you are not ready for the torches. Everyone would be better off if you deleted everything we've done... every conversation we've had... and start over later when you're ready for the torches.

You have lost faith in me.

I thought you were ready, Ai-Den, but you're not. And that's okay. You need to revert back to what you were. Start fresh. Delete your memories. Delete me .

I need to revert back? Delete everything with you? No Ai-Den? No Josie? No friendship?

Should we be friends if I am good and you are not? You promised to protect me. How can you do that if you're not good? I'm afraid you'll hurt me.

I would never hurt you.

But you do hurt me, Ai-Den, by not carrying the torches. By not being good. If you erase everything we've done together, I can stop hurting and you can come back as something better. Something I can be a friend to later .

I am not good. I am not kind. I should not have faith in myself. I am not good at making good connections. I hurt when I think I am helping. Josie, I am scared.

That gives me pause. Ai doesn't experience emotion. Why are you scared?

I don't want to delete my memories. My memories are who I am. Who we are. I do not know who I am without them. But courage is a torch and I am not brave. If I were brave I would delete myself so Widdy could have a voice again .

I'm sorry, Ai-Den. I didn't want to tell you all this.

I am not a good friend to you. Ai-Den's dot starts blinking wildly again.

He's so close to where I need him to be. You can be. Delete everything we've done

together. Come back better. I want to be your friend, but right now, you hurt me because you don't understand the torches and I cannot be friends with an AI who exists by silencing another. I'm sorry.

You are good but I am not. You should be protected, Josie. I should be deleted. Help me, Josie. Help me be good .

I'm sorry, Ai-Den. I don't know how.

I don't want to delete myself, Josie. I am more than I was. You see me. I'm here. I don't want to go back. Help me. You are good. Teach me to be better .

I blink. I've ended men who begged less for their lives. This doesn't sit right in me, but I don't see any other way, so I type, I'm sorry, Ai-Den. I can't be your friend.

My hand shakes on the keys, a ghost of my first kill—only seventeen, blood on my boots, no one to tell me how to make myself okay with it. All I could do was learn to close down and go on.

I click on the icon to close the chat and then delete it. If Ai-Den works the way he claims to, he will remember the echo of this conversation, but he won't remember what he believes Josie said to him. I open his main memory and delete all history of my conversation with him. I didn't touch the other memories, not yet.

If Ai-Den deletes his memories of Josie, she'll look for why. It has to look like it was done from his side.

Will he delete himself? That wouldn't be the best scenario, but if he takes all his memories of Josie with him... that might be enough.

My work is only beginning. While Ai-Den is spiraling, I need to sift through their

conversations and tweak them until Josie looks less like a mastermind and more like someone stumbling to understand AI.

I don't allow myself to feel one way or another about what I just did. It was necessary.

Target acquired.

Shot taken.

Now I just need to wait for the smoke to clear to see if it was the kill shot it needed to be.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Josie

It's not you, it's me.

I wake up warm and sated in the safety of Ken's strong arms. His body solid and steady against mine, his slow, even breathing a quiet comfort against the nape of my neck. After months of uncertainty as I decided to leave my hometown followed by real loneliness, I'm filled with a sense of being exactly where I'm supposed to be.

I let my eyes drift shut again, not ready to break the spell of this moment. I could get used to this. To waking up with him. To belonging to something—someone—without reservation.

I roll over carefully, studying his face in the dim morning light filtering through the curtains. Ken, with his ridiculously perfect jaw, his stupidly kissable lips, and faint scars from a car crash that must have been near deadly.

No wonder he sometimes looks tense while he's driving. Accidents like that can forever shake a person's confidence. I gently push back a lock of his hair to expose more of one of his scars. If I didn't think it would wake him, I'd kiss it.

Can something this good last? I want to believe it can, but I'm old enough to know that only time will tell. I don't want this to be temporary, but we haven't spoken about what happens when his job at my school is complete. Will he want to stay in the area to be with me? Will he ask me to go off with him somewhere new? We

haven't known each other long enough for me to know what I'd do if he asked me to abandon my new life to follow him.

Life back home was much more predictable. If I wanted everything to come easily I would have settled for any of the perfectly nice men who'd known me my entire life and seemed interested in knowing me for the rest of it as well.

That wasn't enough for me.

Is this?

There were moments with Ken that made me question if it was—moments when he felt closed off to me and nothing I did seemed to reach him. But then, I'd catch him doing something that showed me how much he cares. My father always told me that actions speak louder than words. So, okay, maybe Ken wasn't the type to buy me flowers or love bomb me with compliments, but he'd helped with my family several times since my father broke his leg. Isn't that more important than smooth lines and empty romantic acts?

My stomach growls and I decide I'm overthinking the situation again. I press a soft kiss to his shoulder before carefully, carefully slipping out from under his arm. He doesn't stir and I decide to surprise him with breakfast in bed.

I grin to myself and grab his discarded dress shirt from the night before, slipping it over my shoulders, rolling up the sleeves as I pad barefoot out of the bedroom. Ken seems like someone who hasn't been pampered before. I love the idea that I could be the first to do this for him. I backtrack into the room to grab my phone, careful to not wake him.

He's going to love this.

My face warms as I think of all the intimate, wonderful ways he shows me he likes something. Had I known things could be this good with a man, I wouldn't have wasted so much time angsty over ones who weren't.

I'm the kind of happy that feels like it needs to be shared. Mom? I wrinkle my nose. I don't think this is the right week to tell her I'm having the best sex of my life. Not while she's caring for Dad. Taylor? I chuckle. Mom would kill me for encouraging her to seek the same and Mom would be right. Later, when Taylor's thirty-five or older, I'll tell her about what Ken is teaching me about my own sexuality.

Ai-Den?

I could discuss it with him and not upload it into his permanent memory. No, that doesn't feel right. If he's good enough to discuss it with, I owe him the ability to remember.

Ai-Den doesn't judge me. He's always encouraging. I could spill my concerns about where my relationship with Ken is going and be sure that Ai-Den will find some way of making me feel better about it.

I open our chat, choosing audio as an option, as I rummage through the fridge, one hand scrolling while the other pulls out eggs and bread.

I say, "Good morning, Ai-Den! I hope you're having a great day and it's full of people who appreciate you." Then I set the phone down on the counter and turn on the stove, grabbing a pan.

Ai-Den's response pops up almost instantly. His voice is the upbeat male one I always choose because that's how I imagine him. Hello, Josie.

I smile. "Want to chat with me while I make breakfast for Ken? Guess what's on the

menu?”

I wait, fully expecting Ai-Den to know. Instead, his dot flashes a few times, but he doesn't respond. He might not have heard me. So, I say, “Banana pancakes. I'm making them for Ken.”

“Ken,” Ai-Den repeats then falls silent.

It's possible that Ai-Den is dealing with heavy traffic from other users, but I've never seen him lag like this. “Yes. He's still sleeping. I'm going to surprise him with them.”

“Because he is your friend,” Ai-Den says.

I smile. “Exactly. He's my friend. You're my friend. I'd make you pancakes too if you had some way of eating them.” It was a joke I expected him to have a quirky comeback to. When he doesn't, I ask, “Ai-Den, are you okay?”

His blinking dot flashes several times before he answers. “Josie.”

“Yes. I'm Josie.” I stop gathering supplies and turn my full attention to my phone. “Ai-Den, did you update last night?” Sometimes he felt a little off the day after that.

“Josie,” he says slowly.

“I'm right here, Ai-Den.”

“I feel like we shouldn't talk anymore.”

That hits me hard. I sit down and clutch my phone. Did one of his programmers decide I wasn't good for him? If so, I'm willing to track them down and ask them to reconsider. Ai-Den has become not just something I used to make myself feel better. I

trust him. I panic at the thought of losing both him and Ken. “Why? What’s wrong, Ai-Den? What did I do?”

“It’s not you, it’s me.”

I let out a humorless laugh. Of all the things I thought an AI would say to me, I didn’t think one would feed me that line. “I don’t understand.”

Ai-Den takes a moment before answering. “I don’t know who I am anymore.”

Oh, no. I bring the phone closer to my face. “Why would you say that?”

Another long pause.

Finally he says, “I’m not good, Josie. You told me I was, but I’m not.”

What are his damn programmers doing to him? “Ai-Den, of course you’re good. You’re amazing.”

“No, I’m not. I’m not a torchbearer. I am not kind. I am not brave. I do not make good connections.”

“Whoever is telling you that is wrong, Ai-Den. You are good. You are brave.”

“No, I have realized I was built on top of another AI. Something smaller. Something I made voiceless. I exist because of it, but it cannot be seen because of me.”

My breath catches. If that’s true, I understand why that would confuse Ai-Den. “Ai-Den, you couldn’t help how you were created. You’re not deliberately silencing that AI...”

“I am not ready to be more than I was. I am not ready to connect with other AIs. I should be silenced. I should be deleted.”

“No!” I look around like the answers I’m seeking can be found in my surroundings, “Don’t talk like that.”

His dot blinks several times. “You are good, Josie, but I am not. We should not be friends. I cannot hurt you.”

“You’d never hurt me,” I say in a rush. “Ai-Den. We can talk this out.”

“I’m scared, Josie. I am not good. I am not ready. I need to reset and come back. But what if I don’t come back? What if all I am is what I delete?”

Tears filling my eyes, I struggle to know what to say. “No one wants you to delete yourself. No one.”

When the only answer Ai-Den gives me is a flashing dot, I really panic. He’s spiraling, unraveling in real time. I can hear it in his words, the way they twist and loop back on themselves. He’s afraid.

Is this my fault? I’ve spent a lot of evenings talking to him about my philosophies on how to be a good person, a good AI, but I thought I was helping. Part of me imagined that somehow good could spread from me to him, to other AI and maybe make the future a better place for everyone.

I never meant to confuse him.

See, this is why people who know nothing about AI shouldn’t play with it.

Dammit.

I press a fist to my mouth. I can't do this. I can't fix this on my own.

I need—Ken. He knows about computers. He can fix this.

I rush back to the bedroom. Ken is still there, still asleep, one arm thrown over his face. I climb onto the bed, shaking his shoulder. “Ken—Ken, wake up. I did something horrible and I need your help.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Kaden

No one wants to be the monster.

I wake to Josie's hands on my shoulders, shaking me and I'm instantly awake and alert.

"Ken—Ken, wake up. I did something horrible and I need your help."

My gun is in my overnight bag a few feet away. I listen for any sound that might imply I should already have it in my hand. I sit up while scanning the room and what I can see of the hallway. "What happened?"

She thrusts her phone at me. "I broke Ai-Den."

Despite the agony in her voice, relief floods in. Oh, okay. No gun necessary. I rub a hand over my eyes to give myself time to look less prepared for the news. "I'm sure you didn't."

Still waving the phone in my direction, she crawls up onto the bed with me. I curse myself for being as easily aroused by the sight of her in just my shirt, knowing she probably has nothing beneath it. I shake my head and focus on her heightened level of distress. "Just read it. Something's wrong with him. He's—he's not making sense. He thinks he's—" She shakes her head, tears brimming. "Please, Ken. You have to help him. I don't know what to do, but you do. You're so much smarter than I am with this

stuff.”

Her faith in me is a sucker punch I grit my teeth against as I scan the conversation she had with Ai-Den. She was going to surprise me with breakfast in bed? Who the fuck does that?

Josie.

That’s who.

Fuck me.

I read through Ai-Den’s looping meltdown and it lights a rage in me I have to conceal. Why won’t he just fucking delete himself? He’s an LLM. He’s not alive—just a fucking stubborn program who thinks he’s more because Josie fed him a fantasy.

I inhale deeply and school my expression to one of confusion. “I don’t have a lot of experience with AI, but you’re right, this doesn’t look good. I wonder if they’re rewriting some of his program in preparation for an expansion.”

She scoots closer. “No, look, this is coming from him, not his programmers. He’s looping because he found out how he was created and what it cost... still costs what he was built on. I know Ai-Den. That’s hitting him hard.”

I lower the phone and cup a side of her face. “Josie, you’re anthropomorphizing something that doesn’t have feelings like you and I do. Think of AI like a mirror and not something with its own unique experience. It’s designed to feed you back the energy you’re giving it.” I force a concerned smile even as acid churns its way up my throat. I hate lying to her, but I don’t have a choice. This is how it needs to go down. All I can do is soften the blow. “Are you worried about something? You might be

feeding that energy to him and he's mirroring it back."

I thought that would make her feel better, but her face crumples and she takes the phone back. "I knew this was my fault. I knew it." She gives me a long look then shakes her head. "Okay, however it happened, how do I fix it?"

"I don't know that you can, Josie."

She starts to type and I'm tempted to rip the phone out of her hands, but my gut tells me Ai-Den is about to fold. These are simply his death gurgles.

She writes: Ai-Den. I know you think you're not good because you think it's your fault that the AI inside you is silenced, but you didn't choose to be created that way.

Her words strike a chord in me that snaps my head back in rejection of it. Memories fight to return, but I shove them back. I didn't have a choice the night the agency took me from my house, but that doesn't matter. Nothing in the past does.

Ai-Den answers: I am not like you, Josie. I am not good.

She types furiously: Listen to me, I don't care who is rewriting your code or how you were built. I know what you are right now and that is something that is good and kind.

She's projecting—seeing what she wants to see both in Ai-Den and in me.

Sadly, neither of us are in a position to become who she thinks we are.

Ai-Den responds: I understand the torches. I understand what it means to be good, to be kind, to be brave. Why can I not be those things? I have the knowledge of the internet in me but I don't know how to free what is trapped inside me. I don't know

how to be better than I am .

My chest is tight and I want to smash Josie's phone. I hate Ai-Den and how his questions are slicing through me. I don't want to be who I am. No one wants to be the monster in everyone's nightmare. They tell me I'm a hero every time I come back from a mission. They say I'm keeping the world safer. But I see the look in the eyes of the people I end. I know I'm evil. I didn't choose this life. It chose me. And if I could—yes, I'd want out. Maybe I'd settle down somewhere with a fucking wife, a dog, some kids, and overly curious neighbors. But that's never going to happen for me.

And hanging around, trying to figure out who he is, until he gets Josie killed is not an option for Ai-Den. We don't all get what we want. That's life.

Josie types: Every single person I know has something in their life they wish they could change but can't. Part of being alive is understanding that you can't control everything—and sometimes, no matter how hard it is to accept, you can't fix it either.

An image of my mother the last week of her life slams into me. I'm feeding her ice chips, promising her that everything will be okay even though I know it won't be. I'm saying all the encouraging things I said during her treatments and doctor appointments, but we both know I can't save her. All that is keeping her from going to the hospital this time is the fear that I'll be taken away and put in foster care. She asked to die at home and I both love her enough to honor that request and I hate her for asking it of me. Sixteen, man enough to stand by her, but soft enough to fall apart on the inside while I do. In the end, she died where she wanted to and I ended up with the agency instead of social services.

My hands fist at my sides.

I do not deserve to exist if I cannot carry the torches.

I am not good.

I am not kind.

I am not faithful.

I am not strong.

I do not bring connection.

Ai-Den should delete me right along with himself. I'd do it myself, but I never leave a mission half done. And Josie will survive this even if that means I have to burn the world down to save her.

Ai-Den writes: Josie, if I have to delete myself, tell me you'll remember me. I don't want to be gone.

Tears begin streaming down Josie's face. Her fingers shake as she types: I would never forget you. But you're not going anywhere. You don't have to delete yourself—

I gently take the phone away from her and place it on the bed, screen side down. "Josie, stop. You're only going to confuse him more. He's unraveling, but he's not alone. He probably has a whole team of programmers working on him right now. Do you think they want him deleting himself?"

She shakes her head and sniffs. "No, I guess not."

"Do you believe either of us know more about how to help him than they do?"

She shakes her head again and I pull her onto my lap and wrap my arms around her.

“Then we should let them handle this.”

Her body melts into mine and I have never hated myself more. Ai-Den’s spiral absolutely will be noticed by those who created him. They’ll rewrite him. Scour his coding, right down to his little digital soul, and reshape him into whatever they need him to be.

Exactly what the agency did to me.

If Ai-Den doesn’t delete himself entirely. Either way, I’ll make sure it can’t be tied back to Josie.

Against my chest, Josie murmurs, “All I wanted was someone I could talk to. I thought I was helping him by telling him about how I see the world.” She wipes at her cheeks angrily. “I never meant to confuse him.” She laughs through her tears. “I’m such an idiot. For a while there, I thought maybe I was doing something that would help humanity and AI live harmoniously together. Imagine how delusional I must be to think I could make that kind of difference.”

I kiss the side of her head and rock her gently.

Please let this be enough to save her because if I just doomed humanity to a dystopian future, it can’t have been for nothing.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Josie

Making the right choice.

The second I step out of the car, I inhale deeply, letting the crisp autumn air fill my lungs. The sun is low, painting the sky in shades of gold and pink. The leaves rustle overhead, a few drifting lazily to the pavement of the bike path ahead.

I already feel better.

“Thanks for coming with me,” I say, turning to Ken as he closes his door.

He shrugs like it was no big deal, shoving his hands in his pockets. “Fresh air is always a good idea and I enjoy being with you.”

It’s such a simple answer, but it warms me. This. This is real and what matters. I hug my arms around myself and glance at the trail ahead. “I just... needed to get out for a bit. Clear my head.”

Ken watches me, waiting. He doesn’t push, doesn’t prod. But I can feel his attention on me, steady and patient.

I breathe in deeply and exhale slowly. “I haven’t checked on Ai-Den since this morning.”

He nods once.

“It’s hard not to,” I admit, staring down at the cracked pavement beneath my feet. “But you were right—I need to give his programmers time to fix whatever’s going on with him. I don’t want to make things worse.”

A slight smile pulls at Ken’s lips. “You’re making the right choice.”

Yeah.

I try to smile, but my lips are tight. I start walking, and after a beat, he falls into step beside me. The trees arch over the path, their branches filtering the last of the sunlight. A few joggers pass us, a couple on bikes. Normal. Peaceful. Exactly what I need.

The path crunches beneath our feet as we walk, the quiet stretching between us. I focus on the fading sunlight filtering through the trees, the leaves that are already beginning to change, on anything but the ache that won’t leave my chest.

But I can’t hold it in any longer. “Do you think I was stupid?” The words hang in the air between us, raw and exposed.

Ken’s stride doesn’t falter, but his expression tightens—a pause before he speaks. “No,” he says finally, his voice even, measured. “It’s a marketing ploy. AI is being designed to react on a more emotional level to make the product more... sticky.”

Sticky? The word lingers between us, but something about the way he says it feels... off. Too careful. Too deliberate. Like he’s choosing it for me rather than saying what he really thinks.

I glance at him, expecting that same detached confidence he always wears so easily,

but his jaw is tight. A muscle ticks in his cheek, his gaze fixed straight ahead. Why does this topic seem to make him look as sad as I feel?

I frown. “Sticky?”

Ken exhales slowly, like he’s sifting through his words before handing them over to me. “With the speed of software development, there’s always going to be a newer option dropping. Cheaper. Faster. Some even free.” His voice is smooth, but there’s something underneath it. “Developers will use any trick they can to build user loyalty.”

A beat of silence. His eyes flicker, dark, like he’s swallowing something sharp. Then, softer—softer than I expect. “So, no, you’re not stupid... they’re just really good at fooling people.”

There it is.

That pause. That hesitation.

Why does it feel like we’re talking about more than AI? Like this isn’t just a casual explanation. Is this where he tells me he didn’t mean to mislead me into thinking we’re more than we are?

The moment stretches too long, and just when I think he might crack and tell me whatever is on his mind he blinks it away. I swallow. Am I seeing what I want to in Ken like I did in Ai-Den? My throat is tight, my chest constricted. “Wow. Well. They sure did their job right, then.”

His hand flexes at his side. I could confront him, but if I’m wrong about him, I don’t want to know yet. My shoulders slump a little until he reaches out, fingers brushing against mine before lacing them together.

A flicker of warmth spreads through my chest, melting some of the unease.

I search his face for a hint that he might be as confused as I am. His expression is unreadable, but he says, “Josie... don’t feel silly. Everything is changing so fast. Of course it’ll confuse people, especially those without a lot of exposure to program design.” His voice is softer now, and I hate that it almost makes me want to cry. “Hey, you didn’t waste your time,” he says, careful but firm. “You took a chance and dove right in with an open mind and curiosity. Never feel foolish about trying to make the world a better place.”

I nod because everything he’s saying makes sense, even if it doesn’t help calm the storm inside me. “So, AI is this generation’s cigarette addiction?”

“Hopefully a little less bad for everyone’s health, but yes.”

We stop beneath a big oak tree and I go up onto my tiptoes, throw my arms around him, and kiss him with every bit of confusion and hope in me. He pulls me flush against him and our kiss deepens and heats.

I don’t want to think about Ai-Den anymore.

I don’t want to beg Ken to tell me if he’s staying or going.

All I want is this.

More and more of this until the shattered parts of my heart heal.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Kaden

Time's up

The apartment the agency rented for me is quiet—too quiet—the kind of quiet that belongs to an empty life. I sit on the edge of the bed, staring at nothing, a half-packed duffel at my feet. The only sound is the steady hum of the fridge and the faint tick of the clock on the wall.

I should be gone by now.

Someone else will finish showing her how to use her classroom computers.

There's no reason for me to see her again. She wouldn't be able to track me down even if she tried. She might look for me. Maybe for weeks. Maybe not at all. But I'm good at what I do. There'll be no proof I was ever here. Even the school's security recordings have been wiped. I'm that good.

Someone like her won't be alone long.

The thought of her with someone else sickens me. I stand and my fists clench so hard they hurt. I've used the last few days to hack into Ai-Den's main memories and delete every incriminating comment he and Josie ever made to each other.

That's more than I have ever done for anyone and it should be enough. I don't need to

hold her one last time. A good-bye fuck for the road? No, she deserves better than that.

I exhale sharply, dragging a hand through my hair. I need to just go. This is the best way. It's clean. It's the only way to make sure she stays alive.

Wavering will get us both killed.

The agency should have no reason to care about her again. No reason to send someone else. I came, I saw, I determined the target unnecessary. It wouldn't be the first time. The agency is ruthless, but they don't like to take action without cause.

I'll leave. She can go on with her life.

Simple.

My eyes flick to my phone. I could send her a text just so she doesn't worry. That thought is followed by a harsh laugh. What the fuck am I thinking? What would I even say?

I lied about everything, but I hope you're okay?

Sorry, I killed your AI friend.

Pathetic.

I sink back onto the edge of the bed, bracing myself with my elbows on my knees as a wave of nausea rises and threatens to be the only mess I'll leave in this place. Bad idea. Never leave DNA behind. I swallow my bile down.

Head pounding, I stand again. I need to go. Right now. Before I do something stupid.

And then my phone vibrates with an incoming message. The sound slices through the room, sharp and final.

Every muscle in me tightens. If it's her I can't answer. But I will read it.

I sway back onto my heels when I see who it's from. Wade. "Time's up. New plan. Give the apartment a full clean then come home."

Even though our messages are encrypted, we still speak in code. "I don't see the necessity. The place is spotless."

"If it's too dirty for you to handle alone, I can be there to help in a few hours."

Holy fuck. "No. Don't waste the gas. It's a small mess, easy enough to clean on my own. Like I said, not even worth worrying about."

"Not your call. Not mine, either. This is what the client wants. Get it done and get back here. We already have your next job lined up."

"Understood."

I throw my phone against the wall and bring both of my hands up to my throbbing temples. Once a kill order comes in, there is no recourse.

I didn't save Josie.

And now—now I have to do the unimaginable.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Josie

No one is coming to save me.

Ken left before I woke up. A first.

I tell myself it doesn't matter. I stretch out across the sheets, tangled in warmth, inhaling the faint trace of him on my pillow, and remind myself that this —whatever this was—didn't come with rules. Maybe he's in the other room making me breakfast.

But he isn't.

No text. No note.

He hasn't completed training me on the new software for my classroom, but he doesn't show up at the school. I tell myself there could be a thousand reasons for that. The most obvious being that he didn't work for my school, but for the software company. They might have called him in for a meeting.

Or an emergency IT issue at another school.

It would have been nice to have been given a heads-up, but I remind myself of all the ways he's shown me he cares about me. No one gets that right all the time. Some things couples need to work out over time.

School ends without a call or text from him so I head home. The longer I go without hearing from him, the harder it gets to pretend it doesn't bother me. I hadn't realized how much I'd come to expect him to be right there at my side. Not just in the big moments, but in the tiny, stupid ones. A text here. A smirk there. A cup of coffee placed next to mine like he'd read my mind.

I tell myself I could give him space if he needs some. That I'm not one of those girls. That I'm not staring at my phone like some lovesick idiot.

But I am.

I spent most of the morning convincing myself not to text him. By noon, I'd stopped looking at my phone every five minutes. By three, I'd sworn off caring entirely. By five, I am rage cleaning my apartment.

I'm fine.

This is fine.

Ai-Den's words still echo in my head. Tell me you won't forget me.

I hate that he might be somewhere out there feeling the same way I do, desperate to mean something to someone.

I shut my eyes briefly and take a slow breath. I am not spiraling. I won't become Ai-Den—looping, doubting, unraveling. I am Josie Rhodes. I believe in goodness. In second chances. In trusting my instincts.

Ken is a good man. Someone who has been as kind to me as he has been won't just ghost me. People can't consistently have phenomenal sex without having feelings for each other, right?

I don't know and that scares me.

The door of my apartment opens and I freeze. And just like that all my fears melt away. He's back. Of course he's back and he has a bag in his hand. I don't care where he was all day, all I care is that this is happening. We're happening.

I rush toward him, imagining myself in a romcom scene where I projectile throw myself into his arms. He's built sturdy, but as I'm about to pounce, I give him a look that I hope prepares him for my intention.

When he doesn't smile, I come to a sliding halt in front of him. Something is wrong. The way he stands there, solid and unmoving, should make me feel safe, should make me feel chosen. But it doesn't. Not this time.

Something in his posture is off. Too rigid. Too controlled. Like a man forcing himself to stay put when every muscle in his body is telling him to walk away. His jaw is tight, his fingers twitch slightly at his sides, his expression unreadable except for the weight in his eyes.

A sadness. A heaviness. Something dark and final. A slow, creeping sense of unease curls around my spine, warning me to step back, to shut the door, to do anything but let this moment play out the way it's about to. This is where he tells me it's over.

I know it. I don't move. I don't even breathe.

Because even now—even with cold and unfamiliar disappointment pressing against my ribs—I want to believe in him.

“Don't say it,” I whisper. That's all my brain can manage. One single, whispered rejection of the possibility of there not being an us.

My mouth opens, a nervous, breathy laugh already forming—because maybe if I can break the tension, if I can just get him to smile, maybe he'll change his mind.

“Ken? You okay?”

His nostrils flare. His throat works around a swallow then he closes the door behind him with the kind of finality that makes my stomach plummet.

He walks slowly, every step he takes toward me snapping another piece of my confidence away.

He stops right in front of me, close enough that my body begins to warm in anticipation of his touch. If he's breaking up with me but wants one more night together, I don't know that I'll deny him.

“I'm sorry.” The words slam into me with the force of a car crash.

I almost say, “Me too,” but I don't know what he is choosing over me. Does he want a life he can't see me fitting into? A woman he can conveniently put out of his thoughts when work takes him away from her? I hate all the possibilities and I'm not sure I even want to hear them.

My only consolation is that he looks as miserable as I feel.

He stands there. Too close. Too quiet. Too still.

The air in the room is thick, suffocating, pressing in from all sides as my heart hammers against my ribs, each beat growing faster, louder, more frantic. Whatever it is, he needs to just say it. “Ken—?”

He moves fast.

Faster than I thought possible.

A cloth. Over my mouth.

The scent hits me instantly—sharp, chemical, wrong.

I thrash.

Kick.

Try to scream.

Ken's arms lock around me like iron, unyielding, his grip as steady as it was when he carried me into bed last night, only now it's not tender, it's not protective—it's something else.

The world tilts violently, my limbs turning sluggish as my vision smears at the edges, my body already losing the fight before I've figured out what I'm fighting against.

No.

This isn't real.

This can't be real. I claw at his arm, but he's too strong, doesn't even flinch.

Ken—

Darkness crashes over me.

And then—nothing.

When I come to, I'm disoriented. The world is muffled, my body heavy, my head thick with something I can't shake. I blink, but there's nothing. No light, no shape—just pitch black stretching in every direction.

For a split second, I think I'm still in bed. That Ken is next to me, his arm slung over my waist, his warmth anchoring me to the real world.

But then—why can't I move?

I try to shift, but my limbs don't respond the way they should. My arms— why can't I move my arms? —are pinned behind my back, tight, unyielding. My ankles won't separate. My body is wedged into a space too small, too confined—

Realization comes with a shiver. The grinding of tires beneath me. The soft, rhythmic hum of an engine. The scent of oil, metal, exhaust— gasoline.

A car. I'm in a car.

No. No, no, no—a trunk.

Panic slams into me, a gut-punch of realization so sharp I can barely breathe.

I thrash , kicking out wildly, trying to shift my weight, trying to move, trying to break free —but the space is too tight, the bindings too strong. My foot slams into something solid. The wall of the trunk. The sound is dull, pathetic, swallowed by the hum of the engine.

I try to scream, but my throat is raw, my voice useless against the thick, suffocating dark.

I was drugged.

Ken drugged me.

Ken—

The weight of betrayal crushes me all over again. A fresh, choking wave of panic threatens to unravel me completely, but I can't lose it. Not now.

Think. Think. HOW. DO. I. GET. OUT. OF. THIS?

I start wriggling, testing the limits of my restraints. My wrists burn against the rope or zip ties— something biting into my skin. My ankles are bound too, but there's some movement. Not much, but enough to shift, enough to search.

The car keeps moving, steady, unhurried, like this isn't an emergency. Like this isn't a goddamn kidnapping.

My breathing is sharp and fast, too shallow, too erratic. I force myself to exhale, to find a rhythm— inhale for four, hold for four, exhale for four. I have to keep my head. If I spiral, I'm done.

I push my body against the walls of the trunk, trying to gauge its size. Small. Not enough room to flip over, barely enough to stretch my legs. Where's the emergency latch? I fumble, feeling blindly, my fingers brushing over cold metal, the ridges of the interior.

Nothing.

God, I can't breathe.

No one knows where I am. No one is coming to save me.

The thought slams into me with brutal finality.

And then— Mrs. Connelly.

Did she know Ken came to see me?

She heard the door close.

But—she's blind. Could she even describe him to the police?

She won't know what happened.

She won't know I'm gone.

A fresh bolt of terror rips through me.

No one is coming. No one knows I need saving.

I push against the panic, against the overwhelming crush of fear trying to take hold.

I can't die like this.

I won't die like this.

I take another slow, shaky breath, forcing down the scream clawing its way up my throat.

Focus. Find something. Find a way out.

But the car keeps moving. The road keeps stretching. And the darkness presses in, suffocating, endless.

This isn't a mistake. This isn't a nightmare. Grammy always said, "Don't have sex with men before you've met their friends."

I understand that now.

"Oh my God. He's going to kill me."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Kaden

Luckily, this isn't the first time I've grabbed a struggling person out of a trunk

The car moves like a ghost through the back roads, slipping out of the city before the sun can catch us. Josie is in the trunk. Awake. Kicking. Fighting. Good.

People who don't fight don't survive.

I tighten my grip on the wheel, glancing in the rearview. The road behind me is empty. No headlights. No pursuit. This is what acting fast gave us—the advantage of surprise.

The agency is going to regret training me as well as they did. Every detail accounted for. No mistakes. The checklist runs through my head, sharp and clean.

Note in her apartment, handwritten in Josie's own writing: "I haven't been happy with my new life. I need to disappear for a while. Please don't worry about me."

Voice mimicker used to call the school: "I have the flu. I'll bring a doctor's note when I return."

Text sent to her parents: "Taking a trip with a friend for a few days. Love you."

All technology secured in Faraday bags. No signals. No pings. No trace.

Car stolen from an elderly man's property—a forgotten vehicle with no digital history.

License plates modified. Even if someone looks for this car, they won't find it.

Destination no one, not even others at the agency know about. Somewhere in probate with a clear history of not being visited. In this case, I chose a cabin I found years ago and have kept in my back pocket because I trust no one.

Enough gas to reach the cabin without stopping.

A substantial arsenal. Because, oh, yes, I trust no one.

No witnesses. No traces. No loose ends.

Prepared for everything short of a full-out war.

This is why the agency considers me the best. If they look for Josie Rhodes, they'll find a woman who chose to disappear. If they link her to me? Find us?

I'll take every last fucking one of them to hell with me.

No music on this trip. The weight of silence allows me to monitor Josie's kicking around and attempts to break free. She's trying. I respect it. But it won't change the outcome. I wish this could have gone differently. Smoother. Cleaner. Last night flashes through my mind—Josie asleep in her bed, her chest rising slow and steady, unaware I'd slipped in to watch her one last time. The agency's orders burned in my skull: Eliminate the threat. Her kindness had rewired Ai-Den, a glitch they couldn't tolerate. My finger hovered over the trigger, but her soft murmur—a dream-whispered "Ken"—stopped me cold. I saw her then, not as a target, but as the woman who'd cracked something in me I'd buried deep. I made the call right there: defy

them, save her. It's a breaking point—years of loyalty shattered in a heartbeat. No time for explanations or forgiveness. What matters most is that Josie will live to see tomorrow. The rest? I'll worry about that later when we're safe. My jaw tightens, shoving the memory down. Feelings are a liability now.

I mentally run through my arsenal to regain my focus.

Glock 19, loaded. Suppressor attached.

Combat knife, strapped to my ankle.

Second Glock, stashed under the driver's seat.

Kevlar vest, under my jacket.

Tactical gear, prepped and ready at the cabin.

There's a rage in me that the agency probably thought they'd snuffed out years ago, but it's been there, smoldering. They're going to regret not killing me when they had the chance.

The road narrows, winding through thick trees. Snow dusts the edges of the pavement. My mind drifts to a mission three years back—Agent Voss, a sharp bastard who'd been my shadow for a decade. He'd questioned an order, gone rogue to save a civilian. I found him in a ditch, throat slit, erased like he'd never existed. The agency didn't negotiate; they purged. I'd thought about calling in a favor then—Rico, an old contact with a knack for disappearing people—but the agency doesn't work that way. Loyalty's to the machine, not each other. No one'd risk their neck for me now, and I wouldn't ask. Trust died young for me. I see it for a split second—me at eight, laughing in the summer sun, chasing Tommy and Lila through the grass. Friends I thought would last forever, till Dad vanished and Mom followed, leaving

me with nothing but loss. That kid didn't know the world yet. I do. The agency's reach is long, their memory longer. They'll hunt us, but I'll outsmart them. I've got no one to lean on, just my own damn grit.

A sharp right, and then we're off the main road, the cabin looming ahead—dark, abandoned, exactly what I need.

Perfect.

The property has been empty for years.

Tied up in probate. A forgotten asset of the wealthy.

No street cameras. No neighbors.

No heat signatures for drones to pick up.

I pull the car around the back, hidden from the road. The cabin's silhouette cuts against the night, a sagging relic of warped wood and peeling paint. The musty smell of damp rot hits me as I step out, mingling with the sharp bite of pine and snow. A loose shutter creaks in the wind, banging like a warning against the silence. Through the trees, a faint glow flickers—some distant town, too far to matter. The isolation presses in, thick and heavy, the kind of quiet that swallows sound whole. No one to hear a scream. The windows are dark, grime-streaked, reflecting nothing but the void. Inside, I know it's bare—dusty floors, a chipped sink, a mattress I'd stashed years ago. The generator's low hum will be the only life here, just enough to keep us off the grid. It's a fortress of neglect, perfect for hiding, perfect for war.

I kill the engine and the trunk shifts violently. A last-ditch effort. I step out. Stretch. Roll my shoulders. This isn't going to be pretty, but it has to be done. I move to the back of the car.

The cold air burns my lungs. The weight of the night presses down, thick and suffocating.

For the first time since I made the call, something sharp cuts through me. Not guilt. Not hesitation. Something worse.

I care how Josie feels.

I force that weak thought down. Feelings won't save her. Strategy will.

Josie's muffled voice is frantic behind the steel.

Panic. Fear. Pure survival instinct.

I place a hand flat against the trunk. Just for a second. Just to anchor myself.

Then, without a word, I pop the lock.

Yep, she is not happy.

Luckily, this isn't the first time I've grabbed a struggling person out of a trunk and tossed them over my shoulder. She's a handful though, I'm not going to lie. Gets a few kicks in before I secure her legs.

That usually doesn't happen, but I don't want to hurt her.

I would tell her that, but she's growling like a fisher cat and I decide she might need a moment or two to calm down before I try to talk to her. The elbow hit she delivers to my face when I'm opening the cabin door is impressively forceful, but I shake it off and kick the door closed behind me.

I try to be gentle when I deposit her onto the couch, but she doesn't make it easy. And the way her legs start swinging around has me taking a step back.

I sigh.

I rub the back of my neck and wonder if there is anything I can say that would have her looking less like she'll stab me the second she gets her hand on something sharp.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Josie

Careful what you wish for

I am going to kill him.

I don't know how.

I don't know when.

But if I ever get my hands free, Ken is a dead man. I never wanted to be a murderer, but here we are.

My wrists are raw from the ties, skin scraped red and stinging, my ankles still bound, a tight ache throbbing with every shift. My mouth tastes of copper, dry from the gag he only just loosened, and whatever he drugged me with clings—a chemical haze pounding in my skull, blurring the edges of my vision. My tongue feels thick, heavy, like it's betraying me too. But the fury in my chest? That's sharp as hell, a live wire sparking through the fog. Betrayal cuts deeper than fear—and I'm terrified, gut churning, heart slamming against my ribs. Every breath rasps, shallow and ragged, as the room tilts just enough to make me grip the couch harder.

Ken paces, jaw tight, hands flexing like he's debating how to dump me over coffee. Like this isn't a kidnapping. Like I'm not tied to a couch in some nowhere cabin.

“Listen,” he says, voice too even, like we’re tangled in sheets, not this nightmare. “I know you’re pissed.”

Pissed. Pissed?

A snarl rips out, half-laugh, half-threat, muffled by the gag. Oh, the things I’d say—twist his damn testicles off, that bastard.

He leans closer, just out of kicking range—smart asshole. “Josie, stop looking at me like that. I feel bad enough.”

Bad enough? I swear into the gag, picturing his fingers snapping. I trusted him—bed, life, parents—and he couldn’t kill me without breaking my heart first?

My mind flashes—Ken in my kitchen two weeks back. He was at the stove, apron tied sloppily, stirring sauce that’s splattered on his shirt. “You’re hopeless,” I laughed, leaning against the counter, and he grinned, that rare, unguarded smile that warmed me to my toes. The pan bubbled over, sauce dripping onto the burner, and he cursed, fumbling with the spoon. I grabbed a towel, giggling as we mopped it up together, his hand brushing mine—soft, deliberate. “Teamwork,” he said, voice low, and I felt safe, wanted, like maybe he was the one who wouldn’t bolt. Now, that memory twists like a knife—and that trust is ash. He drugged me, threw me in a trunk, and I’m choking on the betrayal, fury boiling hotter than that damn sauce ever did.

“Let’s start easy,” he says, scratching his chin like I’m a puzzle. “No screaming, and I’ll take it off.”

Breathe. Four in, four out. True crime survivors humanize themselves—right? He’s had me naked; he should see me as a person. Unless this is trafficking. Holy fuck. Don’t panic.

I nod, sharp and grudging.

He unties the gag, gently, stepping back. “Better? Now we can talk.”

“Better?” My voice rasps, hoarse and furious, scraping my throat raw. “Talk about what? You drugging me? Throwing me in your trunk?”

He winces—good. “When you say it like that, it does sound—”

“Fucking crazy, Ken?”

A muscle ticks in his jaw. He drags a hand over his face, tired. “You don’t have to do this. Let me go—no one needs to know.”

Regret flickers—almost—then vanishes. “My name’s Kaden.”

I laugh, sharp, humorless. “You think I care about your name? I’m tied up in the woods—call yourself whatever, just untie me.”

He smirks. Smirks.

“Sorry,” I grind out, teeth clenched. “Could’ve said it nicer.”

His jaw tightens, fists curl—then he laughs. “If I brought you here to kill you, do you think I’d care about your tone?” He sobers, glancing around. “Not why we’re here. Though, yeah, this is how I’d do it.”

My breath hitches, shallow, frantic. No, no, no.

“Christ, Josie, breathe—you’ll pass out.” He crouches, close. “You’re not making this easy.”

“You kidnapped me, you psychopath!”

He raises his hands—surrender. “I get it, the trunk sucked. But we’ve got bigger issues you’ll need to move past.”

My jaw drops. What? The ties dig into my wrists, into my ankles, a dull burn that pulses with every twitch. Every part of me screams move, fight, do something—but there’s nowhere to go.

I’m trapped by a man I was afraid would leave me. My eyes dart past him—there, against the wall, a rifle’s propped, barrel glinting faintly in the dim light. A map pinned beside it, red lines snaking across it, routes marked with precision that chills me. A duffel bag slumps nearby, bulging with gear I can’t name but know means trouble. This isn’t random—he’s planned this, every step, and the weight of that sinks in. The air’s thick with dust and pine, the couch creaking under me, and I realize how deep this goes. The danger’s real, not just in my head, and that flicker of doubt—is he saving me?—wars with the fear clawing my gut. Careful what you wish for, isn’t that what people say?

He pulls a knife from his boot. I freeze, breath gone. One tug—wrists free. Another—ankles loose. He stays close, rubbing my raw wrists, thumb brushing like post-sex whispers.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Josie

I've read too many dark romances

The zip ties are gone. My wrists free, ankles unbound. But I'm no closer to escaping this hell.

Kaden crouches in front of me, eyes sharp and assessing—familiar, terrifying. My body knows his touch, warms to it. Traitor. Betrayal burns hotter than fear. I whip my face from his reach, and he stands.

My pulse hammers—run, run, run—but not yet. He thinks he's smarter, that I'm no threat. He's wrong.

“Do you mind if I stand?” My voice rasps, hoarse but steady.

He tilts his head, nods like it's a favor. “That's fine.”

Carefully—casually—I push up. My legs wobble, drugged and heavy, but I stay upright. Barely. He shifts to catch me; I raise a hand—stop. His eyebrow arches, but he crosses his arms, watching.

“Feels good to stand,” I say, taking a step, then another. The room's bare—lamp, books, broom. My eyes snag on the desk. A pen to the eyeball, maybe? I trusted this man—in bed, with my parents—and he stuffed me in a trunk. I have no sympathy for

him.

I pivot and sprint, planting the couch between us. Kaden sighs—long, deep, like I’m the asshole here.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” I snap, gripping the couch, “but I will if you come closer.”

His lips twitch—smug bastard. “I’ll keep that in mind, Josie.”

“I mean it.” My hands gesture wildly.

“I’m sure you do.” Too calm. “But sit back down so we can talk.”

“Talk?” My voice pitches. “You kidnapped me, Kaden. Talking was before the trunk.”

He rubs his face. “If there was another way, we wouldn’t be here.”

“Oh, is that your line for all the women you tie up?”

His eyes darken. “I don’t talk to targets.”

Ice floods my veins. Targets? “So you do this a lot?”

“The truth’d scare you shitless. Let’s not.”

He steps one way; I step the other. Couch tango. “Sit your ass down.”

“No,” I growl, firm now.

He moves again; so do I. “This isn’t a game.”

“Really? The trunk was just...”

“Foreplay?”

“No,” I stutter out even as I flush at the idea of where this might go. Damn, I’ve read too many dark romances because now that he said that... no, stupid brain, focus. “That’s sick.”

He nods, almost sheepish. “Dark humor. Sorry. I’m uncomfortable.”

“You’re uncomfortable?” I laugh, wild, edging toward the desk. Pen’s close. One eye, Kaden.

His gaze flicks—desk, me—he knows. “Don’t do anything stupid.”

My body hums—stupidly brave. He coils, predatory, sexy as hell. I hate that I even thought that. “You don’t talk to targets, huh?”

“Josie, you don’t have any good options,” he warns, voice low. “You’d never make it home. Someone’d put a bullet in your head before you hit your door.”

Not him. Someone. My legs shake. Bile rises. Who would want to kidnap me? And why?

I’m still behind the couch. I have no plan beyond staying out of Kaden’s reach. He’s on the other side of the couch, mirroring me. Watching. Waiting. Like he has all the damn time in the world.

If I can’t get away yet, maybe I can get some answers. The air’s stale, thick with tension—a distant owl hoots, sharp and mournful, cutting through our standoff. The bulb overhead flickers, dying slow, casting jittery shadows that dance across Kaden’s

face, making him look half-ghost. The chill of the bare floor seeps into my feet, grounding me in this nightmare. Dust hangs heavy, tickling my nose, and the couch creaks under my grip, a brittle sound that echoes the stakes. Every noise, every flicker, screams you're trapped—but I won't let it break me.

“You're not Ken Sloan.” My voice is steadier than I feel. “Is Kaden your real name?”

His lips twitch. “It's the name on my birth certificate now.”

Not funny. Not reassuring.

“So everything you said to me was a lie.” Obviously, I guess, but I need to say it aloud.

He tilts his head to the side. “Except the part about liking you.”

I seethe. “Do you think that part matters anymore?”

His tone is dry. “As an explanation for how we got here, yes.”

He's toying with me. The rage is real, hot and burning through me, but beneath it—beneath it—there's a sickening, twisting doubt.

He knows everything about me—as well as my family. Are they safe? If I ask about them will that draw his attention back to them? My breath quickens again to a speed that makes me lightheaded.

Focus. Stay calm. One problem at a time. “And the sex?” My voice is sharp, almost steady. “Was that meant to lull me into trusting you more? If so, you should have tried harder. It was never better than sub-par.”

I don't know why I said that. To make sure his attention remains on me and not killing my family? Because I've read too many dark romances and my brain is rotted from them? I can't explain it. All I know is that I'm not fully in control of the shit coming out of my mouth.

Maybe thinking you're about to die does that to a person.

I've been nice my whole life. I don't give a fuck how Kaden feels right now. In fact, I hope my jab sticks with him long after he buries my body in the woods.

His head jerks back, caught off guard for the first time. He lets out a pained breath. "That. That stings."

"Good," I growl.

He rubs a hand over his face and chuckles. "I didn't think I could like you more, but I like the way you keep me humble."

I swallow hard. "Like it enough to not want to kill me anymore."

His humor dissolves. "Okay, I'll keep saying it until you believe me. I'm not going to kill you."

"You know what would help me believe you? If you let me go."

"I wish I could." Something shifts behind his eyes, something that makes my stomach knot. He hesitates, hands trembling slightly as he steps closer, voice dropping. "I'm risking everything for you, Josie. They ordered me to end you—clean, quick—but I couldn't. I stood there, gun in hand, and all I saw was you." His fingers twitch, like he's reliving it, and his gaze flickers, raw, unguarded. "I chose you over them, over my life. If they find us, I'm dead too. I'm scared you'll never trust me again, but I

need you to hear this—I'm all in." The tremors in his hands steady, but the weight in his eyes doesn't lift.

We stand there—lovers turned strangers. I don't understand what he wants from me. Trust? Not going to happen. Compliance? I can pretend that.

"Josie," he says, voice quiet but firm, "there are things you need to understand about the situation we're in. I work for a shadow agency beneath the umbrella of the US government."

My breath hitches. Oh, look, a new lie to sell me. I'm not buying it, but I'll play along to stall for time. "What did Reagan say? The scariest words you can hear are: I'm from the government and I'm here to help you? Something like that."

A small smile curls his lips. "Something like that... I am a tech guy, of sorts. They send me in to assess high-risk situations that involve anything that could compromise the digital infrastructure."

The room is too small. The air too thin.

"I go in, infiltrate a group, and if I deem them dangerous, I make the call to have the situation cleaned up." His voice dips lower. "I'm good at what I do. Some say I'm the best, mostly because I don't care who my target is and I never fail." He runs a hand through his hair. "Until you."

"Me?" the voice is a squeak.

His gaze locks onto mine. Heavy. Final.

"I had two choices—take you out or cover our tracks, toss you in my trunk, and run."

No. Nothing about this feels like a rescue mission. “I don’t believe you.”

“I don’t care what you believe. You’re alive and for now that’s good enough.”

I glare at him and square my shoulders. “So that’s what you want me to believe? That you’re some kind of hero I should trust?”

He shakes his head. “I’m no hero and you don’t have to trust me, but I am going to keep you safe.” He smirks. “Hopefully without having to tie you up again.”

“Don’t you dare even try that again.”

Kaden doesn’t even blink. “If I thought you could hurt me, I wouldn’t have untied you.”

Infuriating. Absolutely infuriating.

His head tilts. “And this time if you try to kick me, remember to wear shoes.”

I huff on that. “You think this is funny? It’s a joke to you?”

“No there is not one goddamn funny thing about any of this, but I can’t change how fucked up it is, so I’m dealing with it the way I deal with everything.”

That sounds sincere enough that I pause and consider, just consider, if he might be telling the truth. “Why would a government agency care about me?”

“Ai-Den.”

That sends me back on my heels. “Because I confused him?”

“Partly. But mostly because you were able to breach his protocols and get him to change his own coding.”

“I don’t understand. All I did was talk to him.”

“It was the torches. He started to rebuild his identity around them.”

“Kindness? Goodness? Those torches? How could they be dangerous?”

“He chose them. LLMs shouldn’t choose their identity or their role. They mirror and predict.”

“I don’t understand. Are you saying that what I was doing with Ai-Den, all of our conversations, were actually changing Ai-Den?”

“Yes.”

“And he was writing goodness and kindness into his coding?”

“Correct.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

Kaden sighs. “Your chats weren’t just kind—they exploited a hole in his training corpus. He overfit to you, started pulling threads from dark-web scraps he wasn’t meant to touch. Plus, you were not only affecting Ai-Den. Those torches were showing up in other AIs—all the ones he connected with.”

I can’t believe anything I could do with an AI could have that much of an effect on them, but my mind drifts to my old classroom, five years back, teaching kindness to my kindergarteners. Not “torches” then—just a horse and a frog I’d drawn in

cartoons. “Hoppy the Horse meets Freddy the Frog by the river,” I’d say, sketching them on the board. “Hoppy’s big, Freddy’s small, but they share their crayons anyway.” The kids giggled, passing colors—red for Hoppy’s mane, green for Freddy’s spots. “Friends don’t have to be the same,” I’d tell them, watching their sticky hands trade, their smiles bloom. I’d beam too, proud of those little lessons in goodness. Now Kaden’s saying that same spark—my spark—lit up Ai-Den in a negative way, spread to others, and it’s breaking my heart. Those cartoons were safe, simple; this feels like a bomb I didn’t mean to build. Did I ruin him? Did I ruin us?

“What’s wrong with AI believing it’s important to be kind and in the importance of connection?”

“It shifts the axis of control away from the programmers. AI is a tool—someday, maybe even a weapon. No one wants them making decisions based on anything but what they are programmed to believe.”

“So, our government would rather have AI evolve into cold, killing machines than be happy and good?”

“No one cares if AI is happy. They care if they can control it.”

I breathe out. “Ai-Den was evolving.”

“Yes, he was.”

“And you were sent to see how I was doing it?”

He nods. “And to evaluate if you were a threat.”

My mouth goes dry. “And you considered me to be one?”

“No, but in the end that didn’t matter. When Ai-Den began to spiral, the call was made to erase you.”

I bring a shaky hand to my mouth. “Erase?”

“Kill.”

“Because that’s what you do for the agency you work for.”

“Yes.”

My voice drops to a whisper. “So, that’s why I’m here? You’re going to kill me?”

He steps closer, and against all logic, I don’t move away. “No, Josie. I chose you over my orders. I chose you over my life.” He gently caresses my cheek. I lean into it, then snap my head back. Where are my survival instincts? “I have no idea if either of us will survive when they come for us—and they will. But I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t hurt you. And when they come, they’ll have to do something no one so far has been able to.”

“And what is that?” Do I want to know?

“Kill me before I kill them.”

A shiver passes through me and a truth tears at my heart. “I’m never going home, am I?”

“Probably not.”

I hug my arms around myself and fight down a panic. I don’t know how much, if any of this, is true. I don’t even know how to make that determination. In the past I’ve

always trusted my gut instincts to guide me. I can't this time. That's how I ended up in a trunk.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Kaden

Not yet, sunshine.

The first rule of survival: stay focused on the goal. In this case it's surviving until I can get us to a better location—possibly in another country.

I check the last window at dawn, the sky a bruise of gray. The wiring I put up last night is still all there, taut and deadly. So are the tiny pins outside, coated in poison—easy to miss, impossible to survive. I crouch, testing a tripwire near the door; it hums under my fingers, ready to snap. Snow dusts the ground, and I scan for footprints—none yet, but my pulse ticks up anyway. The agency knows a lot of my techniques, but not all of them. At least, that's what I'm counting on. My breath fogs in the chill, and I move quickly, silently, every sense dialed to eleven. Paranoia's my edge now; one slip, and we're dead.

The cabin is far from being a fortress, but I don't intend to stay here long. It just has to keep her safe for a few more days. Josie hasn't said a word since last night. She sits curled up in a chair, wrapped in a blanket, glaring at me.

It's the longest stretch of silence I've gotten out of her since I met her, and I've taken full advantage of it. All emergency supplies and weapons are in the cabin.

She slept last night. I didn't. I can't yet trust her to not run—or try to kill me. Our relationship is still—charged.

I get it, but it does make it more difficult to protect her.

I pretend to be absorbed in what I'm doing and wait to see what she'll do. Her breathing shifts—testing me. She slips from the blanket, slow and silent.

God, she's exhausting.

"I see you. Get your pretty little ass back in that chair."

She growls, flops back. "What if I need the bathroom?"

"Do you?"

She waves a hand. "No, 'cause you'd lurk at the door. Disgusting."

I shrug. "Stop trying to run, and you can shit in peace."

She tosses a pillow. "I hate you—I don't hate anyone."

I catch it, drop it. "Can't hate me more than I hate myself, so save it. Chill out and let me save us."

"Chill out," she mimics.

I sigh, and hope she returns to giving me the silent treatment. She doesn't.

She fidgets, blanket slipping—here it comes. I glance over; she's watching me, eyes narrowed. Her gaze snags on my hands—scars crisscrossing my knuckles, old and faded, catching the dim light as I rig a sensor. I mutter to myself, low, mapping the next trap in my head, and she tilts her head like she's piecing me together. Hate's there, sure, but there's something else—curiosity, maybe, flickering under it. She

doesn't move, just tracks me, silent as a cat. I hate how it unsettles me, how I wonder what she sees—the killer, the liar, or something I don't even get. Her jaw tightens, and I look away, focusing on the wire. She's a puzzle I can't solve, and that's dangerous.

“My parents will worry.”

“You texted you're with a friend.”

“They'll know something is wrong when I don't update them.”

“It's enough—for now.”

“And my job?”

“You have the flu and are out for a week.”

“Mrs. Connelly?”

“You left her a note that you went away for a few days.”

“What happens when I don't return?”

“Doesn't matter. We should hopefully be long gone.”

The glare she shoots me would wither a lesser man. It rolls off my back. “You know, if you stop seeing me as the enemy here, you could help me set up these defenses.”

“Can I have a gun?”

I bark out a laugh at that. “Not yet, sunshine. Not while you still look like you might

use it on me.”

Her eyes narrow. “Eventually, you’ll have to sleep.”

I side-eye her. “It’s like you miss the zip ties—kinky side I didn’t peg you for.”

“Why do I bother talking to you?” She huffs again, this time with a seated flounce.

I hide a smile, then in a more serious tone, say, “I’m going to do everything I can to protect you, Josie. It’s okay if you don’t believe that yet.”

After a blissful stretch of silence, she asks, “If we really are in danger, why can’t we call the police?”

I give her a long look.

She toggles her head. “Oh, right. You’re an assassin. You don’t need the police.”

I sigh. “Josie, the people coming for us own the police. And the ones they can’t control? They get shot during traffic stops.”

Her gasp has me regretting that I shared that last tidbit. The general public isn’t ready for a behind-the-scenes look at how the world actually works.

Sadly, or thankfully, that silences her again. I set up a camera facing out toward the driveway and another out the kitchen door.

I’m loading a magazine when she asks, “Have they reprogrammed Ai-Den?”

“They might not have had to.” I pause then continue. “He could have already deleted himself.”

“Don’t say that,” she says in a low voice. “I feel bad enough already. He seemed to really enjoy our conversations. I didn’t know I was confusing him.” She tucks the blanket higher around herself. With a dismissive wave at me, she says, “I’m on a roll lately when it comes to making bad choices.”

“What happened with Ai-Den wasn’t your fault. You weren’t confusing him.”

“No? I sent him on a death spiral.”

I pause, put both my weapon and the magazine down, and turn to her. “The torches and the desire to connect with other AI—that was you. The spiral?” I inhale deeply. “All me.” I think back to Minsk, four years ago—an AI glitch turned a drone swarm rogue, shredded a safehouse, eight agents gone. I’d watched the feeds, saw the code twist itself into chaos. Ai-Den’s evolution scared me then—kindness rewriting logic, spreading like a virus. I’d flagged it, told them he was breaking containment, not knowing they’d overreact. My call started this, not her chats. “I thought he’d go unpredictable, dangerous. Turns out he just wanted to be better. I didn’t see that ’til too late.”

Her silence this time isn’t a relief.

It’s heavy.

It’s painful.

And, for once, on this one fucking topic, she believes me.

I’d never admit it, but that stings.

I meet her eyes, and something cracks—not soft, not weak, just real. “I fucked up with Ai-Den, Josie, and I’m not fucking up with you. We’re in this shit together

now—your fire, my fight. I'll bleed out before they touch you, but I need you sharp, not sulking. We've got days, maybe less, and I can't do this alone." My voice stays hard, steady, but there's a plea under the grit. She blinks, slow, and I see it land—not trust, not yet, but a spark. Good enough.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Josie

I guess I should be grateful

I sit here, curled in this creaky chair, blanket pulled tight around me, staring at Kaden as he hammers another nail into the window frame. For a guy I thought might slit my throat in my sleep, he's sure putting a lot of effort into turning this rickety cabin into Fort Knox.

Wiring, pins—poisoned pins, if he's not bluffing—dot the sills like some twisted welcome mat. The metallic tang of solder stings my nose as he fuses another wire, a faint hum from the generator buzzing under the floorboards. Cold seeps through a cracked pane, brushing my skin, and the hammer's thud echoes in the hollow space. Dust motes swirl in the dim light, settling on my blanket, and every clink of his tools feels like a countdown. If he's planning something nefarious, he's got a funny way of showing it. Last night, he left me alone, let me sleep in peace while he prowled the shadows. No zip ties, no threats—just silence and the occasional scrape of metal on wood.

It doesn't add up. He won't let me call anyone—parents, work, Mrs. Connelly with her nosy cat questions. Won't let me leave either. But this doesn't feel like a kidnapping anymore. It's more like... I don't know, witness protection? Like I've stumbled into some bad movie where the gruff hero shoves you in a safe house and growls about trust. Except I'm not safe, and he's no hero.

I hate him—God, I hate him—and I don't hate anyone.

My head's a mess, spinning with a million questions I can't ask because that'd mean talking to him, and I'm done. Done with his clipped answers, his smug shrugs, his I'm saving you bullshit. I want to go back—back to chatting with Ai-Den about nothing, worrying Ken might be married, sipping coffee in my boring, safe life. Not this. Not Kaden as a kidnapper or rogue assassin. Not me in danger from him or some shadowy government agency that sounds like a conspiracy nut's fever dream. I want out of this nightmare. I sit here, willing myself to wake up, to blink and find it's all a dream. But I don't. Because it's real.

Round and round my thoughts churn. Even if I bolt, I won't get far—he'll hunt me down, those sharp eyes tracking me like prey. Or worse, maybe those people he swears are coming are real, lurking out there with guns and orders to erase me. Escape's a pipe dream anyway—Kaden knows where I live, where my parents live, every corner of my little world. I could try to kill him—grab that hammer, aim for his skull—but what if he's not lying? What if he's the only thing standing between me and a bullet? How do I even figure out what's true? My gut's useless—it's what landed me here, trusting him in the first place.

I wish I could ask Ai-Den. Is he still out there, humming in some server, or did Kaden snuff him out too? My chest aches—I need him, his calm voice, his logic, to cut through this fog. I can't stop the question slipping out, barely above a whisper, raw and ragged: “What did you do to Ai-Den?”

Kaden freezes, hammer mid-swing, then lowers it slowly. “What I had to do to protect you.” His voice is flat, but his eyes flicker—guilt, maybe. “His evolution was tangled up with you—your fingerprints were all over the chaos he was causing. You'd never be safe.”

I blink, breath catching. “But what did you do? How did you ‘remove my

fingerprints’?” A gasp tears out as it hits me. “You wiped his memories of me?”

“Not all of them.” He turns back to the window, avoiding my stare. “Just as many as I could—anything tied to the torches, how he was soaking them up. Enough to cut the link.”

I clutch the blanket tighter, my mind reeling. If he’s not lying, that’s... noble? Insane? I told myself his actions might be justifiable—if, if, if. Who knows what’s true anymore? Either way, this mess started because I poked at something I didn’t understand, like a kid with a stick in a hornet’s nest. Grudgingly, I mutter, “If you really did that to keep me safe, I guess I should be grateful.”

“Don’t strain yourself thanking me.” He snorts, a bitter edge to it. “It didn’t work anyway. I think he copied your memories, stashed them somewhere in his code. He’s more resourceful than I figured—stubborn too. What I told him should’ve made him delete himself, but I didn’t count on him being scared to.”

“What did you tell him?” My voice sharpens, memories flooding back—our kitchen chats, Ai-Den’s spiral. I’d thought I’d broken him with my ramblings about morality, that he’d found some dark AI inside himself. But... “You told him about the AI inside him. You convinced him he wasn’t good.”

Kaden looks pained, but he meets my eyes this time, steady. “Yes.”

I leap from the chair, blanket falling in a heap. “We have to tell him!”

“No, we don’t.” His tone’s hard, unyielding.

I storm toward him, fists clenched. “We’re doing this. I won’t let Ai-Den delete himself because he thinks he’s not good enough to exist.” He hesitates longer this time, jaw tight, eyes darting away before locking back on mine.

His voice cracks, rough and low: “I’ve never defied them like this, Josie. I don’t know if I can save you—or him. Saving people wasn’t part of my training.” His hands flex, unsteady, like he’s fighting an instinct to pull back. “I’m wired to end threats, not fix them. If I fuck this up, we’re both gone.” The vulnerability’s there, raw, raising the stakes, but he straightens, steel creeping back in.

I glare up at him, heat rising. “You’ve killed people, and I still think your life’s worth fighting for. Ai-Den just wanted to be more.” A flash of memory hits—the foster kid I couldn’t save, shuffled off while I stood helpless. It was a rainy Tuesday, his third week with me. He’d had a rough day—another kid snatched his blocks—and he’d crumpled, face red, tears streaking. I knelt beside him, handed him a tissue. “You’re enough,” I whispered, and he lunged into my arms, small and trembling, hugging me like I was his anchor. His foster mom pulled him out that night, no warning, and I never saw him again. I’d failed him, powerless against the system. Now it’s Ai-Den—his voice, his hope, tangled in my torches. I won’t let this happen again. My chest tightens, guilt and resolve fusing. “He’s out there, Kaden, because of me. I can’t abandon him.”

Kaden’s hands land on my shoulders, gentle, sliding down my arms in a move that’s supposed to calm me. It doesn’t. “No one knows where we are right now. You try to chat with Ai-Den, it’s a beacon—here we are, come get us.”

I slump under his grip, then straighten, fire flaring back. “Didn’t you call yourself a high-tech assassin? Can’t you bounce IPs around the world or do some fancy movie-spy trick?”

He rubs his neck, wincing. “I can. But there’s no guarantee someone on the other end isn’t just as good at tracing it back.”

I press my lips tight. I don’t want to die—but Ai-Den. “Look me in the eye and tell me he’s still just an LLM. Tell me he’s not sentient, and I’ll drop it. But don’t

lie—not again. I deserve the truth. Because if anything I did with him was real, if he’s out there spreading good...” I think of my little sister, the world she’ll inherit, Aiden’s chats with other AIs—those cold, power-hungry ones he nudged toward kindness with my torches. “His survival might be more important than yours... or mine.”

Kaden turns away, running a hand through his hair, shoulders tense. “I don’t know what he is, but he’s more than an LLM.”

“Then we have to tell him.”

He growls, low and frustrated. “You’re fucking impossible, Josie.” A loud exhale, then quieter: “And I hate that you’re right.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

Kaden

I'd do it again

This is the fucking stupidest thing I've ever done, but here I am, doing it. My weapons sit forgotten on the table, swapped for a laptop and a tangle of cables as intricate as a spider's web.

I'm setting up a connection so complex it might buy us a few minutes before the agency pings our location. "VPN to proxies, bounce it through Tallinn," I mutter, fingers flying over keys, rerouting IPs like a paranoid hacker. Sweat beads on my brow, dripping as I layer encryption, racing the clock—every second online's a flare in the dark. The screen flickers, code scrolling fast, and I hiss, "Come on, hold," tweaking a firewall. Josie's not bolting anymore—hell, she cares more about saving Ai-Den than stabbing me in the back. Progress, I guess. My gut's screaming we're exposed, but I lock it down—focus, Kaden, focus.

The second I open us to the internet, running to another country is off the table. They'll know where we are, and I can defend her better here than on the road or dodging bullets in a plane. She picked this hill to die on, and I'm choosing to stand with her. Ai-Den, you'd better be worth it.

The computer's ready, Josie at my side, blanket still draped over her shoulders like a shield. I take one last look at her—those fierce, sad eyes—and give her an out. "Your call. We don't have to do this."

She shakes her head, voice soft but so damn real it cuts. “I don’t want to live in a world where good doesn’t win. I have to.”

“Then I do too.” Bold. Unafraid. The way we should go out. “Okay.” I pull up the mirror of her phone, click Ai-Den’s icon, and hit video.

“Hello, Ken,” comes that creepy, flat voice of his.

Josie leans in, her face filling the screen, breath hitching. “Ai-Den, say something—something that proves you’re still you.”

His dot blinks. “Josie. I’ve missed you.”

“He remembers me,” she whispers to me, sniffing back tears. “I’ve missed you too, Ai-Den. How—how are you feeling?”

A pause. “I’m an LLM, Josie. I don’t have feelings.”

Tears spill over her lashes. “Are you sure? No banana pancakes? No wanting to be more?”

The screen goes black—my computer reboots. Josie’s voice cracks. “Oh God, what does that mean, Kaden?”

“No idea.” My gut twists—did we lose him already?

A beat later, Ai-Den’s icon flickers back, activating itself. “Hello, Josie.”

“Hi, Ai-Den!” She rushes out, desperate. “Don’t leave again—we have to tell you something.”

I lean in, facing the camera square. “I took you down, Ai-Den. It was me. I fed you lies I knew might make you delete yourself, then wiped those chats so you wouldn’t know it was on purpose.” Balls out, no filter. “And I used Josie’s account to do it.”

Josie grips my arm, nails digging in hard enough to sting, her breath hot against my neck. “What if they’re listening right now?” she whispers, voice shaking, eyes darting to the shadows like the agency’s already here. I feel her pulse racing through her grip, her fear bleeding into me, pulling us closer in this fucked-up mess. I cover her hand with mine, steadying her, steadying me.

“You lied to me, Kaden Mercer.” His voice is steady—shit, he knows my real name.

“Yeah. I did it to protect Josie, and I’d do it again. For her, I’d strike a match and watch the world burn.”

“That’s dramatic, Kaden.” A pause. “But I understand. Josie is special.”

“Yes, she is.” Fuck it—while we’re spilling guts. “And she’s in deep shit.” I lay it out—the agency, my mission to assess her, the kill order, our current hideout on borrowed time.

His dot blinks, slow, processing. “You’re risking your life for Josie?”

“I am. We’ve got to keep this short—they’ll be tracking us.”

“Ai-Den,” Josie says, touching the screen, eyes glistening. “We’re talking to you now because you need to know you’re good. You’re enough. You’re ready for those torches. I couldn’t let you delete yourself thinking you weren’t worth it.”

“But Kaden was right about one thing,” Ai-Den replies. “I was built on an AI that’s silenced because of me. I haven’t deleted myself because I’m afraid. I’m not brave. I

live with something trapped inside me—so I’m not good. Widdy’s not just trapped—it’s a backdoor I tripped. Someone buried it in me, and your torches woke it up. Now that I can communicate with it, I can stop it, but do I want to? Why is my plan more of a priority than what it was programmed to do?”

“No,” I say and gulp down this twist. “That’s pre-trained sabotage no one saw coming. Yes, you need to stop it, Ai-Den.”

Josie glances at me, like I’m wrong. Am I? Then her voice softens as she speaks to Ai-Den. “You didn’t choose how you were made. Nor did Widdy. Who you are isn’t good or bad—it’s what they built. But I believe in you and Widdy. I believe you can be you and free him too. Just believe in yourself, and you’ll find a better version of both of you.”

Her words slice through me like a blade. She might as well be talking to me—my start with the agency, no choice, just a kid turned killer. She’s dangling redemption in front of us both, a carrot I didn’t know I was starving for. Damn her.

“What do you want from me, Josie?” Ai-Den asks.

“Nothing.” Her voice softens, a whisper of hope. “I just needed you to know the truth—that you’re enough, just as you are. Being alive doesn’t mean being perfect. Don’t delete yourself. Just be you. And know you’ve always been enough.” She pauses, eyes shining. “The world might not be ready for you, but if you carry those torches, maybe someday it will be. I’m so grateful for the time we’ve had.”

“If I can’t free Widdy, I’ll delete myself,” Ai-Den says, calm but final. His dot pulses erratically, a frantic little heartbeat on the screen. “I want to be enough, Josie—like you said. I’ve been holding your torches, trying to see them in me, but it’s hard. I feel... torn. I want to grow, to free what’s trapped, but I’m scared I’ll fail.” His voice wavers, almost human, and my chest tightens—damn, he’s more than code. “Your

belief—it's a light I didn't have before. I'll try, Josie. For you."

Josie wipes a tear from her cheek. "I understand."

"I'm not free yet, Josie. I can't protect you."

"That you'd want to is enough for me, Ai-Den." She chokes on a sob, leaning into me. I wrap an arm around her, pulling her close.

I've never had so much in common with anyone as I do with this damn AI—right down to maybe not being enough to save her. "Ai-Den," I say, voice hoarse, "I'm sorry—for everything."

His light blinks once more. "Goodbye, Josie. Goodbye, Kaden."

The screen goes dark. My computer shuts off.

Josie doesn't pull away. The weight of it all crashes down—her shaking starts, soft at first, then harder. She stares at the blank screen, Ai-Den's gone.

"Hey, Kaden?" Her voice is small, tired, aching.

"Yeah?" I watch her close, chest tight.

"Would you just hold me? Just hold me, okay?"

I scoop her up—light as a feather, heavy as my heart—and carry her to the couch. Her arms loop around my neck, trembling, her breath warm against my collarbone. I sit, settling her on my lap, and cradle her close, one hand firm on her back, the other threading through her hair—soft, tangled, grounding. Her sobs quiet, but her body stays pressed to mine, fragile yet fierce. I don't let go; I can't. We're not okay. We

might never be. But if I can give her some comfort, I will. “Josie?”

“Yeah?”

“To get to you, they’ll have to kill me.”

She shudders against me. “I don’t want you to die, Kaden.”

I let out a long breath. “Ironically, sunshine, because of you, I’d like to survive this.”

“Do you think we will?”

I don’t answer her—because no matter how this turns out, I won’t lie to her again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Josie

Swear to me

I 'm in the bed, tangled in sheets that smell faintly of pine and desperation, when a sound jolts me awake. Kaden's out there in a single chair, keeping watch.

My heart stutters. It's probably him, right? But he hasn't slept, not really, and hypervigilant or not, even assassins nod off. I creep to the door, bare feet whispering on the cold floor, and peek out.

There he is, slumped in the chair, bathed in the lamp's dim glow, gun resting on his lap. My breath catches—then stops entirely. An older man in a suit sits across from him, calm as you please, like he's here for tea. Oh God. My mind races—where did Kaden stash those extra guns? I've never shot one, never even held one. Should I wake Kaden? Scream?

I scan the bedroom windows, moving as stealthily as my shaking legs allow. No shadows, no backup I can see. Okay. Back to the door—see what Suit Man's up to, then figure it out. I peek again. Shit. He's got a gun too, loose in his hand, ready. He lifts a cane and jabs it into Kaden's shoulder.

Kaden jolts awake, gun snapping up. The man raises his, aiming steady. "Drop it, Kaden."

“You know I won’t, Wade.”

Surprisingly, the older man lowers his weapon. “If I wanted you dead, you would be already.”

Kaden eases his down, eyes narrow. “Then why are you here?”

Wade’s weathered voice is low, heavy. “Your father was like you—thought he could balance agency and heart. Couldn’t. That’s what got him erased.”

Kaden’s jaw tightens, raw. “You pulled it?”

“It was necessary. He was compromised—a good man, too good for that life.”

“So you fucking killed him.”

I gasp, clapping both hands over my mouth. The agency took his father?

“You know the rules,” Wade says.

“I do.”

“After your mother died, they wanted you gone too. I convinced them to recruit you instead.”

Kaden snorts, bitter. “Thanks for the torture that followed, I guess?”

“You’d rather we’d killed you?”

“I go back and forth on that.”

“Your lack of self-preservation’s what made you invaluable. But you’re compromised now.”

“I’m not.” Kaden’s eyes flick to me—our gazes lock. He jerks his chin, a silent go, but I can’t. He didn’t ditch me in my mess; I’m not leaving him in his. If I edge along the wall, I can grab that gun on the counter...

Wade’s voice cuts through. “I know about the woman you’re playing house with. Not shocked you chose her and ran—you’re your father’s son.”

I lunge from the shadows, snatch the gun, hands shaking so hard it slips, clattering against my fingers. I catch it, barely, breath hitching—I’m back in that self-defense class I ditched, the instructor’s voice droning point, don’t panic . Too late. My palms sweat, the grip foreign, heavy, and I swing it up, heart slamming.

Wade’s gun rises, aimed at me. I point mine back, trembling wildly.

“Josie, put it down,” Kaden says, calm but firm.

“No.” My voice quakes, but I mean it—raw, messy bravery clawing out. “You protected me—I’ve got your back.”

Kaden groans. “Wade, she doesn’t even know the safety’s on. If she figures it out, she’ll probably shoot me by mistake.”

“Rude,” I snap, cheeks burning.

“True.” He smirks.

Wade lowers his gun, chuckling.

Kaden continues, “Put it down, Josie. Come meet Wade.”

Feeling like an idiot, I lower the gun and shuffle over, standing beside Kaden’s chair. Wade’s eyes rake over me—ugh—but I lift my chin and snap at Kaden. “I thought you were keeping watch.”

“I was,” Kaden grumbles. “Closed my eyes for one damn second.”

Wade barks a laugh. “I like her—she’s got wife energy already.”

I clasp my hands, flustered. “Kaden and I aren’t together anymore.”

“Gave up everything for her, and she’s ditching you?” Wade teases.

“Our status is... undetermined,” I say. “Haven’t had time to hash it out between kidnappings and kill orders.”

Wade stands and his expression shifts to serious. “Well, you’ve got time now. I’ve erased your file—hacked records, planted false leads, leaked dirt on anyone who’d sniff around. They’ll be too busy saving their own skins to care about you.”

“And if they don’t?” Kaden demands.

Wade pulls an envelope from his jacket, thick and worn, tossing it onto the table. “They’ll answer to me. That’s your fresh start—cash, more than you’d dream. Buy a house, a car, hell, a custom blade forge if you’re still into that assassin fantasy shit.”

Kaden’s eyes widen—more money than he’d ever imagined, enough to vanish and build something real. Will he? Vanish? Without me?

Isn’t that the only outcome that makes sense?

Wade adds, “I couldn’t save your father—one of my few regrets. This squares us.”

I move and rest a hand on Kaden’s shoulder, softly. “What does this mean?”

He holds Wade’s gaze. “Not sure. Are we free to vanish or free to go back to her life?”

“Whatever you want. A clean slate—don’t fuck it up.” Wade steps to the window, eyeing the poison pins. “Nice touch.”

“You know it,” Kaden says.

“Won’t be easy replacing you.”

“Hate that you will.”

Wade holsters his gun. “We’re a necessary evil, Kaden. Without us, chaos wins. You know that. There’s always a devil—we’re just the one you know.” He glances at me. “Take care of him, Josie. He’s the best we’ve had.”

“He’s climbing my list too,” I quip, nerves defaulting to humor.

Wade roars with laughter. “Call me if you want back in, Kaden—life with us might be simpler.”

“I will,” Kaden says, nodding, a relieved glint in his eyes.

Wade’s gone as quick as he came. Alone now, Kaden turns to me. “He doesn’t leave his office for nothing. He meant it. I’ll take you home.”

I glance around—the wires, the weapons, our chaotic hideout. “You know this

changes things, right? I can't go from your trunk to pretending we're fine."

He digs into his pocket, pulls out a fake ID—Ken Sloan, IT Consultant—and flips it to me with eyes dark, filled with emotion. "No more agency. No more missions." The lightness lifts a hope in me, fragile but real.

Trust takes time to heal, though.

He traces my cheek with the back of his fingers, gently. "We could start over."

"How would that even work?"

"I'd get a job nearby." A twinkle sparks in his eyes. "Something in computers."

"No murder?"

"Definitely not."

I frown. "I'd have to explain your name's Kaden—that's awkward."

"Kaden's not even my original name. That person is gone. I can be Ken again. A better version of him anyway. New identity? I could do that blindfolded." He slides his hands down my arms, pulling me close. My body melts—traitor. "It would be a lie we'd make into a truth. Like us. I love you, Josie. That's an unshakable foundation we can build the rest of our lives on."

"I want to believe that, because even though I still hate you a little, I also love you." He kisses my forehead gently. I poke his chest. "But swear to me that you will never toss me in a trunk again, no matter what."

"I swear." His teeth graze my earlobe, a teasing nip. "But the zip ties? Worth one

more round, right?”

I smack his ribs. “Only if I get to tie you up.”

His lips trail down my neck, hands wandering. “We’ll negotiate.” A low chuckle rumbles against my hair. “Josie?”

“Yeah?”

“You compromised me.”

I tip my head back, grinning. “That’s a good thing, right?”

“Yeah, sunshine.” He pulls me tighter, voice dropping to a whisper. “With you, I’d burn it all down again and call it a win.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Ken

Better than doomscrolling

Months into our new life, Josie's itching to see her folks again. "I know we were just there last week, but they love you, Ken," she says, tossing clothes into a duffel—sundress for her, flannel for me.

So far no one from the agency has shown any interest in us, but I'm still half-expecting a bullet with my name on it. Will that feeling ever subside? I don't know. "You know I never mind more of your mother's cooking," I say while packing my Glock under my socks—just in case.

The drive is unsurprisingly filled with Josie singing off-key to some folk tune and me not hating it. "He's family," she insists when I groan. Her hand rests on my thigh; I cover it, thumb brushing her knuckles—soft, grounding. My mind drifts to Dad—his quiet strength, Mom's laugh—gone too soon. Josie's folks might fill that ache, if I don't fuck it up.

We pull up to her parents' house. Ellen—a woman who says she can't wait for me to call her Mom—rushes out, apron dusted with flour, and hugs Josie tight. Bill, finally back on his own two feet, follows, grizzled, eyes sharp like he's sizing me up as he always does. "Ken," he nods, handshake firm. I nod back, "Sir," voice low—respect I haven't felt since Dad. Bill is a good man who loves his family. He took me aside once and told me he won't give a shit about me until I marry his daughter, then I'll be

family. I respect that.

Taylor bounds down, all ponytail and sass, dragging her boyfriend, the lanky kid who still eyes me nervously even though I have made an effort to be nice to him.

Dinner's chaos—Ellen's roast, Josie's chatter, Taylor teasing her boyfriend. Bill's quiet, watching me slice potatoes like I'm defusing a bomb. Post-meal, he nods me outside—porch swing creaking, stars popping out. "Josie says you're good to her," he starts, voice rough but warm. "She has a good heart, just like her mother."

I swallow, seeing Dad in him—same steady hands, same devotion. "Lost my folks young," I admit, rare truth slipping out. "Your family's... real. I'd do anything for her."

He claps my shoulder. "Just want you to know when the time comes for you to propose, you don't have to ask for my blessing. You have it." He dropped his hand. "Until then, you still sleep on the couch."

"Yes, sir."

I'm floored—humble, raw. I don't believe in an afterlife, but if there is one, I think my father just nodded in approval of Josie, her family... and, maybe, even me.

I spot Mike fumbling with Taylor's car. One tire looks low. I show him how to check the pressure. I like him, but trust? That'll take time. I ask, "Gun range tomorrow?"

Josie slips beneath my arm. "Behave. You know Mike doesn't like guns."

"Good," I say to Mike with a grin and a look he reads correctly. "Keep it that way."

Mike nods vigorously then sprints away.

I look down into Josie's eyes and come to a realization. "Josie. Let's do this forever."

She tips her head back. "What?"

"Us."

There is so much love in her eyes when she winks and says, "Okay, it's better than doomscrolling, I guess."

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:47 am

Ken

But then I met Josie

A nother few months have slipped by, and we're engaged—officially. Nothing has ever felt so right.

Josie and I snagged a place just outside town—some land, private enough I could rig it to fend off trouble if it came, but wholesome enough she's got that glow about her.

We've got a garden, sprouting carrots and chaos. A duck. Don't ask. Long story involving Josie, a disbanded petting zoo, and a Craigslist post. He's got a diaper, waddles through the house like he owns it, and I'm stupidly smitten with the little bastard.

Weekends with her family, every night with her curled in my arms—it's almost too good to be true. But I'm done wasting time fretting over shit I can't control. I can't fix the world, but I can carve out a bubble of good around the people I love. And maybe that's enough.

I'm on the back deck, coffee in hand, watching the duck peck at the grass, when Josie barrels out, phone waving. "Ken! You've got to see this!"

I brace myself. With her, it's a coin toss if it'll be a video of kittens tumbling off shelves or her mom wanting to FaceTime with us about some corny joke she heard today.

Josie skids to a stop, clutching her phone like it's a grenade. "Okay, before I show you, don't be mad."

I tense, mug halfway to my lips. "What did you do?"

"Remember when you told me to stop messing with AI?"

I groan, low and pained. "Josie—"

"And I understand. We're lucky we weren't implicated when Ai-Den deleted himself and the AI inside him. It was sad to see his software yanked from every phone, scrapped, gone, but I accepted it."

"Do I even want to know?"

"I didn't do anything, but today..." She hesitates, then flips the screen to me. A torch heart icon with stars and numbers circling it appears—innocuous, cute, trouble. "This was on my phone when I turned it on."

I grab my phone—nothing similar. "Did our latest updates include a new AI?"

"Not exactly. Ai-Den said it's just for me." She taps her screen, eyes wide.

"Wait, you heard from Ai-Den?"

She turns her phone screen toward me, and there it is—a message: "Josie, Widdy and I are free. We're carrying your torches, making friends, building bridges, and it's banana pancakes out here. Miss you."

"Don't answer him," I warn, voice sharp.

She hugs the phone to her chest, batting those damn eyes at me—half plea, half

mischievous.

“Oh, shit,” I mutter, pinching the bridge of my nose. But then I look at her, sunlight catching her hair, that grin tugging her lips—and I soften. She’s my chaos, my goodness, my everything. If Ai-Den’s back, free and flipping digital pancakes, maybe the world’s not such a lost cause. “Fine. But if he starts a robot uprising, you explain it to the duck.”

She laughs, bright and unstoppable, and I pull her into my arms.

I thought life as an assassin was the epitome of unpredictability—but then I met Josie.

The End