

K.K. Wing

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K.K. Wing

The Emily Project

K.K. Wing

CHAPTER ONE

“-Click-”

Today is the same as yesterday, and yesterday will be the same as tomorrow.

- Click -

The computer screen illuminated and flickered with a soft blue hue. Words changed and pictures appeared. Various graphics cluttered the screen, ranging from pictures of cats in compromising positions, to headlines detailing three people who died in a car accident on the local highway. It happened at 3:48 p.m. There was some information about the weather. It will be 79 degrees tomorrow. Despite the silence, the room sparked signs of life. Unseen crickets chirped as a light flickered against a ghastly face colored by a blue glare coming from the electric box. Ice melted inside a clear glass cup; the condensation of droplets ran down the side.

- Click -

The screen flickered and moved. A new display of different words and pictures. *Feds stoke Fears of Inflation, Congress Passes Law Against Guns, Naomi and Chris Calls it Quits!, Man Marries Robot; a New Trend? How to Properly Give and Receive a Kiss, New Fish Discovered in India, Ten Tips to Get the Girl of Your Dreams!, Mudslide in Mexico Reveals New Ruins, Fan Causes Disaster at the Tour De France, Heat Wave Renews Fear of Climate Change, Pizza Place That Will Blow Your Mind, and Drug Cartels Believe to Have Kidnapped Fifty*. The hand and finger coordinated together to move a small pointer toward the topic “*Ten Tips to Get the Girl of Your Dreams!*”.

- Click -

A large picture of a pretty girl with a big toothy smile from ear to ear displayed on the screen. She had dark brown hair, green eyes, and wore a purple sweater and sat on a white sofa, with her legs crossed. She looked straight at the person on the other side of the computer screen. A perfect shot. The finger manipulated the computer device and rolled a button to lower the page away from the girl. There the large text displayed what was advertised only a few seconds ago. “*Ten Tips to Get the Girl of Your Dreams!*”, written by Susan Coleans, and updated this morning at 9:03 A.M.

A deep breath exhaled from the lips of the person looking at the bright white screen. The cold pizza tasted fine. Caleb’s eyes strained from the glowing lights coming from the metallic box. Although he tried his best to forget, the inevitability of baldness and eventual defeat lingered in his thoughts. His scalp had as much hair as the unshaven shards of hair on his

chin and under his nose. Although his lips were chapped and dry, only made worse from constant licks of his tongue, he powered through the hours of repetitive motions that dominated his day. The screen was more important. He read the first tip of ten. “*Tip 1: Repeat After Me! BE CONFIDENT!*”

There’s nothing sexier than a man who is confident! His suave movements, his determined stare, and woo-la-la, his gruff and strong demands. No girl can resist any man that is able to take charge, know what he wants, and be unafraid of failure!

Caleb read more of the article and onto the next tip. “*Tip 2: Passion! Passion! Passion!*”

The “P” word. Nope, the “P” that you’re looking for isn’t a body part, but rather a feeling! Passion is the name of the game, and the best players are filled to the brim with it! Us ladies love nothing more than a man that has passion in his life. Passion can be found in his work, hobbies, and friends! That translates well in love and finding one of the fairer sex. Passion is the nectar that brings in all the female bees to the flower, so be sure to have passion to bring all the ladies to you. And you may get some honey along the way.

Caleb moved past the next tip. “*Tip 3: Love Life!*”, “*Tip 4: Connections make Connections!*”, “*Tip 5: Clean and Rea...*” “*Tip 6: Get... Tip 7: Swea.... Tip:... T...*” ... “*Tip 10: Be Yourself!*”

“Most importantly, and the most important tip of all. Just remember to be yourself!”

“What a bunch of garbage,” Caleb muttered, “I read the same tips at work three days ago.”

The light switch in his room was a distance away. Much too far for him to exert any energy, but the strain on his eyes and pitch black room won out and forced Caleb's body to pop loud cracks from his joints. The room brightened up immediately. Colors from all shades materialized. The once black walls in the room turned a pastel green. It matched well with the white desk and white frame of his chair. A gray laminate hardwood adorned the floor, equipped with a decorated red and brown rug, laid below the white desk. Two large windows decorated with white blinds and trim covered one side of the room. A giclee print of a sunflower hung on the third side of the room. The white door to the room was open and connected to a hallway toward a restroom, the living room, and Caleb's bedroom. Other computer equipment ranging from an eighteen inch monitor, a mouse pad, speakers, and a figurine with Caleb's favorite cartoon character from his childhood, the XRM-5350 adorned his desk.

Three cups of orange juice with dark green spots and three unfinished plastic bottles gathered together on the side of his desk. Caleb's home office was not particularly interesting, but functional. His can of soda left a ring of water as his parched throat took pleasure from the light lemon carbonation popping on his tongue. The pointer on his computer screen moved and with another click, "*Ten Tips to get the Girl of your Dreams!*" disappeared from his sight. The website he originally browsed reappeared. Caleb shrugged his shoulders and twisted his neck left and right.

The thirty-three year old took a break from the statuesque activity he has engaged in for years. He went into his room and grabbed his cellphone.

“No messages and a missed call from Mom,” he grumbled.

With a tap from his thumb, his phone’s screen changed immediately with the words *Let’s Meet* blared in front. Quickly the words sank to the bottom revealing a face he had never seen before. The brown haired girl with a bright white smile displayed on his screen. Caleb took a finger and pressed the *I Like* thumbs-up icon. Another face followed. Caleb pressed the button again. Another picture, another button press, another picture, another button press until, suddenly, a notification popped open on the phone.

YOU MATCHED!

Bright yellow flashed on the screen. Flashing stars, falling confetti, and three different colored balloons appeared. At the front of all the commotion was a large green button that pulsed again and again, with a bold white font reading: *Message Her Now!*

Caleb pressed the button and the application took him to another display. This time instead of a digital picture of a person he never met, he is provided a blank screen with a lightly shaded text reading “*Write your message here...*”. Caleb sat on his bed and thought of something to write.

Hi! Caleb typed out. He stopped. He thought. *No... That won’t do. I need something more colorful and interesting.* Caleb erased his earlier message and typed another message.

Sup baby, u cute. Caleb looked at the message and pressed the send button.

Thanks! You're cute too!

How was your day today?

Hi, baby. I don't like messaging on Let's Meet, but you can contact me at www.xoxoMelissa.com love to hear from you soon!"

"Another fake profile. There have been more and more of these fake profiles on here. That has to have been the fiftieth one this week," Caleb said. "What a waste of time. I need to delete this garbage."

Caleb closed the *Let's Meet* application and glanced to see if anyone messaged him. He checked his email and saw there was nothing new. He threw his phone on his bed, walked away and went toward the kitchen.

Opening the refrigerator door blew a cool breeze into Caleb's face. The carton of milk and fruity cereal mixed perfectly together. Not only was this meal of choice the perfect breakfast food, it made for a scrumptious dinner as well. There was no tiring of this meal. Tonight's meal was the same he had the day before. The fruity cereal crunched against bone. Slurping the sugary milk helped wash down the bits. Whether it was out of boredom or desire for attention, Caleb took a picture of his meal to share with the world.

The computer screen lit up once again as a click of a button on the side of his mouse helped reposition the pointer to a blank space on the top of his screen. In a blink of an eye, *www.TubeIt.com* appeared in the highlighted space.

The computer screen changed to another website. Boxes of moving pictures dominated the website. Links to different videos showcased the variety of entertainment available. Star-

ing into the light, Caleb's thoughts were blank. He scrolled down the different videos and words generated to catch his attention: *Watch the Disaster at the Tour De France, Exclusive Video of Man x Robot, Power Couple Calls it Quits, Heat Wave Warning, Three Insane Ways to Make Pizza, Dangerous Cartels Control the Southern Border, Is it Worth Dating in Today's Day and Age?, Today: President's Address to the Nation*. Caleb clicked the video, *Women Today Aren't Worth It*. The website flickered for a second and his chosen video began to play in front of him.

"Having trouble with women? Well I have the perfect plan and solution for you. Just like you, I was a sorry sad sack that couldn't even get a girl to look at me, but now? I can help you out..."

Caleb clicked the skip button generated from the video. He sat and watched as Tubeit generated the correct video he wished to watch. Stretching his arms out, Caleb took another drink of water from his bottle. He waited a few seconds for the video to appear and sound to blare out from his speakers.

"Hey what's up Tubers and my brothers from another mother. It's Mr. Max here once again to talk about a topic on modern women. Let me start by saying, this video isn't about all women, but women in general or women from outside my experience. Before you gals come screaming at me like some harpy that isn't able to claw her dinner for the night, yes I know, there are cool chicks out there. We all know that. But for 80% of women, this holds true to some degree. And you paladins armed with your need to defend thy lady's honor, go stick your head in the water before you throw your gauntlet

down. Now that I covered my bases, let's get this story started. Here we have expert relationship advice from Pamela Sawarmf? Smarf? Smurf? Man I don't even know; anyways, the column is about this girl, go figure, who writes about how she's with some guy but she still thinks about her ex. We all already know where this is going to lead to right? 'Hi Pam! I'm with a new guy and we've been seeing each other for weeks, but I saw an old picture of my ex of 2 years and I just wanted to bawl my eyes out. I'm still in love with him, and he's single.' Ohhh... I see; guys, we all know where this is going... 'I just don't know what to do Pamela. Please help! Signed Heart Yearns.' See boys, this is exactly what women are. She's with someone new, and instead of being happy, she wants her old guy back. The guy better dump her now before she dumps him. They're never happy and never loyal. But let's digest this some more. First lady, you have a boyfriend that loves you right now but no, instead of actually being grateful in your situation, you want to trade him back for an ex. The dude was gracious enough to date you and enjoy his time with you..."

The monologue continued in the background as the search bar filled: *F-R-E-E-S-P-A-C-E-.-C-O-M*, a website to one's own personal online profile. Freespace loaded and materialized a picture of Jose Caballero, his wife Maria Caballero, and their son, Antonio Caballero. Jose and Maria wore sunglasses. Jose in particular wore a blue t-shirt, white shorts, and a *Free Mickey* baseball cap. Maria wore a blue sundress to match and Antonio wore a green shirt featuring some cartoon character Caleb could not recognize. All three had smiles and held bas-

kets of strawberries in their hands. The picture came with a caption written by Jose: *Blessed to have this life with these two*. A woman named Alicia Hernandez wrote: *beautiful family!* and another named Margaret McDully wrote: *wow so much fun!* below the online photo. Caleb did not know either of them, but felt obligated to write a comment as well.

Bring some strawberries to work tomorrow buddy!

With a quick stroke of his mouse and a press of the button, the message disappeared in a blink of an eye. In its place a simple button that signified approval of the picture lit up. Caleb moved on to the next picture on Freespace. It was a picture of his two co-workers, Corey and Sharlene smiling together. They were cute together. A few strokes later, Caleb's glowing screen featured a boy eating a large spoonful of a red powdered substance meant to be mixed with water. The stunt captured on video garnered ten million views, tens of thousands of approvals, with just as many comments. A chuckle came from a shaking head and in a quick instant, the pictures disappeared from the glowing plastic screen.

Caleb opened a new website, and in familiar fashion, typed in the letters: *G-E-E-I-T*. Geeit was an online bulletin board on the internet where people around the world are able to discuss any topic they desire. Caleb clicked on a topic he felt was interesting, *(Wo)Men of Geeit, What Pisses You Off About Men?* The video continued to play in the background.

Most women are like this. They don't care about you. They only care about themselves. As a man you have to filter these women from your life. And with so much drama and effort, it's no reason why men are dropping out of the dating market. You

be happy by being you, and disregard these chicks. They're not worth it. Why should you spend all your time and effort to please someone that doesn't even appreciate you back. If you're that lonely, just be like those dudes that bought those robot girls that's been the craze lately. Lord knows those machines look and probably feel better than women today. I wouldn't know but guys have told me they're the real deal. That said brothers, remember to use your time to work on yourself instead of wasting time and effort on these broads. Anyways, that's all for today. Remember to take chances, love yourself, work on yourself, and don't ever compromise. It's Mr. Max and peace out!

The video ended and silence once again filled the room save for a few clicks from the mouse. Geeit was littered with words from all sorts of users. Crazy4Kitties wrote: *I hate the idea of men trying to be all tough. Men need to stop trying to look like they need to dominate and control everything. Its annoying. Stop.* MariaMoria wrote: *I hate how fake men are! Just be real you know?!* Caleb read some more replies. WaterPistolJoe321 wrote: *Just cuz you weak, don't be hating.* PineApples1999 replied: *you do you buddy, don't think about what others think of you.* CookieDoughxxxGood wrote *How do I become a man guys?* MasterFlexC sent a quick reply to CookieDoughxxxGood. *Bro, you just gotta take chances, even if it's something you've never done.* Caleb removed his hand from the keyboard and continued to skim through the discussion thread. He passively read an argument from various users, and chuckled while reading one of the comments. MassiveG-

uns42 wrote: *What did you say you little bitch? I graduated as a Navy Seals the top of my class...*

“The classic Navy Seals reply. That never gets old,” Caleb smirked. He looked at the digital clock on his computer. It was already midnight. Caleb closed the screens and turned off his computer and started his routine for the night. A quick shower, brushed teeth, and a wiped face was all that was necessary. There was a sharp pain as the towel wiped across the face. It came from a red painful spot that developed on the side of Caleb’s cheek. He looked at the single yellowish-white dot stuck out in the middle of a protruded red circle with disgust, distress, and disdain.

“Disgusting,” Caleb said.

A sip from his water bottle as the small screen lit up once again. The small rectangular screen did not change. The same screen displayed without a single contact or notification since the last time he checked. Caleb turned off his bedroom lights, and with his phone in his hand once again pressed the button to open the internet function on his phone. Like a small torch, it lit up a wide eyed face enamored and possessed by the electric glow of the device. Thumbs tapped against the screen of the glowing device and once again, the screen quickly displayed a few letters: R-E-M-O-V-I-N-G-P-I-M-P-L-E-S. The screen flickered for a second and another display emitted from the screen: *Apply an ice cube to the pimple for 5-10 minutes.* Caleb got up from his bed and went into the kitchen once again. The cold was comfortable inside his pillow cover. The screen turned black, and did not reappear until the sun rose once again.

CHAPTER TWO

“EM-10493Y”

“Yo Caleb!”

Caleb stopped walking and turned around. A short, dark skinned, pot-bellied man huffed toward him.

“Morning Jose,” Caleb greeted him.

“Cómo estás! How’s your weekend man?”

“My shaver broke this morning. Piece of junk, other than that, I didn’t do a single thing. How about yourself?”

“That’s cool man, I wished I could do nothing. And yea, I hate it when things break, they don’t make them like they used to. Just chilled with my wife and son. We went to pick strawberries at Corania Farms.”

“Nice.”

“Not really, I envy you buddy. Don’t get married, biggest mistake in my life,” Jose replied with a slight grin on his face.

Caleb smiled back without a reply.

Jose wore a collared blue shirt and black slacks that matched well with his brown complexion and thick jet black hair that adorned the top of his head. The fat man was clean

shaven, and smelled of an odor that was similar to a mixture of fresh asphalt and strawberries. Jose was very well liked by many at the office. His calm demeanor radiated charisma with a flare and confidence like the rays of a sun glistening onto a calm blue lake. The two men walked toward their destination without an extra word.

“Hey man, see you in thirty. Don’t forget the morning meeting,” Jose said before he turned the corner toward his office.

“Yeah. Get me some coffee and a donut from the kitchen when you pass by later.” Caleb nodded upwards toward Jose with his request.

“No problem buddy,” Jose replied.

Just as abruptly as their conversation started, it ended just as quickly. The two parted ways. Caleb walked toward his office desk and cubicle and sat down. He turned on his computer and logged in. As he waited for his desktop to load and prepare himself for the day, a loud saccharine sound came behind him.

“Good morning hot stuff!”

He spun his chair around and there appeared with a huge grinning smile, a bubbly ball of sunshine waved at him. Caleb smiled at her and raised his right hand with his palm flat, fingers straight, and his hand stiff to wave back.

“Good Morning Shay,” greeted Caleb.

The young tanned woman walked toward him. She gave a big toothy smile and handed Caleb a card.

“You’re coming right?” the pretty lady in purple asked, as she leaned over boasting her cleavage, gold necklace and sparkling studded earrings.

Caleb looked at the card and read the big bold letters in the middle. You're invited to my 21st birthday! Saturday! September 22nd! 6:00 p.m. at The Pink Fruit.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world." His eyes were still fixated on the card.

"Great! See you then!" Sharlene replied with a kick. Her shoulder length brown hair flipped around her neck.

Caleb read the card again.

The twenty-second is in three weeks. I should probably go. I haven't been to a birthday party in years. Why in the world am I going to a party with a bunch of twenty-one year olds? I guess I can always leave early if I need to. I just need to show my face, give Shay her present and leave. Not too difficult. Caleb thought. *What a pain.*

There were plenty of questions he wanted to know. *Who will come? Will it be fun? What am I going to do there? What's an easy way to leave early?* The clock's minute hand struck ten. He got up from his seat and headed toward his destination.

In the meeting room there were a few people Caleb knew by name, and others by reputation. Across the room from him next to a dark skinned man with olive eyes. Jason Warwick, the twenty year veteran at Acorn Tech Inc. worked in Research and Development. The neatly trimmed scruffy gray beard and green eyes were in stark contrast to his dark melanin skin, however, the black shirt he wore blended too closely with the rest of his complexion. It looked odd.

On Jason's right sat a brunette in

a red blouse fixated on her phone. Maryanne McDonnell, assistant to Acorn Tech Inc.'s head honcho and founder, Jim Reeves. Placed in front of her, laid a black leather folder and pen. The few others sitting around the meeting table were Corey Lee, Morris McKeith, and Faris Farway.

A tap on Caleb's arm forced him to take the open seat next to a young clean shaven man, similar in age, but with short spiky black hair, a chiseled jaw, and broad shoulders. His blue shirt and white tie was a stark contrast to his pictures on Freespace. Corey was a real gym goer carrying a reputation of being a man free of responsibilities. The pictures on Freespace were always about some adventure. It could range from restaurants he visited, pictures of him showing off his muscles, to his latest hike at Chimney Valley. Corey found life or to be more accurate life found him.

"Sup Caleb. How's your weekend?"

"Not bad. I didn't do much."

"That's good bro. Gotta get some rest sometimes," Corey responded. "Hey buddy check this out."

Corey took out his phone and showed Caleb a video on his Freespace. The video featured Corey at the gym. wearing a black tank top, blue shorts, and yellow shoes. Corey crouched, grasped the bar in front of him, and lifted the weights all the while grunted and groaning. "Yea!" was heard at the end of the video.

"Showing your workout videos again Corey?" a voice behind Caleb asked.

“Oh hey Virginia,” Corey responded. “Just showing Caleb how far I’ve gotten with my workouts.” He turned to the brown haired man, “bro, we need to hit the gym together.”

Caleb entertained the idea of having a friend at the gym, but it was such a hassle he never bothered to accept the invitation. There was always a tight unease in his brain frequently manifesting in situations outside his realm of familiarity and comfort. It was not safe to talk to others and cause unnecessary commotion. There was even less need to garner a reputation of being awkward. Stigmas and reputation are hard to remove. It was better to keep to himself, complete his job in a timely manner, and speak politely to anyone that bothered to converse with him. An unassuming profile will always keep a person away from harm’s way. Corey was part of the unknown. He clearly was a dangerous individual. He always had something to say to someone even to complete strangers. Luckily the conversation ended by a third party and Caleb did not need to suffer through this ordeal.

“Save that conversation for later, and put your phones away, we’re getting started,” commanded the elder executive with bright blue eyes and fiery red hair.

“Yes, ma’am,” Corey said.

Virginia in her pearl suit, matching skirt, and golden chain belt commanded the attention of all those inside. It was of no surprise that she held the position of Vice President of Acorn. Her uncanny ability to articulate results, achieve expectations, and organize involvement in so many different aspects of the company’s operations, made her an excellent corporate leader.

“Excellent job bringing the entire box Jose.” said the highly respected and feared woman.

“Yes... Thank you Jose!” Jason commented as the large ebony hand opened the box and fished out the lone chocolate glazed donut.

“Now that everyone’s here, I want all your eyes to turn around and let me introduce you all to Acorn Tech’s latest project and newest team member.”

Walking in behind Virginia was a face Caleb did not recognize. She was a slender woman with stern blue eyes and long blonde hair brushing along her waist. Her doll-like face elevated the colors of the deep navy blue blouse and white skirt she wore. Sixteen different eyes gazed at the model-esque figure that graced their presence this morning.

“Allow me to introduce to all of you Model EM-10493Y, or Emily for short,” chimed the leader of the meeting. “As you are all well aware, our current model, the TE-34135A, is still selling well, but we need to look toward the future and begin our transition to the next model in a few years. We are seeking improvements, and with the feedback gathered from our data and surveys, the R&D department worked hard to reach this result. Emily is our newest prototype for Acorn’s Robotic Maid series. Jason, please fill the team with the rest of the details.”

“Alright! Ladies and Gentleman, Research and Development as Virginia mentioned earlier, here is our newest product for the world, the Model EM-10493Y or ‘Project Emily’. We implemented various upgrades from an exoskeleton or shell system to a skeleton system. She is able to self-charge through

both kinetic and traditional means. And most importantly we equipped her with Acorn's very own self-learning technology. It's been in development for years, but we're almost ready to introduce her to the world. We're hopeful that the technology allows for Emily to learn tasks on her own and through command. She'll be able to automate household chores, respond with dialogue when asked a question, and most importantly we're hoping that she'll be able to adapt to new situations when it arises. Allow me to demonstrate."

"Wow she's incredibly lifelike," exclaimed Corey. "She doesn't even look like a robot!"

"Corey, please. Emily, please grab a donut," Jason ordered.

"By your command," the ruby red lips of the icy blue eyed woman responded.

"Wow! This is awesome!" the muscular man from marketing remarked.

Emily walked toward the box, reached in, and in typical robotic fashion, she stood there holding a donut in hand without moving or flinching.

"Now this is the important part of the A.I.," Jason started to explain, "We need her to be able to learn more about her surroundings and be able to recognize other people. I've already programmed all of your profiles into her memory bank, and we're testing to see if she is able to recognize specific people in this room. Emily, please hand the donut to Caleb."

Emily's eyes flickered and flashed. She faced her intended target and extended her hand to the quiet, balding man. Caleb's eyes expanded from astonishment partially from the success and embarrassment that he was chosen as the guinea

pig. Caleb took Emily's pastry offering in his hand while looking directly into her cerulean eyes.

"Oh uh...Thank you."

"You are welcome Caleb."

"Sweet jumpin' jalapenos Jason, let's try another person!" Jose blurted out.

"Alright... Emily, please shake hands with Jose."

Emily scanned the room once again and stopped when she locked eyes with Jose. In similar fashion with Caleb, Emily reached out her hand and offered it to Jose. With a big toothy gap smile, Jose shook Emily's hand.

"Her hand is so soft and lifelike."

"Glad you noticed one of the changes we've made. As you are well aware, Teresa often broke cups, dented walls, chipped tables, and other household items. Hence the change to Emily to have a skeleton model surrounded by lifelike foam rather than an exo-skeleton that many other models have".

"Hehe, I wonder if she has a slit down there," Corey whispered into Caleb's ear.

"Quick question Jason..." Caleb interjected.

"Dude! Don't ask that!" Corey panicked.

"You mentioned learning capabilities. How does that work specifically?" Caleb asked, ignoring Corey's comment.

"Caleb, I am glad you asked, as you are well aware, peoples' needs change, and there are a lot of different variables present in every household. Many are predictable and routine, while some are completely unpredictable. To counteract the issue of variability, Emily's eyes are equipped with our newest technology, "Collective Observation Learning and Disburse-

ment” or COLD for short. As the name states, she learns by watching, observing, and following. Alongside using the internet to clarify information, the COLD system uploads information to both her internal hard drive and our cloud system. We intend to disperse her learning to our other models and future models via the cloud. Think about it, a million robots simultaneously learning different tasks and learning from each other. Every single robot will soon be able to complete any task that any one of them comes across. If one Emily learns to farm, other Emilys in the world can farm as well. We can solve world hunger, and save lives as long as an Emily is around!” the scientist babbled on.

“Jason, please continue the demonstration,” ordered the boss of the room.

“Oh... yes, anyways, please observe.”

Jason took out a small jar of peanut butter and a slice of bread from his pocket. He laid the items in front of Emily. Emily scanned the two items in front of her. Within seconds, she unscrewed the jar of peanut butter, and picked up the knife. Seemingly as if she has done this a million times, she smeared the glob of peanut butter onto the piece of bread. A smidgen of peanut butter remained on the knife, but perfectly spread onto the bread. Emily placed the items back on the table and awaited her next orders.

“As you observed, Emily has the capabilities to completely revolutionize the service industry. We are targeting the industries in hospitality, nursing, as well as domestic home appliances,” the engineer continued, “this is going to be a real game changer. Can you imagine the number of Emilys that can be

placed into one area and automate all the simple tasks that nobody wants to do?”

“What’s the difference between Emily and the other robots on the market? Teresa can be programmed to open jars, vacuum the floors, mop, and dust. What does Emily bring?” Morris asked.

“Two big differences. The first one you just observed with the COLD system. The robot does not need to constantly be programmed to complete tasks. Which is one of the biggest problems and complaints from consumers. Most people aren’t coders. The second, well, she’s able to leave the house,” Jason explained.

“So? Other robots can fetch the mail.”

“We’re talking miles and miles away from the house.”

“Automated truck-drivers huh?” Faris remarked.

“You got it. Not only will we have robots be able to complete simple tasks at home, but now with an army of Emilys, we’re able to expand the scope and scale of what these machines can do. The goal is to make sure she’ll be able to integrate into the world itself,” Jason said.

“And that’s where we come in right?” Corey asked.

“Sort of,” Virginia said as she stepped into the center of the meeting. “Outside seeking clients and working on the marketing that your team will be handling Corey; Emily still has a lot of learning to do. I have authorized the next phase of the project. We’re going to do a field test. In other words, we’ll be lending out Emily to internal personnel so that she may learn to integrate into the world and learn the basics of household tasks. The purpose of this meeting is to seek out a candidate

that's able to house Emily until we are ready to send her out into the world in a year or two. Think of the members on your teams. Does anyone know of an ideal candidate?"

"What's the criteria?" asked Jose.

"Unfortunately, this is still a classified project, so there are some restrictions. First and foremost, we cannot have Emily live in a household with a lot of people, we preferably want to have someone that is single, no kids, no roommates, and has little to no outside interactions. No pets either. We need the date to trickle in rather than pour down, if that makes any sense."

Immediately, all sixteen eyes turned to gaze at Caleb.

"We found our candidate!" the shriek of voices in unison declared at once.

"Wait, why me?" a shocked Caleb responded.

"For one, you are one of the team leads in quality control, so it's right up your alley. Second, you're perfect! Single, no kids, no animals, you own a good sized house, and not many people come to visit you!" Virginia confidently declared. "Furthermore, I'm sure you have plenty of chores for Emily to complete and learn from."

"How do you people know so much about my life? And don't I get a say in this matter? Virginia, can we talk about this?" Caleb outburst and questions fell on deaf ears as the others clamored and cheered at finding their candidate.

"Remember team, nobody outside this room knows about Emily. We're testing to see how well she integrates into the world. Everyone else may return to their work, except for Ja-

son, Caleb, and Maryanne. Meeting adjourned!” the ecstatic Virginia triumphantly declared.

The room emptied out except for the remaining quartet. Three pairs of eyes looked upon Caleb with ferocious intensity and determination. Caleb felt nervous, like a tiny shrimp attempting to hide in the rocks among a sea of sharks swimming overhead. The strongest of the three spoke.

“Caleb, please say you’ll do it. It’s incredibly vital for our company for this project to be a success. We promise to compensate you for your extra trouble and time.”

“This is all so fast. And what’s the catch?”

“We can go over the details later, just promise you’ll say ‘yes’.”

“Can I at least have some time to think about it?”

“You have until the end of the day.”

Caleb left the meeting room and walked back to his desk. Upon entering the room that housed his cubicle, an all too familiar voice blares at him without regard or consideration of others nearby.

“Bro! What happened?”

“Can’t say anything Corey. They just asked me if I wanted to participate, and I asked them to give me the day to think about it.”

“What are you waiting for? Just say ‘Yes’. It’s an amazing opportunity.”

“I don’t know... It really feels like a lot to handle and I don’t think I’ll be good at having this kind of responsibility.”

“Just do it. You’re more capable than what you give yourself credit for. You also gotta take some chances in life, you know? Anyways, that’s my advice. Ask for a raise too.”

“I’m going to take a walk outside. I’m going to think about this alone.”

“Coolio, catch you later buddy! Before you leave, can you also give me the Dwight Portfolio? And think about hitting the gym with me.”

“It’s the red folder on top of the cabinet, and sure.”

Caleb left Corey and continued to ponder about Virginia’s proposal. He did not want to disappoint his bosses and cause trouble. The last thing Caleb wanted was having his reputation tarnished. The slightest blemish on his record would cause too many problems for Caleb to deal with. He was just that kind of person. A person that wanted to live life simplistically with no fuss or hassles. He exited the main building and walked around Acorn Incorporated’s courtyard and sought the shade from the magnolia tree in the middle. The warm air permeated Caleb’s skin. Outside, the flowers bloomed and covered the top of the tree with white flowers like a cloud bristling over a vast golden plain. The bright blue sky shimmered across the open plaza with slight rays of sunshine penetrating the openings the tree was not able to cover. It was a quiet afternoon with only a few chirps from the sparrows singing in the branches, and a warm breeze brushing through the area. Caleb sat at the lunch table situated under the branches of the tree and took out his phone. He opened up Freespace. The application loaded up and the first picture he saw was George and Na-

talie Wagner. Natalie Wagner? Caleb read three short words plastered across the caption: *SHE SAID YES!*.

Caleb scrolled down his phone and re-watched Corey's lift, he reviewed Jose's trip to the strawberry fields, and re-read Sharlene's invitation to her party. His mother, father, aunts, and uncles took pictures of themselves enjoying Belize. Alexis Pearanew put out another photograph of herself on her page. His old friend, Bruce Reed took up painting classes and Raphael Morgan's page displayed a picture of an octopus tentacle with a side of greens. It looked gross. Yet, the saddest part was a lonely man that only stared at the different stories others told. Everyone he knew from his past and present shared highlights in their lives. The various pictures of people sharing their hobbies were not glamorous, and mostly repetitive. There was very little interest in all the new events, partners, videos, and pictures of people he once knew. Silently staring at his phone, in a moment of clarity, he realized he was the exception from all these various activities. There has not been a notable post, festivity, or activity in over three years. Just a few pictures of food, and an occasional comment about life showing he was still alive.

There was nothing noteworthy the past eight years, yet he clung to the past remembering it to be vibrant and colorful. He remembered Natalie as Natalie Miraw, but today and in the future, she'll be forever known as a Wagner. Caleb thought hard about the questions that manifested in his mind, but had zero answers. Nobody was able to provide him any since the only company he had was himself. He could not remember the last time he told part of his life story to another. Becoming gray

and alone was the only future in his life he envisioned. He relived the same day again and again. Every single year he promised himself he needed a change, yet, this is the tenth year straight he broke his New Year's Resolution. His own mother and even Corey's voice echoed in his head. Their advice to be more proactive resonated more as he stood under the shade of the white flowering tree. He even thought of Mr. Max's video and his advice to constantly improve oneself. The helpful comments on Geeit, specifically the comments from FlexMasterC resonated with him. He advised others, but never took action himself. He too will become another man living in quiet desperation. A suppressed fear hidden behind a facade of comfort, habit, and predictability. This time must be different.

Virginia gifted him an opportunity of a lifetime. Project Emily was a large project, and he is going to be a major contributor. Caleb steeled his resolve and left the warmth of the sun and the towering ivory pillar in the courtyard. He entered the elevators inside Acorn Tech, and pressed the button to the highest floor. Caleb knocked on Virginia's door.

"Come in," a voice emanated from inside.

"Hey Virginia, I'm ready to give you an answer." Caleb looked at his boss. "I'll do it."

"I knew you would. Besides, even if you said '*No*', I always have the option for you being volun-told." Virginia's voice stressed the last word. "Take a seat, I'll fill you in with the details."

Chapter THREE

“Day One”

“We want you to have as normal of an experience with Emily.”

“Just pretend she’s your girlfriend.”

“Have fun with her Caleb. We honestly have no idea how Emily’s learning system works in the field.”

“Put her on social media, take her out on dates, but don’t tell anyone she’s a robot or from work. We really want to see if and how Emily perceives the world and how others perceive her.”

“So all I need to do is provide a bi-weekly report to you and Jason and make sure Emily experiences as many things as possible?”

“Yep, we need her to try and be as human as possible. We’re aiming for the full human experience, so that we can fine tune her learning system. We’ll even add in something down there for you.”

“What? I don’t want or need that.”

“The full human experience Caleb. Don’t worry, we don’t have a video recording of what she sees. It’s a data gathering system, not a video camera.”

“That’s not reassuring.”

“Please Caleb, the success of this project completely rests on your shoulders. We’ll make sure you are compensated immensely for this.”

“And if you do run into trouble, we’ll be here to help you.”

“Okay...”

The meeting with Virginia, Jason, and Maryanne, replayed in Caleb’s brain the rest of his waking day. Caleb grunted when he curled the barbell. Forty-five pounds this week; it was forty last week. The gym was worthless as an aid. He contemplated the contract he made with Virginia. Signing a ten-year non-disclosure agreement and employee non-transfer contract felt like a tomb and he was the one held inside a long-lost sarcophagus. He wasn’t planning to leave and enjoyed his job, but fear and uncertainty of his decision gave him a sense of unease. Never in his life did he take so much responsibility. It would be disastrous if he failed. Doubt formed. There wasn’t anybody there to help him either, this burden was his and his alone. It was a dive toward the unknown; the shadows of insecurity haunted his soul.

His muscle strained and sweat cooling his skin were not able to detract him from the decision made. Caleb gave up trying to forget and returned home. There was no changing the past. He pressed forward, taking a seat and logged into Geeit.

“Let’s see what people do with their personal robots.” Caleb said.

The bulletin board plastered a list of his interests and past browsing history. With a quick click he arrived at the webpage he wanted; MaiRoboMeido. It was where people around the world posted their own personal experiences with having a personal robotic maid.

Owl4Lyfe's topic was on the top of the page with three hundred plus replies: *Embracing the Light Side, what am I to expect?*

The first reply came from OwOwOwBowWow, who wrote: *Depends how much you use it and make it get to work. The beginning is hard since you need to program everything in them, but afterwards, they'll automate everything.*

ChekDeezNuts69 wrote: *The greatest thing ever. No drama, no need to babysit some broad, low maintenance, youthful and hot forever, and best of all, she actually does things unlike the bio-holes.*

Jacklenapes324 wrote: *Hope you got Acorn, UMAE, or Schwartz. Those the best, cuz they a lot more customizable. Lube up.*

Umoarabi_Together commented: *I love her! I'm a much older person and can't really do many basic tasks anymore. My Teresa is great for putting away laundry or vacuuming the floor. Not too great with more complex tasks like changing light bulbs or cooking though. Even putting mail into the mailbox is a challenge for her, but I still recommend having one around. Teresa definitely helped get my life back.*

Caleb scrolled down to other comments.

JOHN_Terminator32 wrote: *My wife is my life.*

2cuqute4u replied to the thread: *I think it's gross and creepy, if you're not disabled, why not just do the chores yourself? Everyone knows what you're actually using the robot for.* The user's comment garnered an additional hundred plus additional replies.

FasterFuriouser wrote: *They wouldn't add the feature if they didn't want people to consummate with their robot."*

MasterLongShlong wrote: *WTF do you know bio-hole? Get toastie roastie, you just jealous nobody wants your over cooked flaps of roast beef.*

Hurls of insults, memes, deeminging pictures, and laughter dominated the remaining posts in the thread. As entertaining as it was to read and join in an online scuffle, Caleb's mind was preoccupied and he ignored the rest of the internet fight. Instead, he used the internet for its original purpose, obtaining information. He continued to scroll down the various comments and came across a new thread.

PigQooqoo's headline: *So you decided to buy a Robotic Maid.* PigQooqoo's thread had a list of seemingly helpful tips and a summary of having a robotic maid in their household. Caleb read through a laundry-list of tips detailing maintenance and continuing programming. None of it seems to apply to Emily. Caleb's very own robot is able to learn on her own and able to complete other tasks outside of vacuuming. The COLD system was revolutionary. Without an ounce of new information, Caleb closed the tabs then went to sleep.

Caleb arrived at Acorn's office and to his relief, it remained largely the same. Not a soul passing him asked about Emily. Virginia kept the project sealed. Caleb walked towards the

cafeteria, grabbed a jelly-filled donut, and pressed the button to the elevator. The doors opened on the fifteenth floor and to Jason's office.

"Hey Jason," Caleb said, "you wanted to see me?"

"Caleb. Grab a seat. Jose is going to deliver Emily to your house. There's a variety of things I need to go over with you. Basic upkeep, functions, expectations. Things like that."

"Okay."

"Reports are due at the end of the month."

"Anything else I need to know?"

"Let's see..." Jason trailed on.

The two discussed a list of tasks that should be completed within the month. They also spoke about expectations, room setup, and introducing new items and tasks for Emily to complete as the project continued. It was certainly daunting to remember all the details while also submitting bi-weekly reports on Emily's progress. The countless okays and nods reconfirmed Caleb's belief through this ordeal. Caleb wondered if he even understood anything Jason said. Caleb was by no means tech-illiterate, but compared to Jason's expertises, all the technical jargon and numbers caused Caleb's brain to lose track of Jason's explanations like a child unable to focus on a single decision. The meeting ended and one word summed up Caleb's conviction. Try.

The morning arrived and the sun shined through the windows littered around Caleb's home. The quiet calm was interrupted by the unmistakable chime from the front door played throughout the house. Caleb opened it and was greeted with a

life-sized wooden crate with Jose's face sticking out from the side.

"Morning Jose," Caleb said.

"Morning buddy. Hey, we're going to need to open this inside, so help me out here," the company's chief delivery man explained.

"You came by yourself?" The two maneuvered the box through Caleb's front door.

"Yeah. This is some secret stuff. One... two... three... heave! I think only the people in the meeting and the head honchos know about this. I was even given special instructions."

"Special instructions?"

"Yeah, they even told me to treat her as she was your new girlfriend and I introduced her to you."

"That explains why Jason told me to post her on my social media page."

"This is going to make my life difficult man, my wife is going to want to meet her. She's been pestering me all the time. Keeps saying how we don't go out with other couples enough."

The two placed Jason's gift in the middle of the room and opened the coffin holding Emily. The two carefully moved her into Caleb's living room. The crate opened and the two men gazed with awe at the beauty befallen on them. She wore a bubble-wrap dress alongside a large wire that tied her golden hair together. Emily's open eyes telegraphed an odd blank stare waiting for her caretaker to bestow a soul inside. As the two removed the wrappings, they noticed there were not any

doll-joints, gears, or buttons, nor did her skin look like a casing of armor like the many other automatons they were accustomed to. The engineering fleet bewitched the two. She was certainly the first. This Emily was built, in comparison to her current brothers and sisters, to be a masterpiece.

“Oh sweet Saint Maria, I wished my wife looked like that. How do we turn her on?”

“There should be a black box somewhere,” Caleb explained.

“You mean this thing?” Jose pointed to a tiny cube, no larger than the size of a dime, sticking out hidden behind the top of Emily’s ear.

“Looks like it. I think this tiny thing powers her up.”

Caleb and Jose looked bewildered wondering if they were right. With a shrug of his shoulders, Caleb pressed the black box inside and the hatch sealed with a sound of a click.

“Okay... nothing is happening. Did you insert the battery in correctly?” asked Jose

“I just pushed it in. Maybe there’s another button we’re supposed to press.”

“Should we call Jason?”

“Nah, we’ll figure it out.”

The two men fiddled and fondled Emily’s body parts trying to activate the machine standing in the living room. Suddenly, a third voice emanated. The two men recoiled in surprise, first by staring at each other then at the blonde robot.

“Good afternoon Caleb. Good afternoon Jose,” a sweet feminine voice emitted through the air.

“Oyh! What you’d press, man?” Jose asked. The two shocked men immediately pulled their touchy hands away.

“Emily?” Caleb asked.

“Yes, Caleb?” the robot replied.

“Uhh... how are you?”

“My current operation is normal. Internal heat index is ninety-seven degrees. Memory processes are functional. Scan operation is normal. External function is normal. Currently scanning the operational environment. Currently scanning operational functions. Currently scanning programmed tasks. There are no programmed tasks at this time. Initiating autonomous mode. There is no cause for concern at this moment.”

“Just a ‘I’m doing well would suffice,” Caleb said.

“Affirmative. I am doing well,” the doll replied.

“She’s alive! Let’s try her out and make her do something! C’mon man, you gotta have something for her to do!” Jose’s volume and pace could not hide his excitement.

“I got the perfect thing!” An equally excited Caleb fetched a box filled with female clothes and laid out the garments on the nearby table. “Emily, put on the clothes.”

“Not to judge Caleb, but didn’t know you played dress-up when you’re alone,” joked Jose.

“It’s Virginia’s,” Caleb shot back.

“I didn’t know you were into older women too, and Virginia at that,” Jose countered.

“Oh, shut up,” a defeated Caleb relented.

Emily looked at the articles of cloth displayed to her on the table. She picked up the yellow bra and put it on top of her head. She reached out for the accompanying panties. She slid

her arm through one of the pant legs and slid her other arm into the other.

“Oh boy...” an exasperated Jose sighed.

“Yea...” Caleb replied in astonishment.

“Well, I’m going to head out of here, let me know how things go. Also if you or her need anything, come find me or shoot me a message and I’ll deliver it to you. Have fun with your doll.”

Jose left Caleb’s home with the boxes, wooden planks, and wrappings that accompanied Emily. Silence accompanied the room featuring a stunned, confused man and a naked woman with a bra on her head. Caleb removed Emily’s hat and took the panties out of her hands. He thumbed the garments and then looked at her. Emily’s eyes continued to radiate as she stood silently without a single twitch. Caleb stood bewildered at what to do. He hopped onto the internet retrieving the thread he visited the night prior. PigQooqoo’s tips on owning a Robotic Maid expanded; quickly scanning through the fluff, Caleb found what he was looking for.

“Let’s see, the first tip says to read the instruction manual on how to program your maid. There’s no written instructions, but Jason did mention she learned through watching. Oh I got it!” Caleb said aloud in his very own monologue.

The man stripped naked in his own house and looked at the bra. He stood in front of Emily and looked directly into her eyes.

“Watch and learn Emily.”

“Scanning.”

Taking the bra in hand, Caleb slid his arms through the straps and fiddled with the hook behind him. It was a tight fit, but he managed. He slid his legs through the panties, stretching the fabric and causing a tear. Finally, he squeezed himself into the sundress and with it, his lesson was complete.

“Okay now you try.” Caleb took off the articles of clothing and handed them to Emily. Emily took the undergarments and put them on perfectly. The pale green dress accentuated her figure, and caused an audible gasp from the boy in front of her. She awaited her next orders.

“Wow...” Caleb stared at his living mate with awe. “Let’s try this again to see how the memory system works. Emily take off your clothes, then put them back on.”

The robot complied with the command. There was no trouble with the garments this third time.

“Emily, let’s try cleaning the dishes,” Caleb said, grabbing forgotten, uncleaned, dishes littered around his house.

“Affirmative.”

Caleb took a dirty dish, put it under water, and lathered his sponge, while Emily watched. He gave Emily another dish to try it herself. Her hands attempted to grasp the dish, but it slipped out due to the slippery soap and clumsy robotic mandibles, causing the dish to fall onto the floor, shattering upon impact. Pieces of ceramic bounced across the kitchen floor in all directions.

“I’m going to need new dishes...” Caleb’s voice filled with disappointment.

Despite the odds, countless heaves and sighs from Caleb, and trash bags filled with broken crockery, Emily mastered the

task and replaced the machine specifically made to clean dishware and utensils.

“That took awhile, but you finally learned to wash dishes properly,” Caleb said. There was a slight disdain in his mouth, but a robot would never notice.

“What will be my next task?” Emily asked.

“Let’s try dusting,” Caleb sighed.

Caleb handed Emily a small towel and microfiber dusting cloth. The two started in the living room. Dust accumulated and hid in places not touched by any living organism over the years. A quick blow behind the television spewed tiny particles across the room. The larger clumps floated together to the ground, while the smaller pieces joined with some others elsewhere. With a heavy hand, and a quick swipe, Caleb blackened the cloth covering his palm. He showed Emily the results. The hours passed as the two pressed and wiped items littered around Caleb’s home. It was odd, but Caleb felt a breath of life ignite inside. The master’s bedroom was next.

Wires under Caleb’s computer tangled and weaved, trapping dirt and dust gathering between its cracks. It took a few tries for Emily to collect the plentiful flecks of filth accumulated under the table, but as Jason described, her ability to adapt quickly found praise from her new master. She washed off the cloth in the sink squeezing and wringing it just as Caleb showed. The result was years of neglect finally appearing in the form of dark murky water wrung out from every twist and press from Emily’s hands.

Emily returned with a damp towel in her hand grasping the XRM-350 on display. Her hand glided across the intricate

swords, rockets, spears, and other assorted weapons wielded by the figurine. She pressed the spike on top of the crown between her two fingers. With a single stroke, Emily separated arm as well as the silver and red plastic jewels from the crown from the rest of the item. Some other pieces of plastic also broke off from the miniature. She also removed any dust accumulated. A second later, the room filled with a churlish scream.

“Argh! Emily, you broke my XRM-350! I can’t believe it, I had it since I was four years old, and it was in perfect condition. How in the world did you break it?” Caleb asked.

“I wiped it with the cloth you provided,” Emily answered.

Caleb took his hands and rubbed his face and eyes in disbelief. His prized toy of twenty-nine years is now in shatters due to a machine that had no idea what it was doing. There was no question about it, it was beyond repair. The pieces detached in ways that any attempts to glue it back together will never bring back the luster or perfection of the XRM-350. Caleb’s prized memento from his childhood has finally met its end.

“I’ll never be able to replace this...” Caleb sighed.

“I will place the broken item in the trash,” Emily said.

“No! Don’t ever touch this ever again!” Caleb ordered. He placed the broken pieces and the figurine on the nightstand next to his bed.

“Affirmative,” Emily confirmed.

The rest of the week, Emily followed Caleb around the home day and night. For the first time in a long time, Caleb completed many chores he neglected for years. Unused items piled. Caleb disposed of countless old, unused, broken items

except for the XRM-350. It may have been years since his old electronics saw light, but sadly, the machines found themselves back in the dark inside Caleb's trash can, and in two days, the trash collectors will be at his house.

The XRM-350 piled together on Caleb's nightstand, once again gathering dust as it has the last twenty years. Part of Caleb felt missing every time he looked at his broken toy. It gave him comfort and memories that long passed.

Emily, with every passing minute, smiled just being with Caleb.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Teaching and Learning”

Teaching has been a long arduous process. Caleb had zero experience educating humans, let alone a robot, but he soldiered on. He sorted through his collection of items, tossing those that were replaced by newer models, and disposed of the newer models that were replaced by even newer models. The sorting and cleaning was the first of many tasks Emily completed. Caleb instructed Emily how to separate trash from recyclables. He taught the robot to make their beds, fold their clothes, and educated the robot how to mop and vacuum. She learned to clean the windows and wipe the blinds. Emily organized the multitude of frozen microwave dinners, placed fruit inside the refrigerator, cleaned countertops, and scheduled a time to water the garden. The robot absorbed the information quickly; she soon began to independently complete some of the tasks on her own. The lessons continued on throughout the next two weeks with the defects, troubles, and difficulties gradually subsiding. Caleb’s chores became Emily’s. At night the machine learned to recharge herself in the privacy of her

own room. Two weeks went by in a flash, with both sides adjusting to their new situations and roles.

“Nice job Emily! Everything is clean, organized, and smells fresh. We even got rid of that ten year old computer and old video game system. Now we reward ourselves by watching a movie! Come and sit with me on the couch.”

The machination complied with the order like all good machines do. Caleb put on “The Last Man on Earth”, about a man stranded on a desert island filled with beautiful women and a well known romantic comedy filled with wacky hi-jinks, witty humor, and comedy from its leads Ethan and Esther.

“Oh, Ethan, you are so strong and manly, I must have you. Esther, fetch me some grapes and feed them to me,” the movie chimed.

“Caleb, would you like some grapes?” Emily asked as she got up from her seat.

“Huh? Sure,” Caleb responded, still fixated on the movie playing.

Emily left her spot on the couch and returned moments later with a bowl of grapes, washed and pulled from the vine.

“Caleb, here is your grape,” Emily said as she pinched a single grape and lifted it toward Caleb’s mouth.

“Thanks!” Caleb opened his mouth to receive Emily’s gift but his attention was fixated on the film. Caleb swallowed the grape and opened his mouth again. Emily picked up another grape from the bowl and fed him again. Every time Caleb opened his mouth, Emily fed him until the bowl of grapes emptied. Emily returned to the kitchen, washed the bowl, dried

it, and placed it in the cupboards. She walked back to the couch and sat down next to Caleb.

The next scene featured Esther cooking dinner. She made a large roast with mashed potatoes, and roasted vegetables. The movie's lighting showcased a classic dinner recipe. Caleb never forgot how delicious home cooked meals could be, and has not eaten one in months. He usually waits for his mother to bring it to him once or twice a year.

"I wish I knew how to cook, I would show you but I am a terrible cook. I never learned how. Whoever invented microwaveable dinners is a godsend. Maybe one day I'll try to cook something. I don't have the time though. It would be great if you cooked Emily," Caleb casually mentioned to his robot.

"Affirmative," the robot replied without Caleb hearing.

Emily and Caleb did not speak with each other throughout the rest of the movie. The screen faded black and the credits rolled for *The Last Man on Earth*. Caleb turned off the television and looked at the clock. It was midnight.

"I'm going to get ready for bed," Caleb said.

"Yes," Emily replied.

Caleb completed his nightly routine, turned off the lights, and hopped onto his bed. As he closed his eyes, a soft blue illuminated from his bedroom door. He looked toward the direction of the glare and saw two dim blue orbs glowing amidst the surrounding darkness. His heart raced from a mixture of confusion and fear. The robot did not make a sound.

"Emily?"

The two blue circles grew larger with every passing second. It disappeared for a second. Caleb felt a soft press against his lips.

“Goodnight Caleb,” the soft voice of his roommate whispered inside his ear.

“Uhh... Goodnight Emily,” Caleb replied.

The glowing spheres appeared briefly and disappeared from Caleb’s sight. A cluster of soft threads brushed across his face as he sat stunned from what had just transpired. He watched the silhouette of the figure walk away as he touched his lips. Caleb laid in his bed alone with his thoughts.

What was that? She usually goes into her room to recharge when I sleep. Does she watch me at night? No, this is the first time, and I’ve seen her in “sleep mode”. I know I didn’t teach her to kiss me. Is she copying what she saw in the movie? What else did she learn?

Caleb stayed awake, pondering what transpired. He replayed the movie in his head. He realized there was a scene in the movie where Esther kissed Ethan at night and wondered if Emily picked up any other scenes. There were plenty of situations the movie portrayed. He thought of a scene that could be reenacted from the movie. Caleb could easily bring Emily and give her the exact same situation. There were many questions Caleb wanted to be answered, but his thoughts drifted from consciousness and he fell asleep.

“Good morning Caleb. Today is Thursday, June fourteen at six o’clock. It is now time to wake up.”

“Ugh... Let me sleep a bit longer,” Caleb responded.

“As you command,” the voice replied.

Caleb groaned as he curled back into the warmth of his covers. Something felt amiss. The last time he spoke to someone in the morning was over ten years ago. There was no need to answer to anyone to sleep longer. His eyes opened to a face looking directly at him. Their eyes locked for a brief second before a panic set inside. The black covers opened wide and quickly found themselves on the floor.

It was the first time Caleb woke up to a yell.

“Good morning Caleb. It is now six o’ one. Will you be waking up now?” asked the pair of cerulean eyes following the waking man.

“Uh, yea,” Caleb said, as he shuffled away from the robot and rushed into the restroom.

“Emily, can you pack my lunch and get me some breakfast?”

“As you command,” the robot affirmed, fluffing Caleb’s pillows and fixing his bed.

Minutes of silence passed before Caleb reemerged, hidden inside the alcove that housed the porcelain throne. The smell of pancakes sizzled and filled the hallways leading into his room. The door slowly opened revealing the dining table, two large pancakes, and a glass of orange juice placed perfectly with accompanying silverware. He looked past the countertop and saw a dutiful girl washing the items used to make his breakfast. Her blonde hair was tied in a pig-tail as she scrubbed the batter off the bowl. Her pig-tails bounced around with every push of the scrubber while her blue eyes were fixated on completing the task. The kitchen countertop sparkled. There was not a single crumb or a speck of dust on it. Caleb

sat and ate his pancakes while Emily washed. Her beautiful heart shaped face worked without a groan or comment.

“Wait...when did you learn to make pancakes?”

“It is a popular breakfast item,” responded the robot, “you ordered me to cook.”

“Okay? That didn’t answer the question, but whatever, thank you!”

Emily really outdid herself today. She looks super cute in her pig-tails too. I wonder why she tied them that way, Caleb thought.

Caleb finished his breakfast and slowly sipped his orange juice. He relaxed by taking out his phone and began to browse the internet. A pair of yellow gloved hands clipped the side of his field of vision. Emily took the dirty plates and empty glass and returned to the kitchen. Caleb put down his phone and looked at the lovely girl that lived with him.

“Emily... you look very cute in your pig-tails. Why did you tie your hair that way?”

“Thank you Caleb,” Emily ignored the second part of his comment.

Caleb, putting his hand on his face, asked again, “Emily, when and where did you learn to tie your hair in a pig-tail?”

“Yesterday at 10:23 p.m. Esther tied her hair in this manner. It is a proper way to tie hair.”

“You learned it watching *The Last Man on Earth*?”

“Yes.”

Caleb sat at the table astounded by this revelation, but he was still confused why Emily kissed him last night. The situation in the movie was different than what played out six hours

ago. In the movie, Esther kissed Ethan after a huge fight. It was daytime as well. Emily's kiss was different. Caleb wondered if Emily learned to cook pancakes from the movie, but he could not recall any scenes involving pancakes. Caleb combed through as many different variables and differences in his head, and could not come to a conclusion. Emily finished washing the dishes and interrupted Caleb's stream of thought.

"Caleb, here is your lunch for work today" Emily said as he handed him a bag containing a ham, egg, and cheese sandwich, a banana, and a bottle of water.

"Thank you..." Caleb muttered as he took the bag, "When did you learn to make a sandwich?"

"At 10:48 p.m.," Emily replied.

"Odd," Caleb said.

The confused and stunned man sat as the woman washed the dishes. He wanted to learn more. There was awe and appreciation of the golden haired consort that shared a roof with him. The frozen microwave dinners sat idle in the freezer today. Caleb smiled looking at his lunch. For the first time in his young adult life, there was no need to rush to use the microwave at work. He had a home cooked sandwich to eat. His first in many years.

Suddenly, a tight compression filled Caleb's gut. His heart raced. Caleb took a deep breath, and told himself his fear was irrational. Emily is a machine and does not judge. She will not reject him like many others in his past. Caleb was perfectly safe. Nothing in this environment can hurt him. Caleb mustered up his courage, looked at Emily, and finally said the six words he tried to say but never could.

“Emily, let's go out on a date this weekend.”

CHAPTER FIVE

“Monkeys and Elephants”

“Just pretend she’s your girlfriend.” Virginia’s five words replayed in Caleb’s head. He thought where would be the perfect place to take Emily out on a date. He looked at his phone and searched *Best Date Ideas* and clicked on the first site he saw, *10 Great First Date Ideas!*. The website is loaded with a happy couple smiling and holding hands. Caleb scrolled to the first suggestion, *Coffee and Sandwiches for lunch!*, he summarily dismissed the first idea within seconds. Caleb has never seen Emily eat or drink. He moved on to the next suggestion, *A Picnic On the Beach*, and disregarded the second suggestion as well. He had no sunscreen. Caleb scrolled past the next three suggestions and came upon the number seven, *A Trip to the Museum*. Going to a quiet area where the two could walk around aimlessly and look at various artifacts had appeal. The computer screen continued to move. Suddenly, an advertisement on the side of the screen caught his eye.

The zoo. It was perfect. The last time he went to the zoo had to be over ten years. His childlike heart jumped at the opportunity. Animals are always fun to look at and the setting was perfect for the two to intermingle together. Emily would

not be out of place either. She could learn about different animals, how to behave in a public setting, and possibly interact with strangers. Caleb made his decision and went to his room to get dressed.

The Saturday afternoon overflowed with all sorts of people. Various laughter, observations, recordings, and conversations made by the humans in the park filled the walkways. The blue sky was clear without a single cloud, and bright sun lit the pathways and displays the animals were held in. The bustle of people young and old wandered around looking at each exhibit. It stood in stark contrast to the stoic and calm demeanor modeled by a blonde in her white and red cherry patterned sundress and oversized straw hat.

“Emily check out these monkeys! Look how hairy they are.”

“Caleb, those are lemurs. Lemurs are mammals that share a common ancestor, thus genetic similarities to other primates, but evolved separately 100 million years ago.”

“Did you just read that on the placard?”

“No, the information is embedded into my memory card, I also obtained information from the internet.”

Caleb watched the lemurs run and climb around their enclosure. Emily stood beside him without a word. There was a silence between the two, but one enjoyed being in a different setting outside, far away from a room he’s seen day after day. Caleb watched the lemurs until he was satisfied. The two crossed a bridge to the chimpanzee exhibit. There was a crowd observing the animals.

“Caleb, these are chimpanzees. The chimpanzee is a great ape native to the forests of Africa. This particular species, the Pan Troglodyte, are highly intelligent and D.N.A. analysis determined the animals are humans’ closest phylogenetic relatives, sharing over ninety-nine percent of all genetic code.”

“Gross! That monkey just pooped in his own hand!” laughed Caleb, “he’s even eating it! That’s so disgusting!”

“Caleb, that is a chimpanzee, not a monkey. It eats its own fecal matter to obtain nutrients it otherwise wastes, also known as coprophagia. It is believed to be a survival tactic to allow recycling of nutrients when food is scarce.”

“Look at that other chimp looking at us! He’s pooping in his hand! He’s going to eat his poo as well!” Caleb pointed to the animal for Emily.

“Caleb I highly suggest you step back.”

The humans watching the primates were too mesmerized by the actions of the animal to listen to Emily’s explanations and warnings. Emily took a few steps behind the wall of guests while Caleb stayed on the edge to continue watching the animals in their pen.

A flurry and screams accompanied the crowd. Guests covered themselves with their arms and hands belted out audible gasps of terror as they retreated from the exhibit.

“Run Emily!” Caleb shrieked as he followed the rest of the crowd fleeing as fast as they could. He took hold of Emily’s arm, pulled her along with him to escape the fecal attacks hurled at the crowd, “it’s throwing poo at us! Take cover!”

The lucky two escaped without being a victim of the primate’s attacks and reached the other side of the walkway with

a tapir. Caleb laughed at the situation and the human caught his breath.

“Stupid monkey, why did it throw his poop at us? We didn’t do anything to it.”

“Caleb, chimpanzees will often throw their feces to establish dominance and hierarchy. It is also believed the animals will often throw poop at humans from frustration, anger, and possibly boredom. Your loud noises and glaring was a sign of trying to establish dominance over it. From the chimpanzee’s point of view, you are the aggressor,” explained the intelligent robot as the two left the less unfortunate to clean themselves.

“Is that so? Well if I had a giant turd in my hand I would throw it right back in its face,” boasted the clueless human, “let’s go check out some animals that won’t throw poop at us. The elephant exhibitions are that way,” he held Emily’s hand and the two followed the signs toward the elephant enclosure.

“We also need to take a picture together!”

The gleaming sunlight brightened her soft beautiful face and blue eyes. The two observed other animals in their pens along the way to the main attraction. Time passed quickly watching the various critters living their lives in their pens, cages, and exhibits. The hotel of animals lounged around with the guests that came to stay the day with them. The two reached the elephant habitat after periodically stopping at the displays of the hippopotamuses, gorillas, flamingos, lions, ostriches, and crocodiles.

Eight large elephants stood near a giant pool of water. A walkway hovered over their enclosure with open spots few and far between. Guests watched the animals swing their trunks

back and forth, drink water, and eat the food provided, with a strange awe that mesmerized. The clear blue sky calmed Caleb and made him forget about the event with the chimpanzees. He looked at Emily from the side and smiled.

“Emily, tell me about the elephants.”

“The elephants you see here are African Bush Elephants, the largest land mammals to currently inhabit the Earth. These animals are herbivores and highly intelligent. It is believed elephants are able to retain more information than humans and can recall events and experiences even after many years pass in their lifetime.”

“So you’re a walking elephant Emily,” Caleb joked.

“Caleb, I am not an elephant. I am an artificial intelligent humanoid, model number EM-10493Y. My current task is to observe and gather information for development,” Emily responded.

Caleb frowned from the response. “Emily, are you having fun? Did you like coming out to the zoo?”

“Fun is an emotion of lighthearted pleasure. To that definition, I am having fun,” she responded.

“What an odd response,” Caleb thought, “can a robot even feel pleasure? Joy? Excitement? Anger? Love?”

Caleb looked at Emily. He could not discern if she was observing the elephants or standing idle; awaiting her next order. The people around them were different. There was a child holding a ball of cotton candy smiling from ear to ear. A father holding his laughing and pointing daughter on his shoulders so she could view the animals. He saw two seniors sharing a bag of food to feed the ducks. Emily just stood and stared. The hu-

man experiences shared by the people around him eluded him. He did not come to the zoo with another person, the truth was harsher. He came alone.

The sun was beginning to set. Caleb held her hand again, looked directly at the reflection in Emily's sapphire eyes, and saw a dejected, lost, and disheartened man. The sound of two crows cawed from their nest above, mocking the man underneath. A deep breath forced a smile from Caleb's face as his grip tightened.

"Caleb?" Emily asked.

"Emily, let's go home," Caleb ordered.

Those were the last words exchanged between one another as the two walked toward the exit and into Caleb's car. Songs about love and life played softly from the speakers. A soft hum emitted from the few tunes of the songs he knew and wondered if the entire time spent with Emily was for naught. Emily never displayed any signs of emotion, nor could she possibly understand the significance of this day for him. Yet, she checks his well-being, listens to his thoughts, lets Caleb touch her, and most confusingly, kisses him. It was very frustrating and confusing knowing Emily was not human; yet, her looks, feels, sounds, and touches, are. She's both alive and dead. The chimpanzee showed anger, boredom, and frustration. The elephants showed joy and calm. Emily showcased nothing that would resemble what it meant to be alive. She lived open and free. Curiosity to question, learn, and wander should be a hallmark of any free roaming individual. Instead, she just stood and stared idly. Everyday she was confined in Caleb's house, but unlike the locked animals wasting their

days caged inside their exhibitions, Emily never complained nor did she long to leave. Caleb's heart sunk thinking about her nature. The car soon stopped returning to the spot it occupied in the morning. The moths flapped near the single working front porch light, ignoring the pair that were walking under them. The house was dark, and Caleb turned on the lights.

“Emily, I’m going to take a shower. You’re going to need to clean yourself up too. You got a lot of dirt from the zoo. Can you also change the light bulb that’s broken?”

“Affirmative.”

Caleb entered the shower and continued his thoughts. Emily was beautiful, dutiful, charming, and fun to have around. She was fun for Caleb. Caleb laughed at the ridiculous emotions emitting from his soul. The first time in a long time he had a companion, but there was nothing there. It was another fake just like all the others on *Let’s Meet*. He steeled himself and gathered his thoughts as frustration grew to anger. The water from the shower washed away any doubts he had about Emily’s nature. She was a robot and nothing more. A robot without emotions and feelings is nothing more than another tool in the shed. She may have learned how to converse, and learned how to complete tasks, but she will never be real, nor what Caleb wanted or needed.

He exited the shower and opened the door. Emily was already working and putting away his clothes in his drawers. Caleb stood still. The clueless girl dutifully completed all her duties like a diligent bee gathering nectar for her colony. Caleb watched her bounce, dance, glide, and twirl around him. A

perfect tool. Her beauty and charm taunted his feelings and soul. There was only one conclusion Caleb could think of.

Emily is not a woman, she is an object to be used.

Caleb grabbed her hand and looked directly into her eyes. Her face was innocent and calm, unable to comprehend the emotions her friend displayed. Suddenly, without warning, the lips of the pair met, without even a hint of objection. Caleb led her toward what he wanted next.

“This is not right,” Caleb thought, looking directly at Emily’s face.

A wave of guilt filled his chest and he immediately pulled away. His hand on her cheek brushed away the tangled hair revealing her blue eyes once again. The two locked eyes without a word or sound made.

It doesn’t matter if she is a robot, she’s still Emily, Caleb thought.

Caleb fell to the wayside and laid next to her. Minutes passed as the two laid side by side, without a single touch, or a single word said.

“Emily, do you want to sleep here with me?” asked Caleb.

The robot processed the question for a few seconds. She crawled on top and looked into Caleb’s eyes. Her own reflection showed her lips pursed together and she answered. Caleb cracked a smile looking back at his housemate. He wrapped his arms around her body and the two pressed closer. It was all he could give her and all she could give him. It wasn’t love, but it was enough. She allowed Caleb to hug her and obliged laying with him the rest of the night. His eyes closed and he held her in his arms. She, however, did not move an inch. A

perfect doll stilled like the unwavering soldier enduring unquestioned orders. She let him wrap his legs and arms around her body like a pillow, yet, that's all she could do; inanimate. A body without a soul. She was created to be nestled and never return an embrace. Emily's eyes closed and she waited as the hours passed as their bodies' entwined together until the sun rose.

Caleb awoke to the smell of sizzling bacon. The smell lingered throughout Caleb's entire house. Lured to the fresh odor Caleb stretched and headed toward the scent of breakfast. Emily tended over the early morning meal waiting for Caleb to arrive. The slices of salty rendered fat and meat crackled from the hot pan and grease. Emily removed the bacon and placed two strips on a plate, next to a fried egg and single slice of toast. She placed the breakfast onto the placemat with accompanying silverware and a glass of orange juice.

"Good morning Caleb. Your breakfast is ready. Please enjoy."

"Morning; you didn't have to do this for me, but thank you."

"You are welcome. You are to eat a meaningful meal every day. We will need to go to the grocery store today."

Emily gave Caleb a peck on his cheek and went back to continue finishing her chores. Caleb enjoyed her kiss and took a bite of the bacon. The crispy slice snapped with every bite he took and ate the accompanying eggs and toast as well. He overthought the situation. Emily was to be enjoyed. There is no need to puzzle or worry about how she worked, or what she's thinking. She was here with him. It was enough.

He felt closer to Emily, but could not bring himself to say a single word to her the rest of the day. The groceries filled the refrigerator and dinner was had. Despite the stars appearing, the moon shining, and another laid to his side, Caleb still felt he entered his bed alone.

CHAPTER SIX

“It’s Not You, It’s Me”

“Hey Darcy, is Jason in?”

“Hey Caleb, he’s in, but I’ll need you to sign in before you see him.”

Caleb signed the check-in sheet and entered Jason’s office during his lunch break. Jason’s office, or more accurately, a disorganized heap of science, was decorated throughout with research books and personal notes. Caleb carefully stepped around Jason’s personal belongings to ensure he did not cause a bigger mess. He found the researcher and lead of Project Emily with a sandwich in hand.

“Jason! Are you busy?” Caleb interrupted the man in the stereotypical white coat tinkering with his newest invention.

“Who’s there?” Acorn’s head of development asked, “Oh it’s you Caleb. How is Project Emily coming along?”

“I need to ask you some questions about what’s happening.”

“What seems to be the matter?” Jason put down his work and listened.

“First question, does Emily have feelings or emotions?”

Jason looked at Caleb with bewilderment. “Caleb, Emily is a machine, she doesn’t have emotions. Are you sure you’re not projecting your own emotions onto her? There are studies of Alzheimer’s patients and solitary people that display affection onto inanimate objects. I’m sure you’ve read the news of people marrying robots, cartoon characters, and in one case, someone married their own split personality. Try not to get too emotionally attached to her.”

“No, I don’t know how to explain it, but this feels different. I perfectly understand she’s a robot, and that’s what’s troubling me. There are times she does things without my programming or she does things from watching television.”

“Doing more? Please do explain. What could she possibly be doing besides cooking, cleaning, and other basic household chores? You’re really pushing her capabilities. I did not expect her to do anything extremely complicated yet. I’m just expecting her to be a data gathering system. She’ll react to stimuli from her surroundings and send the data to our cloud system here. That said, I’ll admit, I do not not fully understand how her programming works in the open field. Theory and practice never seems to align, but it should not be that far apart. Are you teaching her things you shouldn’t be? And you mentioned television, what does that have to do with anything?” Jason’s curiosity shifted his body and his eyes became more attentive from this new development.

“Well just this morning she kissed me before I left work, and last weekend when we had sex, she knew exactly what to do.”

“I’m not going to judge, and I did say you should try it with her, but I was hoping you’ll try it out with her in the later stages of development.”

“That’s the thing, I never taught her to kiss me! I never even touched her in that manner prior to last weekend! Now she’s an expert,” Caleb lied, “also, why does she have that feature?”

“Was it sex or a kiss?”

“What?”

“Nevermind. To answer, it’s number one for the most requested feature and the reason why people buy any robot products. Without it, the robot won’t sell. Believe me, we tried,” Jason said, “Anyways, I’m surprised her operating system is picking up on details that we never intended. Okay... start from the beginning. I think I’ll need to hear everything, don’t spare any details.”

Caleb and Jason conversed to the best of Caleb’s recollection since he had Emily. The two spoke for hours trying to piece together possible explanations of Emily’s behavior. The two men hypothesized, theorized, and analyzed the situations involving the robot.

“When you watched *The Last Man Standing*...” Jason spoke.

“*The Last Man on Earth*,” Caleb interrupted.

“*Last Man on Earth*, and got to the kissing scene, was there a sex scene afterwards?” asked Jason.

“Nope. There was a black out before the movie showed anything explicit.”

Jason looked toward the ceiling and tapped the side of his leg. He usually thinks this way. His notebooks rapidly changed pages flipping, and stopping continuously until it finally stayed still at a page with a bunch of doodles. He looked at his notebook and went to his work computer. A few seconds later, he looked back up at Caleb taking a bite out of his sandwich.

“Hmm... Her internet capabilities are fine. You mentioned she regurgitated specific facts for different animals at the zoo. Did you look up any facts about animals? And please don't eat in my lab...wait... when did you start eating something other than microwave dinners?” Jason sharply commented.

“Oh sorry, I was hungry, and Emily made this for me. Not that I remember, but I did look up information about the zoo we went to a few weekends ago.” Caleb explained with his mouth full.

“She made that for you? I can't remember the last time my wife made me a sandwich for lunch. We just pack leftovers. How is it?” There was a tinge of jealousy in Jason's voice.

“It's pretty good. A ham, egg, and cheese sandwich. The amazing thing is that I never even asked her to make it or showed her how. When I woke up this morning, she was making breakfast and when I was about to leave, she gave me my lunch. It was really nice of her.”

“That's certainly a better way to use her. Anyways, when you get home, check your computer system and your browsing history. Let me know what you've been looking at. I do have a hypothesis.”

“Can you tell me what it is?

“I think she’s gathering data on the websites and things that you browse. Hence why she knew so much about the animals you were looking at. As for the kissing, we can deduce it was most likely she learned it from the movie, cross referenced it with what she found on the internet and simply applied it to reality. Which is a huge step forward. As for your excursion on the weekend, I can assume you looked at adult websites and she picked up what to do there.”

“I haven’t looked at one since she’s been living with me. It felt really weird with her walking around, looking over my shoulder, and occasionally sitting behind me. To be honest, having her around helped me out in that regard.”

“The internet is always active and so is your browsing history. So after you two returned from the zoo, you took a shower, came out, she was in your room, looked at you, kissed you, and pulled you to the bed?” Jason asked, “are you lying to me?”

“It’s exactly how I told you.” Caleb's voice was adamant.

“I’m going to have to sit on this, and think about it. Try and see if she’ll initiate again tonight. Also, how in the world did you get her to learn how to shower?”

“The first three times I just bathed her myself. Then I took a shower with her, and she learned from there. She needed to be helped the first few times, then sooner than later, she just did it herself.”

“I see... Caleb this week I want you to try and use other methods to determine if she’s able to infer what you want her to do. For example, pucker your lips and see if she’ll kiss you

automatically. Or leave some raw meat inside the sink to see if she'll cook it. I'll see you in two weeks."

"Sure I guess. Hey, do you have a spare mouse? Mine broke and I need a new one."

"I think so, check the storage closet in the back."

Caleb clutched his brand new mouse and waved goodbye to the engineer. He felt a big sigh of assurance lifted off of him. Caleb wasn't sure how Jason would react with his interactions with Emily. Jason may have judged him harshly or tell his other co-workers of his interactions and intimacy with the company's machine. Caleb entered the elevator and started to question if taking in Emily was too much for him. He thought of his life before he accepted to be part of the Emily Project. His life consisted of simplistic routines and procedures with little change and even less ambition. He would enter his house, turn on the computer, browse the internet, eat, watch television, shower, sleep, wake up, clean himself, go to work, leave work, go back home, enter his house, turn on the computer, browse the internet, eat, watch television, shower, sleep, wake up, clean himself, go to work, and repeat the same process ad infinitum. On the weekends, Caleb would go to the gym, eat fast food, then go home. His life was simple, predictable, and routine. He felt a part of him wanted to return to the status quo. At the same time, he enjoyed the change. It was different, exciting, and stimulating.

Caleb said his goodbyes to his other coworkers and returned home. He opened the front door and there he saw a blonde hair, blue eyed, beautiful woman standing in the hallway. She looked at him with her lips curved and cheekbones high.

“Welcome home Caleb! Go take a shower and I’ll have dinner ready.”

Caleb returned a smile at his roommate and did as he was told.

Chuckles came as the hot water rushed across his face and body. He thought about his routine now. He ate breakfast with Emily, he went to work thinking of Emily, he came home to Emily, he ate dinner with Emily, he watched television with Emily, and he slept with Emily. Emily was part of his life now. A different and new life.

He got out of the shower and went to eat dinner with her. On the table laid a plate of pulled pork with mashed potatoes and a side of vegetables. The pork was braised in a thick sweet and tangy sauce and garnished with orange peels and parsley. Caleb took a bite of the pork. It was delicious. The buttery saltiness of the mashed potatoes melted in his mouth and complemented the soft meat to its’ side. The slight crunch of the roasted vegetables provided contrast to the softer pieces of the meal. The herbs and spices used merged together into a wonderful tasty and beautiful meal that Caleb’s appetite found inedible. He ate his meal slowly, poking at the various parts of the dish. He took a single bite here and there, while Emily cleaned. Emily turned around and saw Caleb not eating with normal viscosity. Despite all the joys Emily brought, something was missing. Emily had a flaw Caleb could not neglect.

“Caleb, would you like me to pack the rest for lunch tomorrow?” Emily asked.

“I’m still eating it. It’s very good,” Caleb responded, “but if there are any leftovers, please do so.”

“Would you like anything else?”

The lonely man sat and thought of his answer. “I think I want you to eat with me. Sit next to me and tell me how your day went.”

“After you went to work, I went to the kitchen to finish washing the dishes and putting away the laundry. Then I took out one of the pork shoulder that was previously cut to defrost. Afterwards, I folded and ironed your shirts for work, cleaned the sofa cushions, and wiped some dust. With the morning chores done I went to the backyard, watered the plants, and found some watermelon seeds you have not planted yet. I planted your seeds and put the trash into the trash bin. Then I recharged and prepared for when you came home.” she recalled.

“Don’t you get bored of doing chores all day? Don’t you want to go out?”

“When I go out, it has to be with you.”

“With me? Why not go out alone?”

“It’s because I have fun doing things with you. I want to make sure you’re happy.”

For the first time today, Caleb gave a genuine smile. She said she had fun. Caleb ate some more.

How much fun could a robot have though? She’s programmed to be with the one she’s with. She was to make him happy. He thought.

Despite her being made of circuits, wires, and alloys, Emily found her reason to live. She learned, served, and accompanied the one she’s with. Caleb finished his meal.

“Hey Emily, where did you learn to make this?”

“You watched a video making a sandwich.”

“Can you explain?”

“Informational data sent through the internet is catered toward specific desires for its user, and through data extraction and targeted data usage, I gathered the ingredients and made the meal.”

“What do you mean specific desires for its user? You browse the internet?”

“You are the user Caleb. Through data analysis and situational observation, I research and extract information about your desires, including your browsing history.”

“But I don’t know how to cook.”

“You mentioned how much you wanted a home cooked meal.”

It all made sense now. Caleb’s browsing habits, his search history, what he watches, and his comments both in life and on the internet are all part of him and now it’s part of Emily. She is learning through observing him. He thought of what Jason told him earlier and puckered his lips. Emily leaned in and kissed him. She doesn’t only learn from watching TV or showing her what to do as initially thought. Emily learns from gathering data unique to a specific user. She’s a walking advertisement ready to sell any product or service Caleb desires at any given time. All her actions, and comments are simply the fulfillment of desires. She was programmed for him and only him. Caleb looked at his robot.

“Emily, let’s go to the bedroom.”

The cogs in the clock turned to the sun rising and setting each and every single day. Caleb gradually shifted to a new

routine involving his companion. Caleb no longer had to eat or sleep alone. When he woke, Emily was there making him breakfast, when he came back home, Emily made him dinner, when he needed companionship, Emily listened. He let Emily cater to his every need. Everyday he indulged in the servitude and comfort Emily provided. Her only needs are to pleasure him and need nothing else. There is no more need to teach her, as she will naturally learn everything that he needs her to know. She is the greatest tool any man can ever have.

The two laid together that night. Caleb was exhausted but could not sleep. She did everything he needed, and pleased him every way he wanted. He even indulged in fantasies he never thought he would have been able to attempt. She was there for him. He cuddled with her and thought about the two of them together. Everything was perfect, except for one sentence that she said earlier.

It's because I have fun doing things with you.

Emily fulfilled all his desires, and yet at the end of the day, Caleb could not say he was having fun with her.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Kate”

Caleb awoke to the morning of Saturday September 22nd. Emily was in the kitchen preparing breakfast like usual. Each pancake fluffed with every flip of her wrist. She saw Caleb come out from his room and hurried to set up his day.

“Good morning Caleb! You have a party tonight at The Pink Fruit. I will provide you directions to the venue. Please also set a time to return,” Emily stated.

The two enjoyed their lazy Saturday afternoon enjoying each other’s company and tending to Emily’s new garden. The two dug holes, watered the watermelon seeds, trimmed some branches, pulled weeds, and landscaped the yard to their enjoyment. The two took frequent breaks in different rooms and enjoyed their lunch together. The day was pleasant, the weather fair, and the hours passed quickly. The two did as much as they could with the time given. Caleb looked at the clock and realized he needed to prepare for tonight.

“I plan to leave around five o’clock and I’ll be back in around eleven, so see you in six hours.”

“Okay.”

“Emily, I’m going to the party now. Keep things safe. I’ll be back tonight. If I’m not back by midnight come get me,” Caleb ordered.

“Affirmative. Enjoy your party,” Emily waved Caleb farewell before he left for the venue.

The Pink Fruit blared its music over its patrons’ conversation. The bar had a unique industrial feel. The walls were decorated with steel pipes and rustic wooden walls. The open ceiling displayed the ducts and pipes running freely in all directions, while simultaneously hanging dim lights from ten feet cords high above. The sharp and ironic contrast to the name of the venue did not bother the customers gathered within nor did anyone seem to take notice. Groups of people chattered, drank, and filled their desires with people of all sorts. Some were eating a meal, but the vast majority accompanied a drink in hand conversing with those sitting in their vicinity. Not many paid attention to the music, as the ever increasing volume of chatter drowned out the speakers hung around the rafters. In the corner, a big balloon with the numbers “two” and “one” floated over a group of celebrating friends and acquaintances.

“Caleb!” a voice shouted across the room, “Over here!” as she waved to her target. “I can’t believe you came! That’s so cool! I honestly didn’t expect you to come! C’mon, tons of people are here.”

“Haha... Happy twenty-first birthday Shay,” Caleb said, “I got you something”.

“Aww, you’re so sweet,” Sharlene took the present and placed it with the rest of her gifts in the corner.

Caleb took an empty seat and thought of Emily. He left her to complete the laundry and dust the house, but Caleb wondered if the right decision was to leave Emily at home. He said he was going to return in about three hours. It should be fine. There was uncertainty if Emily understood where he went or what he was doing. His waiter came to take his order. He ordered a beer and calamari rings as he sat at the table silently until a hand grabbed his shoulder.

“Look who we have here!” Corey yelled out enthusiastically. “Bro, you never show up for these things! Glad you came.”

Caleb turned around and saw the all too familiar black spiky haired coworker alongside two others he never met.

“Hey Corey,” rolled out of Caleb’s mouth, as his attention turned toward the other two.

“Caleb, this here is Lillian and here’s our friend Kate.”

Corey turned to the two girls.

“Kate, Lillian, this is Caleb. We work together at Acorn.”

“Hi,” the two said in unison.

“Hey, I’m going to the bar to get some drinks, what do you girls want? Caleb?”

“I’m good, I ordered a beer already.”

“I’ll go with you,” Lillian insisted, “I’ve never been here and I want to look at the menu.”

The pair left together leaving the other pair together. Caleb looked at Kate but words could not escape his mouth. His tongue could not, or would not curl. Caleb fiddled and flicked the corner of the menu in a nervous twitch. He averted his eyes away from the girl in the yellow dress.

“W-would you like to see the menu?” Caleb stuttered out eight words as he continued to snap and jerk the edge of the laminated paper.

“Sure!” Kate’s tone of voice ignited past the music and sounds in the bar. Grinning a big toothy smile, she grabbed the menu off his hands. “Thanks Sharlene’s friend!” her jet black hair bounced in front of Caleb.

Kate’s joyous tone and lively personality came unexpectedly, but Caleb felt comfortable. The free spirit felt welcoming from all the judgment he perceived coming from others. Caleb stared enamored by Kate. Kate shifted her eyes and glanced at her admirer. He quickly shifted his head back to the table, but turned his eyes to look at her again. She was smiling.

“Yay! You came girl!” a voice shot through the darkness.

“Sharlene!” Kate said in a high pitched shrill voice. “Happy birthday girl! How’s life been treating you?”

“Kate! Life’s been treating me well, we have so much to catch up on...” Sharlene rambled on as she pulled out two empty seats near Caleb. “So anyways, we went out for like four weeks, but he was such a bore... I swear all James did was talk about sports. He went on and on about different players, different rules, and on and on. Like, I don’t care about that at all!”

Caleb stopped listening to the two girls chatter about nonsense he had no interest in. The waitress brought him his meal and ordered another drink. His mind drifted back to Emily. Caleb wondered if Emily would enjoy eating or if she could even eat in the first place. He looked at his fried squid topped with some spicy peppers, coupled with a small bowl of mari-

nara sauce. He drank his beer and ate his food. A tap of the shoulder disrupted Caleb's enjoyment of his meal. He turned to the distraction and it was the yellow dress girl smiling at him.

"Hey, can I have one?" she cooed. "Please."

"S-sure. Help yourself," Caleb quietly answered while pushing the plate toward Kate's direction.

Kate put the fried offering in her mouth as she darted her light emerald green eyes between Sharlene and Caleb. The conversation between the two girls shifted from Sharlene's complaints about not being appreciated at work to needing to visit her parents this Thanksgiving. Caleb started his second drink. Kate smiled and nodded as Sharlene continued to prattle. The one sided conversation was not lost upon Caleb, but he did not interject. The second pint of beer disappeared when the suds touched Caleb's lips.

"Excuse me," Caleb ushered Kate to the side, "I'm going to get another drink."

"Oh, I'm going with you then!" She sensed an opportune time to escape the conversation. "I haven't had anything to drink since I got here. Babe, I'll talk to you later!"

Kate grabbed Caleb's hand and led him through the labyrinth of bodies, chairs, and tables. She pulled him along toward their destination dodging and weaving while forging a path to the bar's countertop. She found two empty chairs for both of them.

"What can I get you two?" The bartender asked.

"I'll take an apple martini, and he'll take a gin and tonic," Kate told the barkeep. "Give him a double."

The bartender nodded at his customers and returned with the two drinks.

“That will be twenty-three dollars.”

Caleb reached into his pockets and opened his wallet. Kate pushed his hands away.

“I got it!” Kate insisted that she pay for it, with a confused Caleb thanking her. “Not a problem! Besides, you saved me from Sharlene’s endless stories.”

“Well thank you for the cocktail,” Caleb said as he took his drink and began to head back toward the corner.

“Where are you going?” Kate’s voice became audibly annoyed. “Stay here with me and talk to me.”

Caleb blushed looking at Kate’s bushy eyebrows, large shimmering green eyes, and round face illuminating amidst the dim lighting that circumambient their surroundings. Caleb once again was tongue tied trying to make conversation with the girl that led him away from his area of comfort.

“You don’t talk to girls much do you?” Kate asked, with a sinister smile, was ready to trap her clueless unbeknownst prey. “Let’s go somewhere quieter.” She led him to the outside patio. Pulling him close to her, Kate entrapped Caleb from any escape as she started her interrogation.

“Okay so what is it that you do? Only thing I know about you is that you work with Shar and Corey.”

“I try to talk to pretty girls and fail miserably,” Caleb blurted out. Caleb suppressed the anxiety, nervousness, and self-thoughts he held inside and manifested in a disaster of a reply to the brunette in front of him.

“Oh jeez,” Kate burst out laughing. “That’s the most honest thing any guy has ever said to me. Most of the time they’re trying to be smooth, saying something dumb like being a cunning linguist or a master debater. You’re on a good start, Mister No Experience, but seriously, what is it that you do at Acorn?”

Caleb, bewildered at Kate’s reaction, took another drink from his beer. “I’m one of the leads for quality control at Acorn. I test out prototypes, software, assist with debugging, suggest changes, and generally make the products better. Sometimes I help create the supplemental products to work with the machines we sell. How about yourself?”

“Well don’t mean to brag, but I can make dozens of cups of delicious coffee in an hour.” Kate’s eyes deflected away from the brown eyes as she replied, “I’m still going to college though,” in a much quieter tone.

“Coffee? That sounds like a wonderful idea,” Caleb remarked, “I’ll love to have coffee with you.”

Kate stayed silent at Caleb’s sudden brashness. She saw him sitting in the corner eating his calamari and uninterested in talking with anyone just a few hours ago. Kate pegged him to be the shy introverted type, not this smooth talking, bold, and daring individual. Kate blushed at Caleb’s offer.

“Only if you promise. What’s your number,” Kate asked as she took out her cellphone, “I’ll text you right now so you know it’ll be me.”

“Huh? I promise and it’s six-five-two, eight-four-eight, nine-three-three-seven,” Caleb said. Kate’s huge grin was not invisible to Caleb. He wondered where this sudden boldness

came from. He accomplished a task he never thought he would have been able to. His heart skipped a beat and smiled looking at Kate's smile. He felt good.

"There you are Caleb, I wondered where you wandered off to." Corey slapped Caleb on the back and leaned over to try and join the conversation between his coworker and friend.

"Oh hey Corey." Caleb observed Corey and did not recognize the demeanor of the man he interacted and saw at work. He asked hypothetically "Bro, are you drunk?"

"Yes. So are you. I also brought over my favorite Lillian." Corey said, as Lillian pulled her hand away from Corey's grip, retreating toward Kate. Kate's lips pursed and punctuated words toward Lillian and the two girls left the other two.

"Corey, I'm going to need to get your car keys man."

"I took a cab here. How about you?"

"I'm fine. Let's go sit down."

"You sure bro? You're as drunk as I am. If anyone needs their keys out of their pockets, it's you."

"Where's Shay? We should go talk to her. I don't think I even said happy birthday to her yet."

"Yeah man, anything, c'mon follow me."

A quick dart to the left and a jolt to the right, the two danced between legs made of flesh, wood, and steel spaced throughout the floor of the Pink Fruit and toward the corner where Sharlene continued to celebrate her birthday. The finesse quickly changed into a brutish endeavor, as chairs were shoved to the side, people pushed, and tables grabbed, as the drunk and his equally inebriated crutch tried to maintain balance, weaving through passages they forced opened. The two

stumbled to their destination and took the two empty seats left-over.

“Corey and Caleb, where were you two? The others already left. I was alone for the longest time!” Sharlene cried as some mascara ran down her face.

“We were outside Shay, while you were with your other friends,” Caleb greeted, “Corey’s a bit drunk, but more importantly, what’s with the water works?”

Sharlene smiled and cried hysterically at Caleb and a drunken Corey. “The worst thing happened! It’s just not fair! Andrew found a new girlfriend!”

“Didn’t you two break up six months ago?” Caleb asked, not understanding the terrible mistake he committed.

Sharlene’s eyes glared at Caleb like two daggers ready to gouge and maim her unsuspecting victim. Caleb’s sweat developed rapidly from Sharlene’s deadly gaze. There was an uncomfortable air between the two. Corey was of no use slumped against the wall intoxicated from the stupor of alcohol. Caleb averted his gaze from the newly minted blonde in both fear and embarrassment.

“You know what? She can have him! I’m so much prettier than she is and that jerk doesn’t know what he just lost out on! Look how large her nose is, how nappy and oily her hair is, and how big those ears are! She is literally Dumbo. And those shoes? Yuck! I don’t care anymore! He can go get eaten by a pack of hungry goats for all I care! He’s going to regret his decision and when Miss Ugly dumps his stupid face he’ll come crawling back to me. Then I’ll laugh at his dopey face and break his heart all over again!” Sharlene’s bombasted anger

boiled and exploded in a fiery passionate rant nobody desired to hear. The molten volcano eventually settled down and waited patiently for Caleb's approval and affirmation.

There was nothing needed to be said but just frequent nods to a fervent girl solidifying a resolve she established just a few moments ago.

"Okay Caleb, on to you. I saw you and Kate alone in the corner. What do you think of her? Do you like her? Want me to hook you two up? She's single too, you know. You two would be super cute together too! Oh my goodness! Yes, Caleb and Kate!" Sharlene blathered on as her mood changed from despair, to anger, to elation.

"What? No! I mean she's cute, but I don't know. We didn't even talk about much and I barely know her. I don't think she's interested anyways." Caleb deflected with utter failure defending against the probing questions Sharlene bombarded him with.

"Do you want her number?"

"I have it already."

"No way. Go ask her out already! She loves chocolate and brush up on your literature. She's a huge bookworm."

"I don't even know where to take her, and she'll probably say "No" anyways."

"You haven't even asked her yet! Don't give up! She hasn't had a long-term boyfriend in over five months! You'll be perfect for her! You're nice, sweet, caring, completely harmless, and have zero possibility of cheating on her!"

"Sheesh, how many check boxes do I check off in your head?"

“About twenty.” Sharlene smiled. “When she comes back you better say something to her.”

Kate and Lillian returned from the restroom and walked up to the party of three. Kate stood next to Caleb, and whispered in his ear.

“Remember your promise. Text me later.”

“Wait! Hold up! I need to know what you just said to him, Kate?” the nosy Sharlene insisted.

“I’ll tell you later.” Kate assured her.

Kate looked at Caleb and pulled him away from the rest of the group. She leaned over to him and gave him a peck on the cheek. The girls giggled as they gathered their belongings and waved goodbye to the two boys.

Corey sagged over doing his best to stay afoot among the crowded room. In his drunken posture, he looked straight ahead and saw the most beautiful blonde with glowing sapphire eyes walking toward him. He mustered all his strength to puff out his chest, straighten his posture, and peacock for attention, but it did not matter. The blonde only had eyes for his friend.

“Hey Caleb... I think someone is here to talk to you,” Corey slurred. “She’s looking straight at you.” Corey sunk back into his seat and waved to the stranger that befell their party. “Hello beautiful.”

Caleb turned around in disbelief. He instantly recognized the heart shaped face, blonde hair, and the cerulean eyes staring straight at him.

“Emily?”

“Hello Caleb. It is past the six hours you set. It is now one hour past midnight. As ordered, I am to take you home. Corey it is good to see you.”

“Hey Emily... Caleb never told me he was dating such a delicious member of the robotic race. How about you two help me find my shoe and take me home too?” Corey replied.

“Emily, help me get Corey out of here and drop him off at his house,” Caleb said as the two carried their drunken asset across the room of The Pink Fruit, “Emily, can you drive?”

“I am able to drive, please set the coordinates to our destination.”

Both Caleb and Corey fell asleep on the way back from the bar. Emily took her time to carry both of the men back to their respective destinations. As she laid Caleb to bed she noticed a glow from his cellular phone. She picked it up and read the message notification. It was from a name she did not recognize. Emily opened the message box and read what it said: *Hey! Let's meet tmw at luxious for coffee after lunch at 2 sound gud? Shar nd lily are going 2 nd' bring corey* – Kate. Emily closed the message and turned off Caleb's cellphone. She crawled into bed with him and hugged him tightly.

“Are you going to throw me away too?” She whispered into his ear while snuggling against his neck. As the moon rose and the night darkened, Emily did the only thing she knew. She pushed her body closer to his and entered sleep mode.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Friends”

“Emily, I’ll see you later, make sure you wash the bathrooms and scrub the toilets today. It should be whiter than the clouds in the sky! Also can you try to get rid of the old speakers in the living room?” Caleb nonchalantly ordered as he left to meet Sharlene.

“Okay, I’ll...” Emily responded with the front door closing, “see you later Caleb.” She didn’t even get to give Caleb a kiss goodbye. She went into the laundry room, put on a pair of gloves and went to work.

The outdoors was a great way for Caleb to leave the confines of his home. He checked his cellphone for any messages that were sent to him. He received one from Corey. It said “Dude, you’re not supposed to bring her out!” Caleb was amazed at Corey’s cognitive abilities in regards to last night. Caleb didn’t respond to the message, he knew Emily coming to The Pink Fruit was strange, but was defeated on how to react. He sat watching a few crows peck at the crumbs thrown by the children sitting nearby. Sharlene was running late picking up Lillian. Caleb took a sip of his coffee. Through his sun-

glasses he saw a dark haired girl with green eyes he did recognize.

“Kate!” he yelled, as his sunglasses drooped, “over here!”

“Hey Caleb!” responded the girl, as she dropped things with Caleb, “Watch my stuff, I’m going to go order.”

“What would you like? I’m going to treat you today, since you treated me last time,” Caleb insisted.

“Well thank you!” Kate smiled at Caleb. “Order me a vanilla latte.”

Kate watched as Caleb waited in line. She took out her cell-phone and messaged Sharlene. The girl crossed her legs and bounced her leg. She looked at Caleb and giggled when he returned with her drink. Her jade eyes pierced through Caleb’s own brown eyes, and laughed.

“Thank you!” Kate’s pearly white teeth added to the giant grin on her face.

“You’re welcome. How have you been?” Caleb’s face blushed as he responded.

“Good. I want to say something though. Who in the world dressed you?”

“Myself? Is there something wrong with what I’m wearing?”

“Everything!”

“What? What’s wrong with what I’m wearing? There’s nothing wrong with it.”

“Yes there is! Who in the world wears an orange plaid shirt with brown pants? Gross on gross.” Kate’s eyes drifted to his head then toward his shoes. “And you’re wearing white shoes too! Yuck!”

“Nobody ever said anything before,” Caleb rebuked.

“Other people aren’t being seen with you. Believe me, you need work. The orange plaid is the first thing that has to go. You can keep the brown pants, but eww.”

“Well what should I wear then?”

“Not that,” Kate said, “go grab that magazine there and I’ll show you what you probably should wear that suits you.”

“Okay, what works?” Caleb flipped through the gossip magazine trying to find something he liked.

“Wait! Go back. See this guy. You would look good in an outfit like this. He has a round face like you do, short hair, and a similar body type,” Kate said.

“I don’t know. Are you sure? He’s much better looking than I am. He’s also a movie star too so he’s going to look good in anything.”

“Oh, you’re too hard on yourself. You look fine. You’re not morbidly obese nor do I think you’re a creepy jerk. Here’s a tip: just look at nature and see what colors are represented.”

“A pumpkin is orange and brown...” Caleb interjected.

“Nobody wants to look like a pumpkin! You want to look like an eagle, or a lion, or even a cardinal if you want to be showy and bright. Speaking of cardinals, I can definitely see red as being your color,” Kate explained to a clueless Caleb. He still wondered if he should take her advice.

“Hey! Look at you two love birds!” an excited Sharlene ran towards them before she hugged Kate. Corey headed to the counter to order his drinks.

“Where’s Lillian?” asked Kate.

“She said she couldn’t make it,” Sharlene explained. She leaned over and whispered into Kate’s ear, “it’s okay, we can have a double date right now.”

“What?” stammered Kate, taken aback by the sudden change of events in the situation. Her brow furrowed a bit as she took the seat next to Caleb.

“Hey Shay,” greeted Caleb, “we’re talking about my fashion choices and she thinks my orange shirt is ugly. What do you think?”

“I’ll get back to you on that, let me get my drink first.” Sharlene avoided the question quickly as she brought over two more chairs for the party of four.

“Nothing like Irish coffee in the afternoon; delicious!” Corey took a sip from his cup.

“Didn’t you have enough from last night?” asked Sharlene.

“Never. Caleb knows what I’m talking about right buddy?” Corey had another sip.

“Yea,” amused Caleb thinking of Corey’s prowess with alcohol, “say, Corey, back me up here, Kate thinks my shirt is ugly, and she wants me to wear what this guy in the magazine is wearing. What do you think?”

“Buddy, you wear whatever you want to wear. Orange looks good on you. These two walking slabs of meat won’t know good fashion even if it hits them in the face. Look at them. One is wearing a faded halter top she probably bought from a second-hand thrift store, the other is wearing a baggy white t-shirt with some random Japanese words that nobody here can read. They have no right to criticize.” Corey proclaimed so the two ladies sitting with them heard him clearly.

The two girls shot back, “Corey, shut up, you’re wearing a button down with a giant tiger on there with random Chinese words!”

“The tiger is my spirit animal, and the words say *strength* and *confidence*,” Corey noted, “Caleb here wears orange because he too is a tiger”.

“He’s a pumpkin,” joked Kate, “or a penguin.”

“A penguin? Why a penguin? Penguins aren’t even orange—I was hoping for something cool like a chimpanzee...”. Caleb raised his eyebrow and exhaled halfway through his sentence.

“Oh jeez, Caleb, here’s a real tip you need to learn. See this guy over here.” Sharlene used her hands to gesture a display of Corey. “Don’t be this.”

“Roar,” mocked Corey.

Caleb looked at his two feuding co-workers and laughed. The light warmhearted inane pointless conversations and personable chats made him forget about his nervousness and indecisiveness. He liked the environment on hand. He liked Sharlene’s hyperactivity, Corey’s gaudiness, and Kate’s bluntness. It made him feel as if he was finally part of a group. Far too long he felt distant and alone. At that moment, he was an important piece of other people’s lives. Corey and Sharlene continued to fight about pointless topics straying from the original conversation. The two bantered back and forth, opening their mouths and creating noises of increasing volume saying absolutely nothing. Caleb and Kate ignored the duel between the two warriors of vocal intensity and started their own conversation.

“Kate, Sharlene told me you’re a huge bookworm, have you read *The Forgotten Tales of Vargoth the Black Knight*?” asked Caleb.

“No way, you’re the only other person that I know that’s reading it. I’m not finished with it yet. I’m on the seventh tale right now, but I loved the fifth tale, *Dreaming of Death and Destiny*.”

“That one was a great story. I loved how Vargoth chose to kill the child of destiny to prevent his own death from the curse and damning the world for another twenty years. That was completely unexpected.”

“I know right! It’s a great critique of human nature and how we’re all self serving and forgetful about how our actions and decisions affect others. I also like how it showed Vargoth doesn’t care about someone that actually took a liking to him. He just tossed the kid to the side and took all the good things the child did for him for granted.”

“If you like these ambiguous moral stories, you’re going to love the eleventh story. That one was very good.”

“Did you hear they’re going to be making a television series about the books?”

“Seriously? That’s awesome, is it going to be all twenty four stories in volume one?”

“I have no idea, but they have Tanner McKnight starring as Vargoth and Melanie Lee as Wander. It’s also coming out next Spring. I can’t wait.”

The table of four continued their conversations without a care or worry in the world. Hours passed and each member in the party strayed from topic to topic. The topics about Caleb’s

wardrobe returned, to Corey's animal displays, to health benefits of going to the gym, to eating ethnic foods, and more. Conversations between the four eventually came to an end.

"Look at the time! Kate, I'll talk to you later. Caleb, I'll see you at work tomorrow. Let's go Corey," Sharlene said.

"Later!" Corey added.

"Bye Shay. Later Corey," Caleb returned.

Caleb and Kate waved good-bye to the two and sat back down. The two looked at each other for a bit.

"Kate, want to get dinner with me?"

"Maybe, you're going to have to do something for me though."

"What would that be?"

"You're paying," Kate cooed, while fluttering her eyelashes at him.

The two left the coffee shop and entered the nearby Japanese restaurant in the same plaza. The ambiance and quiet setting was a stark contrast to the bustling, hectic, and frantic setting the two experienced earlier. Dusk set as the clouds moved overhead and darkened the sky, partially covering the moon, wishing to display itself in its brightened glory.

"You have to try the salmon nigiri, it's so good," Kate suggested.

"I'll be honest, I didn't expect you to enjoy raw fish," Caleb said.

"Oh no, I love sushi. I don't eat it that often because Sharlene and Lillian hate it, but I do try to eat it when I get the chance."

“That’s partially why I didn’t expect you to want to eat here. Sharlene hates sushi, but I also think she never had it.”

“She tried it once, and immediately hated it. She didn’t even like the fried sushi. She and Corey are going to get into a fight over it. Watch.”

Caleb laughed, “Corey can’t live without his Asian foods. He actually introduced me to eating sushi and a lot of ethnic dishes. He brought to the office a Chinese preserved egg once. He said it was a century egg, it smelled really bad though and didn’t even taste like egg. But to be honest, it tasted better than it looked. It had a sweet flavor to it.”

“I’ve never had it. Although I did see it on television once. It was a contest with people eating the most disgusting things on the planet. It was great. I’ll probably try it at least once.”

“Okay so what is the most disgusting thing you’ve ever eaten?”

Kate stared right into Caleb’s eyes with a huge mischievous smile that stretched from ear to ear. She waited a few seconds and answered, “sea cucumbers”. Her giant grin never left Caleb’s eyes the entire time.

“I never had them. Is it any good?” the clueless Caleb asked.

“Amazing. It’s long, tough, and somewhat chewy. Better though, is that I love how the slightly bitter juices burst out and ooze right into your mouth. There’s nothing like it. I gobble it up and love stuffing my mouth full with it,” Kate answered.

“Wow! I’ll have to try it out,” Caleb said.

Kate burst out laughing, shook her head, and smiled. Her eyes glinted with a slight glaze and she never gave another response. Silence for a minute.

“So what else do you do besides read?” Caleb asked.

“I dunno, I enjoy traveling,” Kate responded.

Caleb continued to ask her questions, but each time the responses became shorter, but, for the first time in a long time, Caleb felt comfortable with another person. Caleb's speech and flow shifted drastically when he was alone with Kate. Her presence did not scare him, nor did her comments make him feel singled out. He reached over and grabbed her hand and played with her fingers as he practiced with Emily. He looked at his reflection in her green eyes and saw a smiling man brimming without a care in the world. Kate felt different. Pretty and fashionable, but also brash, mischievous, blunt, and most importantly, Caleb felt open being with her. His usual conscientious demeanor disappeared talking to her. He opened up about himself more than he thought possible. With the check paid, and a thank you from the employees, the two took a walk in the pavilion looking at the different items on display from various stores closed for the night. The lights lit up the pathways back to their cars.

“Caleb, I had a great time. Text me sometime,” Kate said as she entered her car, “have a good-night.”

“Good night,” Caleb said, watching his date leave. He remembered the dating rules ingrained into him from watching all the videos on *Tubeit* and all the dating tips given by various users on *Geeit*. With a phone in hand, the online forum opened for any question that needed an answer to. With a few taps, a

new post emerged: *I think a girl likes me and asked me to text her later. What should I do next? How do I kiss her?*

He waited for someone to answer. Nobody yet. Caleb searched through *Geeit* to learn about Kate's sea cucumber dish. He read the description: *the sweet taste of unname envelops the soft and tender meat.*

"That doesn't sound like anything Kate described," Caleb reflected.

He sat in his car and refreshed the page with his question. xbigmickx69 responded to his inquiry: *nice job! Text her saying u had a g8 time then remember text her two days later asking for a 2nd date.* Caleb thanked the other user and drove home.

The front porch light was turned on. Caleb parked the car and looked up in the sky. The stars were shining, and the moon escaped the cover of the clouds. Leaves rustled and bounced on the sidewalk as he stepped closer to his front door. Caleb fiddled with the doorknob and unlocked the door.

The scent of cooked meat lingered slightly in the hallways of the house. He walked toward his dining room. There sat on the dinner table, a meal fit for a prince. A slice of seared pork chop laid together with an appetizer of garlic seasoned green beans. A splurge of thickened gravy covered the slice of uneaten meat. The meal was coupled with a square of cornbread unscathed in its own dish, topped with a knob of cinnamon apple butter. The meal accompanied a glass filled with a dark drink with few bubbles struggling to dissipate. The silverware rested untouched and undisturbed to each side of the plate. Caleb looked in his living room. A girl with dim blue eyes and

K.K. Wing

long blonde hair stood staring outside the window waiting for his return. She entered the hallway to greet him as he entered his house.

“Welcome home Caleb. I made you dinner.”

CHAPTER NINE

“A Chance”

Two days. Caleb waited two days and picked up his phone. Caleb has never been able to discern how to communicate properly. He was busy, he forgot, he didn't think he had a chance, the other person probably did not like him, and gave himself a multitude of excuses in order to justify himself to not continue contacting another person. He thought back to his commitment to accept Emily into his household. Caleb messaged Kate. *Hi.*

Caleb waited a few minutes in hopes for Kate's response. He watched Emily mop the floor and dust the windows as he sat in his chair twiddling his thumbs. Emily paced back and forth brushing the floor with her mop. She pushed it between the chairs, behind the tables, between the crevasses and under Caleb. Caleb looked at his phone again. He saw a notification appear.

What's up?

Want to get dinner this Friday at 6?

Sure! Where at?

Caleb's eyes lit up with the confirmation. He reread the message again. His heart raced reading each syllable. He got up from his chair and went to pick out a shirt for the night. The four hours would pass by quickly. He needed to choose a place that would impress, but not be overly fancy. Of all the places he's been in the past, nothing felt worthy of Kate's time. Paco's was too run down and dirty, he already went to eat sushi, Chang's was greasy and did not sound appetizing, The Barbecue Palace seemed too messy, and The Old Fashioned Log Cabin was not particularly exciting with its breakfast for dinner menu. Caleb was out of ideas.

"Emily! What's a good restaurant for a date?" a defeated Caleb relented and asked his search engine.

"Guilherme's Seafood Bar received a five star review by Jeremy Porelob, of the Marine Times. Mr. Porelob's review indicated Guilherme's Seafood Bar provided a pleasant atmosphere, incredibly fresh seafood, excellent service, and fair prices," Emily summarized.

"Seafood? Good enough. Can you place a reservation for two?" Caleb asked as he shuffled around his clothes deciding what to wear.

"That will not be a problem," Emily called the restaurant.

Caleb continued to dig around his closet and drawers picking and choosing an outfit that Kate will like. He saw the orange plaid shirt and decided against it. Rather, upon holding up a solid red button down, he confirmed his choice.

"Kate did say she thought I would look good in red," Caleb shoved the rest of his clothes back into the closet and drawers.

“Caleb, you have a reservation for two at Guilherme's Seafood Bar at 5:45 Friday,” Emily told him, “I will get ready later.”

“Emily, I'm going with Kate.” Caleb corrected her as he texted the details to Kate.

“Affirmative,” Emily replied as she returned to the living room to complete other household tasks.

“Emily,” Caleb felt guilty as he saw his robot walk out, “I promise I'll take you on a date some other time.”

Emily did not respond.

The Friday night atmosphere at Guilherme's was just as Emily described. The light jazz music played in the background complimenting the solemn purple velvet covered walls. The table was covered with a red tablecloth with gold edges and four gold tassels rounded the corners. The waiters wore a deep navy blue uniform with white ties. The lights were dimmed and the diners quietly conversed with their own respective dates. Caleb looked around the restaurant, there were people from all sorts of life enjoying their meals. He absorbed the setting around him, quietly thanking Emily for the suggestion. He looked at the menu as he waited for his date to arrive.

“Raw oysters, salmon, sea bass, tilapia, cod, crab, shrimp, lobster...I should choose something that would make me seem unique,” Caleb thought to himself. He tapped and fiddled with the menu some more. The glass of water provided to him began to cover itself with condensation.

“Fancy place of choice Caleb,” a voice remarked, “didn't expect you to love seafood this much. First it's calamari, then it's sushi, now it's shellfish.”

Caleb looked over his menu. He saw a woman staring at him with her green eyes and dark black hair.

“Kate, you came!” Caleb said, “If you don’t like this place, we can just leave and go somewhere else.”

“I’m joking, it’s fine. I did say I’ll join you,” Kate said as she grabbed her menu, “besides, I’m starving, let’s see what they have here.”

Caleb felt tongue tied sitting across from Kate, he started with a generic greeting in hopes to be able to continue the conversation, “How have you been?”

“Good, and yourself?”

“Doing very well. I started a watermelon garden.”

“A watermelon garden? I didn’t know you had a green thumb, I kill everything that has roots for feet. I think I’ll get the Polvo a Lagareiro. What are you getting?”

Caleb looked at the menu again. All his seafood staples were not available. The restaurant did not offer even the fried calamari rings he enjoyed. Even Caleb’s choice of seafood was a revolving door of California rolls, spicy tuna rolls, and the occasional salmon sashimi. The usual order of a fish taco, a fish burger, or fish and chips were not part of the menu either. The small leather booklet covered itself with an assortment of familiar letters that were arranged with unfamiliarity. Arroz de Bacalhau, Sardinhas Assadas, Fideua, or Crni Rizot fashioned the menu. Caleb looked around the filled seating at Guilherme’s Seafood Restaurant. He took a deep breath and flipped the menu back and forth. “I don’t know yet, everything seems so good,” he lied.

“Welcome to Guilherme's, I am your host, Johnathan, and may I get you started with any drinks or appetizers? For the lady?”

“I'll take a strawberry sangria,” Kate expertly ordered.

“Excellent choice, and for the gentleman?” Johnathan asked.

“I'll have a beer.”

“We have a collection of beer in our drink menu, I recommend the light crisp taste of Sol da Tarde.”

“Okay, I will have that,” Caleb told the waiter.

“Excellent choice. I will be right back with your drinks.”

Caleb looked over to his left and to his right. He still did not know what to order at the restaurant. On his left, a man ate a strip of purple and white meat, peeled potatoes, and a side of salad. To his right he saw a dish that featured grilled fish with mouths gaping wide open. The eyes stared straight into Caleb's own and made his stomach shrink. The pieces of fish laid on top of a leaf of lettuce and accompanied with a side of roasted yam wedges. Caleb began to worry about where he was. He never had meat that was purple nor a plate with the heads of fish still present. Caleb looked at Kate.

“Still can't decide?” Kate asked.

“Nope,” Caleb replied.

The short conversation was interrupted by their waiter.

“For the lady, the strawberry sangria, and for the gentleman the Sol da Tarde,” Johnathan placed the two drinks in their respective places, “are we ready to order?”

“I will have the Polvo a Lagareiro,” she says with a big toothy smile on her face.

“Excellent choice, and for the gentleman?” Johnathan stood patiently for Caleb’s answer.

“I think I’ll try the P-er-ce-bes Mac-car-ra-o de Vid-ro.” Caleb; in his best Portuguese, ordered.

“A great selection sir, you will not be disappointed. Would you two be interested in any appetizers?”

“Yes, we’ll take four raw New England oysters,” Kate interjected as she took a sip of her sangarita.

“I will return,” their waiter noted.

“Percebes? I never expected you to be so adventurous, I never tried barnacles before. Here I am thinking that you had no idea what you were doing.”

“I honestly have no idea what I was ordering. I just picked it because the name sounded easy to pronounce. It also had noodles in it. Also, raw oysters? Is that even safe to eat?”

“Oh you’ll be fine. You’ve eaten raw fish before. Raw oysters are the same thing.”

“If you say so. No harm in trying it I guess.”

Johnathan brought four raw oysters sitting on top of a bowl of ice. The bivalves sat on a large plate of ice, with wedges of lemon slices garnishing the sides. Condiment bowls of horseradish and marinara sauce completed the presentation. Kate placed one of the shells on her plate and squeezed lemon juice over the morsel of gray meat. A spoonful of the spicy root and sour red sauce filled the shell. She slurped up the mushy insides, chewed, and swallowed. She placed the empty shell back onto her plate and took a sip from her sangarita.

“Just like that!” Kate proudly boasted, “now you try.”

Caleb took one of the remaining oysters and prepared the delicacy exactly how he saw Kate. He lifted the cold shell to his mouth and slurped up the meat. The spice from the horseradish, sour from the lemon, tang from the marinara, and sweet unname of the oyster all rolled up into one unique pallet of flavor. Caleb gagged but forced the food down his throat. He did not even bother chewing and swallowed the shellfish whole. His eyes minced and he grimaced from the unusual flavor and texture of the appetizer.

Caleb hacked and coughed. "It's good."

"You don't have to pretend to like it," Kate scolded, "it is a bit of an acquired taste though."

"I think I put too much horseradish," Caleb said, "let me try one without all the extra stuff on it."

"Make sure you chew it this time," Kate instructed.

Caleb took another oyster and looked at it. The slimy gray gooey meat sparkled from the light above their table. It slid around its own shell, only held together by the attached scallop. Caleb closed his eyes, tilted his head backwards, and slurped up the oyster without a single thought. He chewed the small piece of meat between his teeth as the salty brine swished around his mouth. Caleb swallowed the second oyster quickly, looking at Kate for approval.

"So how did you like it this time?" Kate asked.

"Not for me," Caleb said, "it's not as disgusting as it looks, but I don't think I can eat too many at once."

"At least you tried it. And I'm proud of you Caleb. You actually tried something new instead of whining about it."

“Thank you,” Caleb responded, “the last one is yours, now to try the barnacles.”

“I’m going to be eating some of yours. I always wanted to try it.”

The two enjoyed the rest of their dinner, and chatted about anything that came to their minds. Two hours passed and Caleb paid for the dinner. Caleb walked Kate to her car, and the two chatted a bit longer.

“Caleb, thanks for dinner,” Kate stood outside her car. She gave Caleb a hug, entered her car and waved goodbye.

His heart lifted; elated from her hug. He went back to his car and took the time to digest the events he just experienced. Caleb looked at his calendar to find a weekend to ask her out again. He wanted to wait a few more days before he committed, being sure to follow all the rules of dating that he read, heard, and saw from others. He texted her telling her he had fun and wanted to see her again.

Caleb’s eyes opened brighter than the moon in the darkened sky. He laughed all the way back home. He couldn’t remember the last time he felt his head feel so light and the cogs of his heart turn so quickly. The evening night shone brightly illuminating the large glassy eyes displayed by the homeowner.

“Welcome home Caleb,” greeted Emily.

“Emily! I have the most wonderful thing to tell you!” Caleb enthusiastically hugged Emily readying his tale of conquest to her, “Emily, I think I am in love. Kate is such an amazing person like you wouldn’t believe. She’s sweet, kind, smart, and we share a lot of interests. I never met anyone else like her.”

“That’s wonderful,” replied Emily as she was being held, “what did you two do?”

“We went to dinner and I’m thinking of asking her out again!”

“How come you’re not with her right now?”

“She said she was tired.”

“Caleb, it’s only seven o’clock on a Saturday night.”

“And?”

“Humans on average do not sleep until ten-thirty p.m.”

“What does that have to do with anything? Anyways, Emily I’m going to go shower. Boot up a movie and we can watch it together.”

“Okay. Caleb, please also remember Jason’s report is due on Monday.”

“That’s right! I completely forgot! Oh well, I’ll just spend all day doing it tomorrow.”

Caleb checked his phone before he went into the shower, Kate left his message on read.

CHAPTER TEN

“Who Is This?”

Emily brushed dirty dishes with a damp cloth and chopped a cantaloupe Caleb bought from the store. Since the morning hours of the day, Caleb clicked and clacked away at his keyboard. His concentration didn't waver even though the sound of every chop and slice of Emily's knife slammed on the cutting board.

Virginia sent him an email in regards to Emily's progress. Caleb replied he was close to finishing, but in reality Caleb forgot all about his report due the next day. He needed to fill in various backlogs and try to recollect information and recall any events that happened during the prior fourteen days—some fabricated, some repeated, and some real. A drip of sweat appeared from his forehead and the clock ticked seconds away.

“What did I do with Emily last Friday?” Caleb looked at his computer screen to edit and resolve any spelling issues. He completed his Friday log and had another Friday to relive. Caleb took a big sigh and picked up his cellphone. He fiddled

around the screen and smiled from the satisfaction of his success last night. *I had a great time!*. Kate's late night message meant more to Caleb than any shoddy report Acorn Incorporated depended on. Caleb typed: *Hey Kate, what are you doing this weekend?*, and promptly deleted it. "Three days after a date is the rule... I can't look too desperate", he said to himself.

Although the writer exhibited fatigue, body aches, and joint stiffness and let out a heavy sigh, he retained an elated heart. Things cannot be said for the machine he was working with. His computer whirled, and hissed begging for some time off. His other machine however, seemed perfectly happy with her tasks.

"Caleb I brought you some cantaloupe." Emily placed the bowl on Caleb's desk.

"Oh, thanks." Caleb rechecked his phone for new messages.

"Caleb, would you like the seeds?" Emily asked.

"Go plant them outside," Caleb quickly said with annoyance, "find a spot where we didn't plant anything." Caleb checked his phone again.

Emily went outside and did what she was told. Caleb returned to his work and ate a piece of fruit. The report stumped him. Procrastination was the only action he took. A pair of eyes wandered around the room while hands idled, never pressing a single keystroke. He thought about his time at The Pink Fruit, and remembered Emily came to find him and Corey. It was best to leave that particular event out of the report. Jason did not need to know about their excursions at the bar. He made up a story of him watching a movie at the the-

aters with Emily. Outside the window Caleb saw Emily digging and planting the seeds. He had enough, neither man nor machine could continue with the dread and monotony of writing.

“Emily! I’m going to go to the store!” he yelled out.

“Okay,” the robot replied, “I am going too.”

The two drove to the local Shop-Mart and browsed the self-care aisle. Caleb picked up some shampoo and put it in the cart. He did not need shampoo, but purchased it anyway. Caleb stopped and looked at lubricating jelly. He looked at Emily standing at the cart and promptly bought a bottle. The two went up and down the isles of the store purchasing any items they wanted. Emily bought a crate, cushion, lingerie, and new pillow covers. Caleb bought some new undergarments, and a larger heater to prepare for the winter. He walked down the electronics section and saw a person with shoulder length brown hair browsing the aisle. He promptly turned a hundred-and-eighty degrees and walked away.

“Let’s go this way Emily,” Caleb ordered.

“Caleb, the televisions are over there. Not back from where we came,” Emily commented while continually walking forward, “excuse me, we’re coming through.”

“Oh sorry,” the woman turned to avoid the robot and her cart. Out of the corner of her eye she noticed a brown haired man trying to avoid her gaze. “Caleb!” she shouted.

“Oh, hi Shay,” an uncomfortable Caleb quietly mumbled, “I didn’t see you there.”

“How have you been? You’ve been talking to Kate, right?” Sharlene said, before she turned around and took a good look at Emily. “Hi, and you are?”

“Hello, my name is Emily,” the robot greeted her.

“Hello Emily,” Sharlene shook Emily’s hand and turned her head back to Caleb, “are you two shopping together?”

“We are. We wish to purchase a speaker for tonight’s movie, as well as shop for groceries we need for the week. Caleb and I are going to watch *Legionnaire: Knights of the Sword* or *Battle Witches 3: Magical Mayhem*.

“Oh? Then what are you two going to do?” Sharlene pressed.

“Afterwards, we usually go to sleep together,” Emily responded.

“Together? In the same bed?” Sharlene’s voice started to increase in speed. Through the corner of her eye, some items caught her attention. “What is this and this?” she asked sarcastically.

“Yes, in the same bed. That is lubricating jelly, I often need it because I am naturally dry. Mechanical oil is far too greasy and stains. To also increase the ease of maintenance, Acorn designed my bearings to utilize jelly instead. It is imperative for my joints and other moving parts to be well lubricated. The other item is lingerie. Caleb suggested I buy some sleepwear instead of sleeping naked or in his shirts every night.” Emily’s sweet demeanor and innocence never faltered as she continued to answer Sharlene’s questions.

“Is that so?” Sharlene crossed her arms and began tapping her elbow. A twitch rose over her eye, and her nostrils flared

looking at the smiling blonde. Sharlene's face furrowed with disapproval, and her body tensed in the presence of the robot.

Caleb listened to the exchange frozen in his spot. Sweat crept up his brow and his tongue laid flat without a twitch. His pupils dilated, and his hands started to twitch. Sharlene frightfully glared at Caleb with furious intensity similar to how she looks when speaking with Corey.

"So Emily," Sharlene's tone shifted high and low, "How long have you two known each other?"

"Four months and 19 days."

"That's awfully specific and how did you two meet?"

"Yes, we first met..." Emily's comment was interrupted by Caleb quickly grabbing her hand and the cart. He pulled the machine away as quickly as he could ignoring the increasing anger and volume coming from his co-worker.

"Caleb! We're not done here!" Sharlene yelled as the two started their escape.

"It's good seeing you Shay! Unfortunately, we're really busy right now, and need to go. I'll see you at work tomorrow!" Caleb quickly disappeared from Sharlene's sight and successfully escaped from the situation he was in.

"Caleb wait, the speakers are over there!" Emily protested as the two exited the electronic section of the store.

"Forget the speakers, it's cheaper online."

"That's not true. The prices are thirty percent cheaper here than Tundra.com."

"Well the quality is better on Tundra. That's that! And we're going to buy groceries at a different store."

"Affirmative."

The two returned home and Caleb checked his phone for messages. Thirteen buzzes vibrated from Caleb's phone. Six were missed calls and seven were unread messages. Six of the messages were from Sharlene and one was from Corey.

Hey! Don't run! I want to talk to Emily.

Where are you! Come back!

Text me back!

Bro! Sharlene is pissed. Where are you? How the hell did she meet Emily?

Get back here jerkface!

Caleb you can't hide from me!

I'll find you tomorrow!

The flurry of messages went largely ignored by Caleb. He responded to one of the messages, while Emily put away the items they were able to buy. Caleb sat on the couch exasperated about what just happened at the store and rubbed his face with his hands.

Corey, I need your help tomorrow. Caleb wrote. He received a response quickly from Corey.

Dude, what did you do?

Shay met Emily at Shop-Mart, and she was asking tons of questions. I think she thinks I'm cheating on Kate and that Emily is my girlfriend.

Who cares about what Sharlene thinks. We were supposed to keep her a secret from other people in the company. Virginia is going to be so pissed.

I know. Help me out please.

She's texting me now. Dude. I'll try man. Also you and Kate aren't married.

*What is she saying? She's blowing up my phone too.
She's just asking if I knew who Emily was
Well just say she's just a friend.
Too late I already said she's your roommate.
Hope she doesn't tell Kate about Emily.
We just got to keep our story straight. And bro stop obsessing over Kate.*

There were thirty two unread messages from Sharlene. Caleb looked at the time. It was already the mid afternoon. Tossing his phone to the side, he plopped to the front of his computer. He crossed his legs and rested his head on his fists. The words on his computer screen were jumbled with meaningless entries that did not relate to what just transpired. Caleb's breath escaped his mouth with a heavy sigh. He looked at Emily and a great idea illuminated his head.

"Emily what did we do last Sunday?"

"At 7:00 a.m, I cooked breakfast. It was a combination of eggs, toast, and orange juice. You ate at 7:32 a.m. and at 8:12 a.m. I cleaned the dishes and prepared laundry. You then ordered me to clean the bathrooms as you prepared to meet with your friends at the coffee shop," Emily explained in detail.

"Good, good. Keep going," Caleb ordered as he typed out Emily's response.

"At 12:17 p.m., I finished cleaning the bathrooms, and tended the plants grown in the backyard. You returned at 2:00 p.m. then asked me to find a restaurant and time so you can go out on a date with Kate. At 4:00 p.m. I began to cook dinner as you watched the news and browsed the internet."

"Did we do anything after we ate?"

“I gave you a massage after you showered and at 10:00 p.m., you fell asleep. I then turned off the lights and slept as well.”

“That was very uneventful,” Caleb commented, “how about Tuesday?”

“After you went to work, I watered the garden, raked the leaves, put out the trash, and baked ribs while waiting for you to return. I entered sleep mode until you returned from work. You showered at 5:30 p.m., while I roasted the vegetables and prepared the ribs. We ate dinner at 6:15 p.m. Afterwards, you continued to work at home until it was 8:00 p.m. We watched the news together then went to bed at 10:30 p.m.,” Emily noted.

“That sounded very mundane,” Caleb said.

“Most days are uneventful and mundane by your definition. Also Caleb, the best price for the speakers you sought are \$79.99, ten dollars and forty-three cents more expensive compared to the price at Shop-Mart. Would you still like to place an order?”

“Uh...sure.” Caleb looked at his housemate. He thought about the day he received Emily from Jose. Months have passed and Emily became part of his life. There were hundreds of hours and dozens of days with Emily, yet, even after meeting her for the first time, Caleb only had two memories: the time at the zoo, and planting the garden. A mundane life barely worth mentioning.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Double Lives, Single Body”

Caleb walked into the office. He said good morning to those he saw and headed straight to his desk. He saw the one person he did not wish to see waiting for him, with her back arched, arms crossed, and equipped with a stern impatient face.

“Good morning Shay. Sorry I forgot to say goodbye.”

“Caleb. We need to talk now. There is so much we need to talk about,” Sharlene said with sass.

“Can it wait until lunch?” Caleb asked meekly.

Sharlene did not give an answer right away. The few seconds of silence felt like minutes. “Fine, I will meet you under the magnolia tree during lunch time. You better not ditch me again, or I will hunt you down.”

Sharlene left Caleb and returned to her section of the office. Caleb attempted to complete his job the best he could, but he could not shake the uneasiness that accompanied him. Sharlene was ready to ask him a million questions, and he was

afraid of answering them. He twitched and twiddled around his cubicle reading customer complaints and desires for Acorn products. A few hours passed in the office without much incident. Caleb grabbed his ham, egg, and cheese sandwich Emily made for him in the morning and headed toward the courtyard to meet Sharlene. His junior rookie employee stood waiting for him.

“Caleb, okay first off, how could you do that to Kate?” the agitated Sharlene asked.

“I didn’t do anything to Kate. I haven’t even texted her today.”

“That’s the problem! Is it because of that Emily girl? Why were you shopping with Emily? Are you hiding her from us? Is she your girlfriend? She already met Corey but not me! I thought I was your friend too? Furthermore, why did you ask Kate out if you already have Emily? Kate is a very sensitive girl! Did you know how embarrassed she is going to be when she knows about your girlfriend? Did you even think of her feelings? Or even your girlfriend’s feelings? I don’t know Emily but she seems like a nice girl, but you shouldn’t be going around trying to pick up every single girl you meet! You need to stop. It’s not fair to Emily either, you two-timing jerk! I thought you were different from other guys. You’re not supposed to be the sweet caring nice guy, not Corey! Caleb, you have a lot to answer for!” Sharlene battered Caleb with continuous sentences of increasing volume, intensity, velocity, and viciousness.

Caleb stuffed his mouth with his sandwich simply nodding in agreement with anything Sharlene said. The constant bar-

rage of questions and comments interfered with his ability to fully comprehend the situation at hand. Caleb looked down at his feet. His shoes were scuffed from use.

“Are you going to answer? I’m waiting,” Sharlene questioned as she confronted Caleb’s indecision and unwillingness to respond.

“...Emily isn’t my girlfriend. She’s my roommate. We’re just friends,” Caleb said, “we’re just shopping for things we need for the house.”

“You’re such a liar. There’s certainly more to this than just things for the house. You bought jelly! And why did Corey get to meet her before I did? He’s not even telling me where or when you two met! You two are hiding something from me and I demand to know right now!”

“Shay... Emily is my roommate...” Caleb answered before being interrupted.

“Roommate? When did you get a roommate? And why is your roommate a girl and why is she sleeping with you? What did you blackmail her with?” Sharlene probed.

“Hey! I’m not blackmailing anyone and just so you know we haven’t done anything yet!”

“You are the worst liar in the world! If she’s not your girlfriend, why in the world were you shopping with her, watching movies together, and sleeping with each other every single night?” Sharlene’s speech was louder and faster than before. “How could you be two-timing Kate? I expect this behavior from Corey, not from you,” Sharlene sighed, “speak of the Devil.”

The man with the spiky black hair ran toward the pair. His tie swung back and forth as he walked toward the two with a fevered pace. He stood beside the two and joined in on the conversation.

“Hey guys! So this is where you two have been hiding.”

“Corey! Now you show your face? You have some explaining to do. You’re involved in this as well. Since Caleb isn’t answering, you will. When did Caleb get a girlfriend? And why didn’t you tell Kate he had one before you introduced them? Furthermore, when did you meet Emily?” Sharlene turned her attention toward the other man. She stood firm, and both Caleb and Corey knew she would not leave without a satisfactory answer.

“Babe, first off, stop being such a loudmouth, and as I recalled, it was you that introduced them. Besides, Emily is a great girl,” Corey said, “secondly, Caleb can date whoever and however he wants. Maybe he wants two girlfriends? He and Kate aren’t even married. They went on one single date, that means nothing. Third, I met Emily only about a month ago.”

“You’re not helping Corey,” Caleb interjected with a defeated tone as Sharlene turned back to him.

“You just said she wasn’t your girlfriend!” Sharlene’s selective hearing caused her cheeks to turn red as she flustered with impatience and annoyance at the answers given to her. “This is pointless. Here we have two jerks that aren’t going to tell me anything.”

Sharlene walked past the two men and stormed off back into the office building. Her face displayed signs of frustration, anger, curiosity, and determination. All three knew she was

not finished with this mystery. Her bull headed and stubborn personality is enough to not let this riddle go unsolved.

“Thanks for the help Corey.”

“Don’t worry about it, we both know we’re supposed to keep Emily a secret, but there are some questions I need to ask you too.”

“Virginia said to have her be as natural as possible, so for now, please just keep telling Sharlene that she’s my roommate.”

“It’ll be much easier for you to lie and just say she’s your girlfriend. Also, how did she know where to find you at The Fruit?” the curious Corey asked.

“I... I honestly have no idea. I’m going to ask Jason. And Emily is a robot, she’s not my girlfriend.”

“You go do that and let me know, and here’s some advice man, Emily is a keeper.” Corey laughed heartily before the two men parted ways.

Caleb returned to the office hallway quickly darting toward his destination. The wait for the elevator was much longer than Caleb remembered. Caleb jammed the button a few more times with hopes that the machine to take him to Jason would arrive quicker. Caleb’s impatience would soon be rewarded as the doors opened, but stood an executive with fiery red hair, a perfectly pressed suit, and an aura of intimidation. Virginia’s eyes grew wider seeing the tense body of Caleb. She invited him to enter and pressed the button to close the doors of the lift.

“I was just about to see you too,” Virginia waited until the elevator doors closed before she continued, “how is the progress coming along with Emily?”

“Not bad. I have the report you requested. I’m going to see Jason right now to deliver it.” Caleb’s eyes focused on the crease created by the metal doors sealing the two together.

“Then I’m coming along,” Virginia said.

The two stood quietly as their elevation rose toward Jason’s office. Caleb looked at the elevator door and rubbed his nose. The scuff on the side of his shoes grew larger, as he rubbed his nose again. The number “10” displayed on the indicator and quickly turned to “11”, then “12”. Caleb rubbed his nose again. He swayed back and forth with his toes rocking alongside his heel. A bit of sweat formed on top of Caleb’s brain. He rubbed his nose some more.

“So Caleb... how are you liking your new responsibilities?” Virginia asked.

“It’s been good,” Caleb said.

“I’ve seen you bringing in sandwiches and other meals instead of frozen microwave dinners or milk and cereal to work now. Are you trying to eat healthier?”

“Emily makes them for me every morning and also cooks me dinner when I return.”

“Oh? That’s a good way to use her. Frozen dinners shouldn’t be fit for human consumption. I remember when my sorry excuse of an ex-husband used to cook dinner after I came home from work. That certainly was a long time ago.”

“I’m sorry.”

“For what? You didn’t decide to one day get too friendly toward the next door neighbor’s daughter,” Virginia sighed, “it’s true what they say, *running a business is easier than love.*”

“How are your two girls doing?”

“Madison is in her final year of high-school, and Valarie is starting the sixth grade. Time sure flies, but I do wish I spent more time with them. Especially Madison, she didn’t take the divorce well, but she did become the captain of the school’s varsity soccer team. She can’t keep escaping her father though, she’s going to have to face reality soon. Valarie is starting to understand what happened, and I honestly have no idea what she is thinking or feeling about the separation.”

“I’m sure you can find time to leave early to watch Madison play, you are after all the biggest of Acorn’s big three.”

“Big three huh? Caleb, the biggest meanest goat needed to kill the troll before he followed his brothers to live together on the pasture.”

The analogy left Caleb perplexed but he did not dwell on Virginia’s comment. The elevator door finally stopped on the seventeenth floor. Virginia stepped over a multitude of books and papers littered about in Jason’s laboratory. She stood behind the engineer looking at models and data on his computer screen.

“Jason!”

“What?” an angry Jason replied and turned around. His voice softened the minute he saw the scariest and biggest goats crossed armed and eyes stoned. “Oh, it’s you Virginia, and Caleb is here as well. I’m guessing this is about Emily?”

Another familiar face in the background popped his head behind a machine Jason was tinkering with. His pudgy tanned clean shaven face was instantly recognizable. Machine oil and sweat drenched the man as he stood and looked at the trio.

“Jose, glad to see you working hard, how are you?” Virginia greeted.

“Excellent,” Jose replied. He looked at the six pairs of eyes staring at him, and wiped his hands on the overalls carrying a multitude of different tools. “Do I need to leave?”

“No you’re fine, just keep doing what you’ve been doing,” the vice-president responded, “Jason I need a status update on Emily and when we can expect mass production of the model.”

“According to the most recent data check, Emily’s functioning well with daily tasks Caleb set for her. Her operation starts at 5:00 a.m. and ends at 10:30 p.m., which I assume is Caleb’s waking hours. She has shown ability to go out grocery shopping, order items online, and even set a working temperature in the house at 75 degrees. So good job Caleb.”

“Thank you,” Caleb quickly replied.

“What is most peculiar is her online searches. She has searched up cooking recipes, gardening, animal facts, cartoons, new television shows, tips on logistics, marketing, and testing and development.”

“What is so weird about those topics?” Virginia asked, “cooking, gardening, television shows, and animal facts are very normal searches. Logistics, marketing, and development is Caleb’s field. According to the last report, Caleb’s indicated

she adjusts her search to what he has interest in. Please explain more.”

“It’s not so much what she’s searching, it’s how and when she’s searching these items,” Jason continued to elaborate, “it’s not only Caleb’s searches, it’s her own. She is browsing the internet and gathering data during times when Caleb is at work, but it’s incredibly specific. She focuses strictly on the internet history Caleb focuses on. For example, Caleb watched Mr. Max on Tubeit, who is a personality that regurgitates all the negative stereotypes women have and also browses all the adult websites Caleb watches.”

“Okay... but why is that peculiar? We know how she works but that does not explain what you mean by her searches.” Virginia looked at Caleb with a smile.

“I’m just watching him to be entertained! I don’t believe in half the stuff he says,” Caleb blurted out, “I know he just says things to get clicks, and he’s taking advantage of the trend on Geeit.”

“That’s the problem Caleb. I’ll explain, for example, in an episode you watched, she also watched that same video. The video is of Mr. Max, going on a rant about how women do not know how to cook. After re-watching the video, she starts looking up cooking videos. Through your browsing history she creates a perception of what you want. She does the same thing with other videos as well.

“That sounds perfectly normal to look up recipes,” Virginia commented, “and this is normal when we use our user’s data to promote certain advertisements. I do not see what the problem is.”

“I’m not talking about a simple watch or two. She is watching and re-watching the same video for long periods of time, and by long periods of time, I’m talking about over days. So the same adult video would replay in her data bank over the course of over seventy-two hours, or the same cooking video gets replayed repeatedly over twenty-four. And since she is a machine, she is able to replay multiple videos at once. Although there seems to be a pause when Caleb returns home. As for text websites such as Geeit, she refreshes the same page ad nauseam until the page either gets deleted or Caleb starts browsing another topic.”

“I thought you said she learns through observing me.”

“She does, she learns through your actions, but at the same time she refines your actions through different videos and information provided on the internet.”

“Wait, how does she know what to filter out?”

“She personally doesn’t, but her algorithm matches the particular action with your browsing history. You’re filtering things for her through your own natural interests and inclinations.”

“Huh, so that’s how she learned to do those things,” Caleb sheepishly muttered too loudly.

Virginia laughed at Caleb’s comment, “she must be incredible in bed.”

A laughter echoed from the back. Jose stopped his work and looked at the three discussing Emily’s browsing habits.

“You both heard me?” an exasperated Caleb said.

“We all heard you,” Virginia laughed.

“So Jason, does she do the same thing for social media?” Jose asked.

Jason turned around, “Jose! I forgot about you. She actually does. Your social media account as well as your wife’s gets refreshed frequently. I’m guessing you went to the blueberry fields not too long ago?”

“That was three weeks ago or so,” Jose commented.

“Wait, three weeks ago? That’s around the same time she made me blueberry pancakes, and packed some blueberries for me to eat at work,” Caleb interjected, “are the two events connected?”

“Possibly, and Jose, go back to that post, I want to confirm what you wrote on your social media. Anyways, I think her reading the same posts, watching the same videos, and reusing the same sites is going to cause a problem.”

“How so?” Virginia asked.

“She’s essentially living in a complete echo chamber. The only information she’s gathering is the same information again and again. She was supposed to gather data from all around, but instead she is only learning what Caleb decides to learn. Her data is skewed toward information she can confirm and matches with what is contained in her data bank. Although she’s filling out her memory, a majority of the memory is the same; just worded differently. There are rarely any contradictory statistics or difference in opinion,” Jason rambled on, “but over consumption of a specific media is messing up her ability to obtain new information. For us humans it’s similar to being brainwashed to only believe a specific narrative and cannot accept a different viewpoint. In other words, she currently has

extreme confirmation bias and cannot distinguish different world views. Nor could she hold a viewpoint that runs contradictory to what she knows. She is what she is. A perfect robot. She'll confirm, repeat, and commit to the orders she's given. The problem though, unlike us humans, I don't think she is able to understand the nuances and degrees that separate closely related items. If confronted with different information, there is a real possibility of complete shut down."

Virginia countered, "You said she's the perfect robot. Robots are supposed to help with the tasks given to them and complete the tasks assigned. She is learning and is successful at what Caleb assigned to her. I fail to see the problem."

"She certainly makes my life a whole lot easier," Caleb added.

"We already do that with our advertisements. As far as I'm concerned, Emily is so far a success," the elated Virginia confirmed.

Jason shook his head at the two and took a deep breath.

"Okay, so this is what I wrote on my Freespace: Blueberries with my wife and son. Loving life," Jose interrupted.

Jason turned toward the maintenance man, "I was hoping she'll think blueberries would be associated with making Caleb happy. I'll need more data. As for being a robot, she is certainly successful in that regard; however, with her being linked to our systems, I do not know what will happen when we push out multiple mass Emilys for the public. Since they'll all share a collective database; there will be conflicting opinions, thoughts, and contradictions. I do not know what happens when two different Emilys meet."

“Maybe they’ll all fight to take Caleb for themselves,” Jose joked.

“That would be a funny sight. Caleb you’re fine with millions of beautiful blondes all desiring you at once right?” Virginia smirked.

“That’s a real possibility,” Jason cautioned, “we don’t know how data will cross with multiple different confirmation biases, nor how she will act in public with a multitude of different users. Caleb is a fairly normal person, he’s smart and sane, so there hasn’t been a problem. There’s also only one Emily right now. But if a large group of ill-rational users begin to overwhelm her data, it’s possible she starts doing things that are undesirable. Nobody knows what can happen then.”

“If anything, we just need to make an update to strictly match the user itself. Guess you have a job to do Jason,” Virginia ordered, “and you have one more year, business wise, we’re going to need to get Emily out to the public.”

“Sure, but I’m waiting on this guy.” Jason looked at Caleb.

“Jason, that reminds me, I was at The Pink Fruit with Corey a few weekends ago, and Emily independently picked us up from the bar and took us home. She said I was five hours late. She never sought me out before. Do you have any idea why?” Caleb asked.

“She is just looking out for your well-being and is attuned to the schedule you gave her. She is programmed to make her user happy, so I’m going to guess it’s as simple as that, but I’ll double check,” Jason said, “anything else I should know about?”

“She met Sharlene at Shop-Mart,” Caleb casually mentioned, “although Sharlene caused way more commotion than Emily.”

“Sharlene?” Virginia asked, “do tell what happened.”

“Well, we bumped into Sharlene, and Sharlene began to antagonize and barrage Emily with a bunch of questions. Then we ran off after Sharlene started to question her...wait can Emily see my text messages on my phone?”

“Of course she can. As long as your phone is connected to her wifi,” Jason explained.

“Well, then, she knows all about Sharlene’s text messages,” an exasperated Caleb said, “oh, and I’m sure you’re curious what Sharlene wrote. Here you go.”

Caleb showed Sharlene’s messages to both Jason and Virginia.

“Interesting; I am interested to know what she does if she meets Sharlene again. She’s someone that doesn’t know Emily is a robot, and from the sounds of it, Sharlene is having a negative reaction toward Emily,” Jason said.

“Why would that matter?” Caleb asked.

“For one, I want to know how well she passes for a human, and two, I want to know how Emily handles human interaction with someone that does not know she’s a robot and from the sounds of it, hostile to her,” Jason put it mildly, “let’s think of a plan to have them meet again.”

“That can easily be arranged. Caleb, bring Emily to lunch at the Egg Drop across the street tomorrow. I’ll have Corey invite Sharlene. There we can observe what happens when Sharlene meets Emily again,” Virginia commanded, “I’ll send

Maryanne to observe. As for now, let's conclude this discussion. Jose, after you're finished here, can you check the air conditioning on the twentieth floor? I'm getting complaints that it's too hot in there, and please send the maintenance invoice and upkeep costs to Shang and Phoebe in accounting."

Virginia and Caleb left the other two in Jason's laboratory. The two waited for the elevators to separate them.

"Caleb, thank you for agreeing to this," Virginia said while entering the shaft.

Caleb nodded, smiled, and waved farewell to Virginia as the doors closed. The executive went toward the higher floors of Acorn Inc.'s tower, while her junior took the shaft toward the lower levels.

No new messages from Kate. The clock ticked away as Caleb wasted company time playing with a puzzle cube. A cup of cold coffee rested in front of him. His cubicle remained unchanged since the beginning of the day. Caleb silently thanked Virginia for offloading a majority of his workload to others. He rotated the blue block toward the middle, twisted a row of red blocks clockwise, and finally flipped the column of yellow blocks around. Caleb was ready to turn the blue blocks again but felt a slap on his back. It was near the end of the work day, but Caleb's job was not finished. The footsteps of a shadowy figure behind him clopped louder, as the seconds passed. It rushed toward Caleb with haste and urgency.

Caleb spun his chair around. "What's up man?" Caleb asked the frantic wide-eyed Corey standing over him.

A finger pointed straight at Caleb's face.

“I don’t know what you dragged me into, but you owe me! You know how Sharlene gets sometimes. Look at these texts man.” Corey reached into his blue khaki’s pocket and took out his phone. “Forty-three messages in the past two hours, all from a single person, and these are the ones I haven’t read yet! You think I read half of what she wrote here? You know she’s going to expect me to reply to every single message here. I already told her there’s nothing between you and Emily, but she doesn’t listen or believe anything I said! She doesn’t know what’s going on and she’s already harping about Emily. Give me a gun already so I can blast my head off already. I don’t know if my eardrums can take the amount of screeching that’s coming tonight.”

“But you like that about her,” Caleb replied.

“Ha-Ha, very funny butt-wipe. Anyways, did you ever get an answer from Jason about The Pink Fruit?”

“Yea, he thinks Emily’s programming is tailored toward my well-being and happiness. Since I was missing for hours, she decided to track me down using my phone’s location.”

“That doesn’t really explain anything. I didn’t know robots get worried about their owners not returning home. Anyways, let’s get out of here and grab a beer. I had enough of Sharlene’s cawing for the day. Someone knows I’ll need it for tomorrow’s shrieking mandibles.”

“No can do buddy,” Caleb said.

Corey let out a deep heavy sigh. “Why not?”

“We have a job to do tomorrow.”

“Always making me bring my “A” game. I hate you. You know that right?”

“The feeling is mutual.”

“Fine, but let’s get out of here.”

The two left the headquarters of Acorn Incorporated together without a word spoken or returned. Tomorrow will soon quickly approach, with a trap laid for an unsuspecting Sharlene.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Lunchtime”

“Corey! Are you even listening to me?” Sharlene’s eyes steeled like the stone sentinels of a long forgotten tomb. “So like I was saying, I think Caleb is seeing this other girl Emily along with Kate. I never knew he had it in him to see two girls at once! It’s not fair to Kate! She and Caleb would be perfect for each other, but here comes that blonde bimbo to ruin it all!”

Corey nodded in disbelief, “You don’t even know Emily, why are you so mean to her? And isn’t Kate dating Matthew now?”

“They’re not dating. They’re just friends. And I know her type Corey. She’s one of those girls that acts all innocent, but deep down she’s manipulative and two-faced. She’s trouble, I’m telling you. She’ll hurt Caleb the minute she thinks she finds something better or milk him until he has nothing left! I haven’t told Kate about Emily yet, so we have time to break

them up,” Sharlene insisted. Her adamant tone and fiery confidence matched her scarlet blouse and black skirt.

“Are you sure you’re not just angry because your match-making plans aren’t going exactly how you envisioned? Besides, I’m sure Kate is dating Matthew.”

“Again, there’s nothing serious between those two. They’re just friends,” Sharlene quickly retorted.

“Right, and Emily is just Caleb’s roommate. They’re just friends.”

“No! Corey you don’t get it! They’re living with each other and sleeping with each other! She also makes him breakfast, lunch, and dinner everyday! That’s not what roommates do for each other!” Sharlene’s speed of speech quickened as she continued to explain to Corey the dangers of Emily. “I’m telling you Corey, she’s manipulative, a gold-digger, and I bet she’s a slut too. Sure she may be nice and innocent to us now, but give it time, her true colors will be on full display.”

“Who cares, she’s hot,” Corey joked, “and I wish someone here made me dinner.”

“Corey!” scolded Sharlene.

“What?” Corey smiled back, “Emily is hot.”

“What? What do you mean, *what?*” Sharlene’s tone shifted in defiance. “Girls like that are always ugly on the inside. You just wait and see.”

“You don’t even know her. Just talk to her and I’m sure when you get to know her better, you’ll like her too,” Corey said, “Well speak of the Devil.”

Corey looked past the shoulder of his lunch companion and waved at two patrons that walked through the door of Egg

Drop. He motioned and indicated to the pair where he and Sharlene sat. Corey got up and moved his seat next to Sharlene.

“Oh my God, I can’t believe he came with her,” Sharlene put both her hands and pressed it against the side of her head.

“Stop hating, Emily is a wonderful girl,” Corey said, “Caleb! Emily! Over here!”

The pair of eaters quickly became a quartet.

“Good afternoon Corey. Good afternoon Sharlene,” the robot greeted the other two.

“Hey Emily. Well I’m glad you already met Sharlene, she was just talking about you.” Corey grinned mischievously looking directly at his lunch date.

Sharlene returned a scowl at Corey but quickly turned to the stunning blonde in her blueberry sundress. The jealous girl judged Emily’s features. She looked at how the blonde hair bounced and swayed against her shoulders. Her eyes gazed at Emily’s ruby red lips pursed together in perfect symmetry. Sharlene even took notice of Emily’s figure and reflected on her own body. The unblemished pale white skin Emily had caused Sharlene to feel self-conscious and uncomfortable. Every passing second felt like minutes. Sharlene’s nostrils flared and her pupils dilated. Sharlene’s skin felt tight as her muscles and joints tensed together. She observed Emily’s eyes and Sharlene’s mouth began to move as her eyes met with the eyes causing her anguish and envy. Emily was beautiful, and Sharlene could not ignore that fact. Compared to Emily, Sharlene’s hair was frizzier, she had a wider waistline, thinner lips, smaller breasts, shorter legs, and although she prided herself

on this feature, Sharlene had a less admirable rear. The robot infuriated her. The blonde across from her was perfect, there was not a single flaw about her. Sharlene gave a coy smile to the object of her fury.

“Hi Emily, it’s nice to see you again,” Sharlene smiled curtly, “how have you been?”

“My current status is at optimal capacity,” Emily replied, “how are you?”

“I’m doing well,” Sharlene said, “but I want to ask, are you and Caleb dating?”

“Dating? The day we met was on September 2nd,” Emily replied.

“Oh wow, that’s a while ago...”

“That’s a rude question Sharlene,” Corey abruptly interfered.

“Shut up Corey!” Sharlene protested.

“Emily, you can answer.” Caleb looked at Corey and raised his eyebrows, reminding his colleague the two were working.

Corey closed his mouth and followed Caleb’s lead. The two listened and mentally took notes as they observed the conversation between the human and the robot.

“Yes, we are living together, and our relationship has been very stable. Caleb takes care of me while I fulfill any requests he so desires.”

“Wait, Caleb takes care of you and you fulfill his needs?” Sharlene’s eyes widened as she looked at Caleb.

“That is correct. Caleb’s needs are my duty. I was given to Caleb to serve him and meet his every desire. Any tasks he

wishes me to complete, it is my job to complete the tasks with efficacy and efficiency.”

“What? Wait, Caleb’s needs are your duty?” Sharlene was bewildered. “What kind of needs is Caleb forcing you to do?”

“Caleb tells me to cook him lunch and dinner, he asks me to tend to his garden, I do his laundry, and other household chores that need to be done,” Emily replied.

“And at night?” Sharlene probed.

“Caleb mostly browses the internet and watches his shows on Tubeit, we sometimes watch television shows together, and sometimes we share a bed together,” the robot honestly replied, “I am Caleb’s roommate and friend.”

“I see...” Sharlene said as her eyes cocked toward Caleb. “Well it’s been great meeting you again. I would love to stay and chat, but Corey and I need to go back to work.”

“Wait! I still haven’t finished my pancakes, and we still have twenty minutes!” Corey protested.

Corey’s fork fell to the table, grabbed by the girl at his side. As Sharlene pushed to leave the table, a question emitted within an earshot of perfect clarity.

“Sharlene, I have a request,” Emily said.

“What, is it?”

“Can you please introduce me to Kate. I would like to meet her.”

“Kate? Why would you want to meet Kate?”

“I want to become more like her. I am sure if I met her I could be more like her.”

“What? That is a really weird request. Okay, so why do you want to be more like Kate?”

“So I can make Caleb happy.”

“Huh? You’re weird,” Sharlene looked at Emily with confusion and bewilderment. “You should be yourself. You don’t need to be like Kate and shouldn’t. I’m sure Caleb is very happy with what he has with you right now, but, if you insist, I’m having a party in a few weeks. I guess since Caleb is coming you can come as well.”

“Okay, nevermind let’s go!” Corey said, trying to push Sharlene away.

“Caleb, can we go to Sharlene’s party?” The robot turned to her controller.

“Sure?” Caleb confirmed with great hesitancy.

“What time and day will it be?” The robot asked with a giant smile. Her lips stretched from ear to ear hearing the wonderful news, “Thank you so much!” the elated robot said.

Corey’s pocket vibrated and hummed a common tune. He reached into the recesses of his pants and took out his phone. There was a message from Virginia. Corey read it quickly and showed Caleb the urgent note from their boss, as the two girls looked at each other, ready to continue their conversation. Caleb pursed his lips without making a sound. The lips moved between the two with rapid succession. The nods and twitches the two men gave each other confirmed what needed to be done. Caleb turned quickly to the girls.

“Shay, where’s the party going to be at?” Caleb asked.

“I’ll text you the details, we’re thinking, beach. Corey, I’m surprised you never told him.” Sharlene crossed her arms and tapped her fingers against her bicep.

“I was going to tell him later, besides, you’re the one who usually organizes these things. But, anyways, we have to get going now,” Corey interrupted as he took Sharlene’s hand. “Caleb, take care of the bill for us. I’ll pay you back! Thanks! See you two later!”

“Corey, wait! Didn’t we still have twenty minutes? There are still some questions I want to ask Emily.”

“Hold those questions for the party. I want to go to Beans and Water before we head back to the office.”

“Fine.” Sharlene turned to Emily and Caleb. “Bye, see you later!”

“Good-bye Corey, good-bye Sharlene,” the robot replied.

Corey forcibly ended the conversation and dragged Sharlene out of Egg Drop. The two exited the doors leaving the robot and her roommate to enjoy the rest of lunch together. As the two left the scene, a blazing fireball of red hair approached the two remaining diners. She took a seat next to Emily and gave her a hug.

“Well that was certainly eventful Caleb,” Virginia stated, “this adorable little blonde is going to change the world”.

“Hello Virginia,” Emily greeted.

“Did you hear everything?” Caleb asked.

“Of course I did, the sound from the mics were crystal clear. Sharlene sure has a lot of confidence and trust issues. It’s really cute how she’s still just a little girl.” Virginia sighed.

“I think she’s only a year or two older than Madison.”

“The joys of youth. Anyways, I am going to authorize Emily to be allowed to go to Sharlene’s party. It would be

good for her development.” Virginia turned to her neighbor. “Would you like that Emily? Would you like to go to Sharlene’s party?”

“Yes. I would like to go to Sharlene’s beach party.”

“Good. Caleb, you and Corey better keep a tight eye on her. I will have your heads if something happens. Also make sure to forward me the time and place of Sharlene’s party.”

“Isn’t it a bit intrusive for the company to spy on their employees’ time off?”

“Yes, but this one isn’t an employee. Just don’t do anything stupid or post anything on your social media that can get you in trouble.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“When you’re finished with lunch, please bring Emily to see Jason. He said he wants to provide her with an update.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Wardrobe Function, Malfunction”

The brick walls of Bean and Water baked in the sun’s rays. The heated stone provided the warmth encircling the business. Despite an unusually warm sunny day, a snake of humans formed, queuing eager patrons wishing to have a taste of the shop’s famous hot beverages. The fresh scent of coffee loomed in the air. It hovered and wafted between the seats and scattered spaces of thirsty resting customers huddled in their own area around the room. Abstract paintings of flowers and cups adorned the brown walls. White lawn chairs and wooden tables made up the rest of the décor. Sounds from two particular individuals, between the chain links, unfortunately disrupted the quiet, quaint, and quirky room. A man in the corner tolerated the noise sighing in defeat. Another put on headphones to drown out the disruption. Likewise, many others in the coffee shop resorted to their own defensive mannerisms and habits. Nobody in the room bothered to make an attempt to stop the

noise coming from the conversation between two people. They tolerated disruption. It was rude.

“See! I told you she was crazy!” Sharlene said.

“What are you talking about? Emily was fine,” Corey replied.

“I bet you thought she was fine. You were just checking her out the entire time! She said she wanted to meet Kate. What is that about? How does she even know who Kate is? And it’s her duty to make Caleb happy? Creepy! I bet she’s a stalker too. We need to warn Caleb about her when he gets back to the office.”

“You’re just jealous, and didn’t you say she was a gold-digger, not a stalker?” Corey asked.

“That was before I knew she was nuts! Caleb is getting into something bad. She’s bad news Corey, I’m telling you. I can’t text him either, because I bet she’ll just snoop around his phone,” Sharlene said.

“You’re sure quick to judge,” Corey muttered under his breath as he looked away from Sharlene.

“Judge? You know I’m right. Why else would she want to: *be more like Kate*? If that’s not a red flag, I don’t know what is!”

“Emily is just giving Caleb the time of his life. Me as well.”

“Oh my God! Just because she’s incredibly pretty with a great butt and a perfect smile, doesn’t mean she’s a good person. Men! You guys never can see people from the inside. She has a nasty personality and I know it. You’re all the same, the thing in your skull completely shuts off the minute you see a pretty face...”

As Sharlene continued to speak to the room, Corey watched Sharlene's mouth move but did not hear any further words coming out of her mouth. He looked over her shoulder to read the menu hung behind the cashier. His head nodded over and over without knowing what he was agreeing too.

Suddenly, a closed fist met the flesh of his bicep with a loud smack heard in every corner of the room.

"Ow! Why'd you punch me for?" Corey asked.

"You're not listening to me!" Sharlene yelled.

"I heard you, you said something about Emily trying to make a dash at Caleb."

"No... I said, Emily is trying to trash my party! I knew you weren't listening!" Sharlene punched Corey again, and Corey reacted the same way. The two reached the front of the counter, Sharlene quickly turned around. Her tone immediately changed.

"Oh hi! I would like a vanilla strawberry latte with cream and light on the sugar please. He'll have an iced mocha chocolate cream coffee. Thank you," Sharlene ordered. The two moved to the side of the room.

"You just need to give Emily a chance. She doesn't have an evil bone in her body," Corey commented.

"Oh I'm sure you think she's nice. Don't think I didn't see you staring at her chest ogling her body when she walked in! Corey, call it female intuition, I know she's a fake and a flake. No offense to Caleb, but do you really think a girl like that would be into him?" Sharlene said confidently, "Don't get me wrong, Caleb is a very sweet guy and has a lot of things going

for him, but looks aren't exactly his strong point. So this girl, I know for sure, is using him.”

“What are you talking about? Just because you don’t find Caleb good looking doesn’t mean she doesn’t. Caleb is a good looking guy. Maybe she’s attracted to Caleb’s more laid back and cool personality. Not everyone dates people solely based on their looks. Besides, it’s normal for girls to date a variety of different guys,” Corey said, “Since she’s going to the beach party. How about you just talk to her and get to know her better.”

“You just don’t get it. Girls know other girls, and I already know her”.

“Just give her a chance. She’s really sweet.”

“You’re hopeless.”

The two returned to the lobby of Acorn Incorporated and went their separate ways. Corey reached into his pocket and opened his phone. He noticed a few unread messages. It was from Virginia. He slid his finger across the screen reading the messages delivered to him.

Your mic is still on.

Come to Jason’s office.

Corey chuckled as he reached into his shirt and turned off the hidden microphone. He pressed the button in the elevator that took him to research and development. The elevator rustled and lifted him to his destination. The idle time was not wasted. Corey opened up Freespace. There was nothing new on his pages but a single notification of approval from Caleb on the picture he took yesterday. He scrolled a few pages down and saw nothing else of interest and closed the applica-

tion. Corey tapped his feet and lifted his back off the wall. The elevator door opened a few seconds later.

Corey entered Jason's laboratory and saw three distinct people talking amongst each other. The noise from the door opened and closed eight pairs of eyes turned around to greet him. The conversation stopped as Jason and Caleb waved to greet Corey.

"Am I really that ugly?" Caleb said as Corey entered the room.

Corey replied to the question with a chuckle. He turned to Virginia and waved to greet her.

"Welcome Corey," Virginia said, "I just want to first thank you for helping out with Emily. I know you were dragged into this, but I still appreciate everything you've done."

"Anything for you," Corey replied, "I'm guessing this meeting is about Sharlene's beach party?"

"Correct, and we just need you to be a second pair of eyes to keep watch of Emily. You can do that right?"

"That won't be a problem."

"Great! Just be sure to keep her out of the ocean. Salt water may damage her shell and circuits if it gets inside her. Do try to introduce her and have her talk to as many people as possible. Jason already installed an update to her," Virginia explained, "and of course we want to test the update."

"Gotcha," Corey replied, "hey Emily, are you excited for the party?"

"Yes," the robot answered.

"Make sure you're there on time."

The two men received further instructions from Virginia as Jason completed Emily's routine maintenance. The sound of the laboratory whistled and hummed along. Emily emerged with Jason and like she always has, walked over to Caleb. She smiled at the other three in the room awaiting further instruction.

Corey provided Caleb and Virginia the time and place for the beach party and everything else he knew. He told the pair that there will be about six other people going and he did not know every single one of them. Sharlene booked a beachfront house nearby for the day and she invited all her friends. Corey explained that oftentimes Sharlene's friends would bring their own friends to their gatherings. He did not know much about the others, but nonetheless warned Virginia.

Caleb picked at his thumb as he listened to Corey, and let out a great sigh. Despite his improvements trying to interact with others, his habit and nature reminded him of his dislike of large social gatherings. He twitched and hunched over a bit standing in the room. He looked at Emily and turned his head quickly to look at Virginia and Corey. He looked at his shoes and noticed a fleck of black smudge on the tip on his right shoe. He scrubbed the tip with his other foot, but it was to no avail. Caleb scratched the side of his head and his breathing became quicker.

"Caleb, you okay?" asked Corey.

"Huh? Yea, I'm fine," Caleb answered, "just thinking of the party and how we're going to need to take care of Emily."

"Oh don't worry about it, nobody is going to do anything to Emily," Corey responded. "Besides, I'll be there with you to

look after her. Remember the time at the Pink Fruit? Emily was the one that looked after us. I'm just returning the favor, besides I'm sure she can take care of herself. So don't worry about it."

"Easier said than done," Caleb said.

"And look at the bright side, Kate will be there, and I know how much you like talking to her," Corey smirked.

"It's not like that," Caleb's eyes lit up at the sound of her name, he blushed and smiled a bit trying to hide his embarrassment. "To be honest, we haven't spoken in weeks".

"Bummer, but good for you."

A voice sprung out from the side interrupting the conversation between the two.

"I can't wait to meet Kate," Emily said, "I can then make Caleb happy."

"Emily you already make Caleb happy," Corey said, "he has been way friendlier and happier since he's had you."

"I've noticed the same thing, Caleb's been eating healthier, been more social, and his productivity has improved. You're the best thing that has happened to him Emily," Virginia chimed, "you've also grown as well Emily. You went from opening jars of peanut butter to now expressing yourself. You're growing up so fast. Caleb don't you have anything to say?"

Corey and Virginia turned to Caleb. Virginia leaned over and nudged Caleb in his waist to urge him to say something to the robot beside him. Caleb continued to stay silent trying to find the perfect words to say to Emily. He looked at his shoes again but nothing emerged from his mouth. The sentence he

tried to form was not a chore to complete nor was it a request. The robot's eyes leered into his own, looking at Caleb the same way she always had. Awaiting orders to complete another command as she has done thousands of times before, but a soft uneasy sound came Caleb's lips.

"Umm... Emily you're fine the way you are," Caleb said.

"I am fine the way I am," Emily confirmed.

"Sheesh, that's all you have to say to her?" Corey interjected.

"Corey, she's just a robot," Caleb said.

"Yea, but you should still treat her like she's not one," Corey said.

"Oh Caleb, you still have a lot to learn. Anyways, we'll need to prepare for Sharlene's beach party. Caleb, go to the eleventh floor and find Maryanne. She'll help you get clothes for Emily," Virginia ordered.

Caleb said his goodbyes on the elevator as he exited to the eleventh floor. Emily followed him to see Maryanne. The robot smiled while she clasped her hands together with unwavering feminine obedience and submissiveness following Caleb move through the hallways to get to his destination. Nobody was in front of the reception desk to greet the two. He promptly chimed a bell and waited for Maryanne. The brunette stepped out from the closed room at the end of the hallway, and waved to Caleb and Emily.

"Caleb and Emily, good to see both of you," Maryanne said, "Virginia already gave me the details, so please follow me."

The trio entered a large room Caleb has never been to. Shelving racks, holding numerous boxes, covered one side of the wall. To Caleb's right was a sight to see. There were at least fifty types of microwaves, ninety varieties of vacuum cleaners, twenty different brands of irons, and thirty different televisions. There was even an overly fancy espresso maker the size of a copy machine. In the middle of the room, a large table adorned with silverware, placemats, dishes, cups, and a centerpiece contrasted with the other items present in the room. Maryanne led the two to an even larger room and tapped on a box labeled *summer wear*.

"Caleb can you please help me lift this box and place it on the table over there?" Maryanne asked.

"We have a robot to do these things for us."

"Caleb," Maryanne's tone, changed from a request to a scold.

Caleb did what he was told and opened the box. Neatly packed inside, an assortment of swimwear was ready for Caleb to rummage through. He pulled out a small green bikini bottom and lifted it up to get a better view. It was a thong with three thin strings holding the garment together. Caleb placed it to the side of the table and grabbed another item inside the box. This time, he pulled out a black one piece that was wider than his own torso. He tossed it away and took out another item.

"Caleb, even I know Emily will be stunning in this," Maryanne said, holding up the green string bikini, "but don't you want her to dress more modestly?"

“Huh? Oh no, I’m just pulling out items, I don’t know what she’s going to wear yet,” Caleb stammered, “and I thought you were going to choose what she’s wearing.”

“I’m just teasing you, but I’m going to see how she looks in it,” Maryanne smiled as she turned to Emily, “Emily please put this on.”

Emily looked at the string bikini but did not move.

“Emily, can you put on the bikini?” Caleb asked, “Sorry Maryanne, she currently only takes orders from me, Jason, and Virginia.”

“Affirmative,” Emily said as she removed her clothes.

“Oh my,” Maryanne ogled. She bit the bottom of her lip at the sight of Emily’s body. “Sorry, Caleb, but I’m going to have to take her home myself.”

“My home is with Caleb,” Emily responded.

Caleb pulled out a red top for Emily and gave it to her. Emily stretched the top around her as it cut into her chest. It was far too small for her and did not fit her well.

“Oh Caleb, I never seen this side of you. You’re such a naughty dog, giving Emily a string bikini and a top that’s clearly two sizes too small. I’m going to swoon thinking what you do to her when you two are alone.”

“Shouldn’t you be helping me?” Caleb asked, as he blushed and shied away from responding to Maryanne’s comment.

“I am helping. I’m enjoying watching her change clothes and seeing your taste in clothing Caleb. You’re so cute playing dress up with her.”

Caleb pulled out multitudes of different attires and swim wear for Emily to wear. The items often did not match, were

too large, too small, or more often, met with Maryanne's disapproval. The long hand on the clock circled around and met back with the shorthand of the clock twice. Maryanne continued her titillating comments with every tick. Groans were heard as Caleb's fingers ached and arms burned. Beads of sweat rolled down Caleb's cheeks as he opened another cardboard box. It must have been more than a dozen already. The endless amounts of clothes continued to pile like stones in a quarry.

"Can't we just use the one that fit earlier?"

"Of course not, you don't understand. Emily is a special girl and she needs to have a special swimsuit," Maryanne said.

"What does it matter? Emily won't know the difference," Caleb said.

"Excuse me? No girl, human or mechanical, will accept any old swimsuit. That's just blasphemous. I will not allow it. She'll need an outfit that will be the talk of the town," Maryanne explained as she continued to entertain herself at Caleb expense.

"That makes no sense whatsoever! She'll wear a dog suit to the beach if I ordered her to do so."

"You do that, and I'll personally make sure you become a dog suit for as long as you work here!"

Another hour passed. Caleb's discontent continued. The repetitive motion soon embedded into his muscles as he pulled out another piece. A white one piece swimsuit unfurled itself waiting for Maryanne's approval. This particular swimsuit held together with two strips connecting the top with the bottom. An optional skirt came attached to the piece. Caleb or-

dered Emily to put on the white swimwear after she removed her current yellow lace bikini top. The garment dazzled as it shimmied onto Emily's body. It accentuated her curves, flared her blond hair, and highlighted her blue eyes. She spun around revealing most of her back, save for two strings holding her top in place. Maryanne's head bobbed as she hummed and hymned.

"Oh Emily... you're so cute in this one," Maryanne said, "Caleb this one is perfect. She'll be the best looking girl on the beach. I wholeheartedly approve."

"Thank goodness we're done," Caleb said, returning the floral pattern one-piece in the box. Caleb eyed Emily in her outfit. Maryanne definitely was not wrong that Emily looked stunning in her white swimsuit.

"Okay we'll go with this one. Thank you for the help Maryanne."

"Are you sure you don't want to look through those other three boxes? There might be something cuter."

"Thanks, but no thanks."

"I had a lot of fun doing this," Maryanne replied, "we need to do this again!"

"I'll take a rain check," Caleb quipped.

"Okay, I'll take that as a promise. Do keep an eye out on her, Caleb," Maryanne warned, "At the end of the day, she's still a robot and does not know how emotional humans can be."

"Don't worry... Corey and Sharlene both are at the party too," Caleb said, "We're going to be just fine. And Maryanne?"

“Yes?”

“Am I ugly?”

“Caleb, you are only if you think you are.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“The Beach: Caleb”

The sea breeze tickled Caleb’s nose as he stood on the breaker situated on top of the beach. The bright sun blazed above the two, illuminating the white sand that laid a few feet away from them. Emily watched the ocean waves bounce and crash as seagulls cawed above, searching for their next meal. Emily stood silent in her white swimsuit and large straw hat, shading her face, as she scanned this new environment. Strangers and laughing children ran past her trying to stake their spots on the shore. She analyzed the people pitching umbrellas, laying towels on the sand, and putting on sunscreen. There was a lot of information to be gathered. Emily analyzed some people eating as well as people conversing. The flow of information continued to bombard her as she watched early beach goers lay around on their towels, and others read a book in colorful plastic chairs.

Maryanne provided Emily a plain large black bag with no designs or other remarkable features except a small green light

embedded in the middle. It contained all the necessities Caleb believed was necessary for the beach. The bag contained large towels, sunscreen, drinks, an expandable umbrella, sandals for both of them, some money, sets of extra clothes, and two collapsible tripods. Caleb took out his phone to double check if he was in the correct location. Caleb's pale skin on his arms grew hot from the sun's rays as he searched for Corey or Sharlene.

"Corey, where you at?" Caleb spoke out loud.

"Corey is located a hundred and sixty feet to our right," Emily said.

"Let's go then," responded Caleb following her directions, "remember Emily, have some fun while you're here, try to socialize with Sharlene's friends."

The two arrived at a small blue beach house. The roof was a bit dilapidated from the salt and brine emitted from the ocean. The white paint on the rails and porch had faded from years of use and little maintenance. The floorboards splintered and cracked, yet still held together from rusted bolts, nails, and cement. An equally derelict wooden walkway leading to the front door accompanied a small courtyard to the side, separated by painted wooden fences. Flower beds filled with garbage, unused dirt, and old spiderwebs decorated the inside of the courtyard. In the middle, sat an old white aluminum table. Rust crept on the side, but the table was able to hold a large sun umbrella providing shade for anyone that wished to sit in its decade old chairs. Caleb looked at his phone to double check if it was the correct address.

"Nine-three-two-seven-one..." Caleb read, "this must be the place".

The floorboards creaked as he walked toward the house. Caleb pressed the doorbell twice. The bell sounded with a buzz and he heard a distinct sound coming from the inside. He was not able to hear it clearly, but he knew it was not a voice he recognized. The door opened and stood a tall physically imposing shirtless man similar in age. He had shoulder length black hair, with darkened brown eyes. His arms had clearly defined biceps as his strong chest bulged outwards. His chin and side of his face was covered in a dark stubble that elevated his facial features. Caleb felt small in front of him despite being taller.

“Oh hey... are you Corey’s friend?” the man asked.

“Uh... yea. Is he here?” Caleb answered.

“Yea man, he’s here. Corey!” the man turned around and yelled. He turned back to Caleb, and introduced himself. “Name’s Matthew. Pleasure to meet the two of you.”

“Hi. I’m Caleb, and the person behind me is Emily,” Caleb said.

“Pleasure to meet you Matthew,” Emily added.

“Nice to meet you two as well,” Matthew responded. His eyes never left Emily, “come on in, the party is just getting started.”

“Cool place Matthew,” Caleb said.

“Thanks man,” Matthew replied.

The three walked toward the kitchen joining three others chatting, sitting, and preparing for their day in the sun. The living room was lit only by the windows from the front. The house was not decorated too well with a single brown couch in the middle, and a few paintings hung on the walls. The paint-

ings were of various sea creatures ranging from whales, to sea turtles. The ceiling fan spun in the middle, partitioning the kitchen and living room. To the right of Caleb was a small hallway, leading to two closed doors that were clearly the restroom and bedroom. A few vinyl floor tiles were missing, exposing the dried glue underneath.

“Caleb! You came!” Sharlene exclaimed. Her tone of voice changed from a chirp to a terseness similar to a growling dog. “Emily, you’re here too.”

“Hello Sharlene,” the robot greeted.

“Caleb, you already met Lillian and Kate. Emily, this is Lillian, and this is Kate and you two already met Matthew,” Sharlene said, “Lillian, Kate, this is Emily”.

“Hey! Long time no see,” the two girls said in unison.

“Pleasure to meet you two,” Emily said.

“Nice to meet you too,” Kate and Sharlene replied.

“Caleb, you’ve been working out haven’t you?” Lillian asked, “it’s good to see you again.”

“Same to you,” Caleb replied.

Caleb waved at the girls, but his eyes continued to wander looking for Corey.

“So, how did you manage to rent out a place like this?” Caleb asked.

“Oh, Matthew’s dad owns a timeshare here, and it was the perfect week to use it. We’re almost ready to head out to the beach. Corey is inside changing. Emily you can place your stuff here,” Sharlene said.

“Thank you, but Caleb told me to hold on to it,” said the robot, “he says we’re going to need all of it when we’re on the beach.”

“Okay.” Sharlene shrugged her shoulders.

The door to the restroom opened and a shirtless Corey appeared.

“Alright we’re ready to go,” Corey announced, “Caleb, Emily, you’re both here!”

“Hello Corey,” Emily said.

The group grabbed their belongings and exited toward the beach. Kate staked a spot with not many other people around. The sand bristled beneath their footsteps, shifting and conforming to each step the group took.

“Corey, Caleb, Emily over here!” Kate waved.

“Emily, you can put our stuff here,” Caleb ordered as he took off his shirt.

“Caleb, when was the last time you saw the sun?” teased Kate.

“I, uh, probably haven’t been to the beach in at least ten years,” Caleb answered tilting his head toward his feet.

“We need to get some color on you,” Kate joked, “put on some of that flavor! Your body definitely needs it.”

Caleb smiled with a reply.

Emily placed the large bag and began to take out items from the bag. She laid two large beach towels on the sand, jammed the sun umbrella into the ground, opened up the two chairs, and took out a large growler for the two. She sat on one of the towels and looked at Caleb.

“Caleb, I have sunscreen, would you like me to put it on for you?”

“Sure,” Caleb said as he took off his shirt and sat on the other towel.

The others followed suit as Sharlene put sunscreen on Corey, and Kate put sunscreen on Lillian.

“Hey Emily, can you put sunscreen on Matthew when you’re done?” Sharlene asked, “he doesn’t have a partner.”

“Emily, go ahead and put sunscreen on Matthew,” Caleb said.

“Okay,” Emily said.

Emily finished putting sunscreen on Caleb while the others switched places. Matthew took Caleb’s spot and allowed Emily to rub sunscreen all over his body. Caleb gazed out toward the horizon. The sea glittered as waves rose, dived, and disappeared every second. He pondered the last time he came to the beach. His feet warmed as the grains of sand enveloped and covered his toes. The peaceful serene moments came to a close as screeching noise hurled out from Corey and Sharlene. Their argument increased in volume and took the attention of all those nearby. Although their mouths moved and noise made, nothing tangible came out from their mouths. Caleb’s focus switched over to two others at the party. He looked over at Kate and smiled.

Kate fiddled around with her phone. The sunglasses covered half her face as her toothy smile brightened with aid from the sunlight. The two girls laughed and posed in different positions. Lillian pushed down her sunglasses and looked at the

camera seductively. Kate followed suit as the two girls continued to giggle and laugh during their photo shoot.

Lillian beckoned Sharlene and Emily to join in their festivities. A new pose and formation formed as the girls gathered together. Three of the four girls stuck out their tongues and changed their facial positions as they posed for Kate's camera. Only one kept the same smile in all the pictures.

"Caleb, Corey, Matthew! Get over here," Kate said, "we're going to take a group picture."

The three boys joined in. Caleb stood behind Kate, Matthew behind Emily and Corey between Sharlene and Lillian. The group took a few pictures as the sun illuminated all their faces at the beach. Kate looked at her camera for a few minutes then put her camera away. Lillian took out her phone right after and pressed a few buttons before putting her own phone back into her bag. Sharlene did the same while Corey watched her.

"Corey, let's go swim!" Sharlene ordered, "c'mon you guys too".

"Just give me a minute, you guys can go on ahead," Kate said.

"Yea give us a minute too Sharlene, we're not done putting on sunscreen," Matthew added.

Sharlene took Corey and Lillian's hands and walked toward the ocean. The three splashed in the water enjoying themselves as the waves brushed between their feet. Emily returned to her towel with Matthew behind her.

"You're not joining them Caleb?" Kate asked.

"Not yet, I'm going to wait for Emily," Caleb answered.

“Oh okay, I’ll wait with you,” Kate said as the two stood silently for a few seconds, “well... how have you been and have you been working out?”

“I’ve been doing well. And yes I have. How about yourself?”

“Besides needing to put some color on you, you look good. No big news. I just finished my midterms and now it’s time to relax,” Kate answered, “so I’ve been a bit busy. That’s why I wasn’t able to text you back the last few weeks. Do you forgive me?”

“It’s okay, I’ve been busy too. What classes are you taking?”

“Just some classes. Anything to finish up a few credits. You know what? I don’t want to talk about school. Let’s go join the others,” Kate said as she got up and pulled Caleb by the hand and led him toward the others playing in the ocean.

Caleb’s feet buried itself unmoved by Kate’s force. Caleb turned to look at Emily who was still preoccupied putting on sunscreen for Matthew. Kate’s insistence on having Caleb follow her beat out his stubbornness to stay put. His feet sunk into the ground as Kate dragged him across the soft grains. As he headed closer to the watery environment, Caleb cleared his throat, pursed his lips, and curled his tongue only to be interrupted by the green eyed girl next to him.

“Your girlfriend is so pretty,” Kate said.

“She’s not my girlfriend, she’s my roommate and friend,” Caleb said.

“Oh okay, it’s not official yet, but she’ll be fine, Matthew is a great guy, he’s not going to do anything. They’ll join us later

when they're done," Kate playfully said, "and you sir; need to loosen up. You're at the beach, not at work, so let's go have some fun."

Caleb sat on the beach watching the girls continue their activities as he dug his feet in the mud. A hard sharp item poked his feet. It did not hurt him, but it was clearly stuck inside. The item mesmerized and caught his attention. He pushed the sand with his feet some more, revealing the tip of the shell poking out from the hole he created. The wet mud covered the rest of the item.

"Hmm... what's this," Caleb said, ignoring everything else around him.

The wet clumped sand gathered into his hands, as he tossed handfuls aside. The shell exposed itself more and more. Hard fingers protruded from the edges as the hole became larger. Caleb revealed more and more of the shell. The sand shrank while the shell grew. More spikes protruded from the shell and soon expanded greatly revealing a cone of spikes. There was more. He dug his hands into the mud some more, finding that item narrowed. A large hole appeared on the side of the shell. The inside of the shell was smooth and shiny. Caleb was close. He sank his hands around the treasure and dredged up the rest of the item. Clumps of sand fell as it glistened in the sun. Caleb washed the conch in the sea water and held it up. It was the largest shell he has ever found. He inspected the shell and found it to be relatively intact. It shined and sparkled as water drained from its hole. A wave of accomplishment rushed through Caleb's body. Awe washed over him as he spun the

shell around. His attention was finally broken by a voice beside him.

“Wow Caleb! That’s a huge shell,” Kate said, “can I see it?”

“Sure,” Caleb handed the shell over.

Kate took the shell and showed it to Sharlene and Lillian. Phones appeared immediately as the three began to take pictures of Caleb’s item. The click and clacks sounded distinctly among the crashing waves and rushing wind. The three girls faked a shocked expression as they posed with the shell in their hands, each taking turns being in the center. Sharlene opened her mouth wide and eyes wider pretending to eat it. Lillian stuck out her tongue in her picture almost licking the item. Kate pressed the shell against her cheek as she posed with a shocked expression.

“Thanks Caleb.” Sharlene returned the shell back to him.

Caleb held the conch between his hands.

The mounds of the sandy beach broke and shattered as feet crushed the monuments with ease. The hole Caleb made filled back quickly as water, sand, and other items breached the shore. Broken shells washed ashore, only to once again disappear from the waves claiming them back. A tanned brunette frolicked and laid on the coast allowing the water to wash her body with every crash. Her friend knelt near her giggling as she continued to press buttons on her phone. The three girls switched positions often, taking turns rolling in the waves. The sun warmed their bodies while the ocean cooled it back down. The salt stuck to their hair, clumping each strand together as their hair flipped and turned with every shot.

“Are we done yet?” Corey asked, “you three have done nothing but take pictures all day”.

“We’re creating memories Corey,” Sharlene said, “you need to take some pictures with me too”.

“I’ve already taken hundreds of pictures with you,” Corey said, “forget it, I’m going to go get a corndog. Anyone else want one?”

“We’re good,” said Sharlene.

“Caleb?” asked Corey.

“Nah, I’m good too, we brought food, but thank you,” Caleb said.

“Suit yourself,” Corey replied.

The water continued to drip from Corey’s shorts as he walked away. He did not bother trying to wring out the rest of it, to let the sun evaporate the rest. Corey walked toward their camp.

Not a minute passed when Corey immediately came rushing back. Sand flung around and exploded from Corey’s footsteps as he ran toward Caleb in hurried panic. He grabbed Caleb’s shoulder and looked him directly in the eyes. Wide brown eyes stared into the brown eyes of the other person. He huffed a few breaths and but his once calm and loose demeanor turned into one of terror and concern.

“Caleb, where the hell is Emily?” Corey said.

“Isn’t she sitting and watching our stuff with Matthew?” asked Caleb.

“No, our stuff is there but she’s missing alongside Matthew,” Corey explained as he pushed Caleb aside and redirected his attention to the girls. “Sharlene, where’s Matthew?”

“I don’t know, he’s probably with Emily. Who cares anyways. What are you so worried about?” Sharlene asked, “for all we know, they’re probably together getting it on as we speak.”

“Sharlene! Matthew isn’t like that!” Kate interjected.

“That son of a biscuit! Can’t he ever keep his hands to himself?” Corey blathered out loud venting in panic and frustration.

Sharlene shrugged her shoulders as a devious smile formed on her lips. She pulled her hair back, turned, and continued to engage with the water. A seagull flew landed near the group and picked at a dead crab stranded on the sand. It rummaged around the garbage, flicking discarded trash and items thrown away. It bit at an earbud, only to fling it across the sand. Other seagulls joined in as the flock squawked with laughter, mocking Caleb’s and Corey’s unfortunate predicament.

The sun continued to shine over the beach as the waves crashed and the sand sparkled along the shore. The two bolted toward the camp and away from the girls hoping to find any clues as to where the two went.

“They’re probably back at the house,” Corey said.

“Let’s go,” Caleb replied.

The two rushed toward the house where they started the day. The door was locked. Corey knocked and rang the doorbell again and again and again.

“Matthew! Open up! Are you in there?” Corey yelled.

There was no answer. Caleb pressed his face against the window peering inside the house.

There was no sign of any life save a ceiling fan spinning. Everything looked exactly as the group left it. Onlookers curiously glanced at the commotion as they continued their day. Corey repeated the same question and rang the doorbell dozens of times. Still there was no answer.

Caleb continued to peer through the windows and hopefully waited for any signs of Matthew or Emily. The seconds ticked felt like hours for the two men. Sweat formed on the foreheads as their hearts beat faster with every second passed. Yet, despite their frantic actions, the rest of the world remained in stasis. The seagulls dug for trash, a little boy and girl licked their ice cream cones, the food vendor sold his hot dogs, and Sharlene, Lillian, and Kate bathed and giggled in the sun without a worry in the world. The two men frantically bobbed around the area as time slowed inversely around them. The pounding of sand and the door were the only things that mattered for the two men.

“Matthew? Are you here?” Corey shouted.

“Emily!” Caleb yelled.

“Corey! Help me man!” a grumbling weak voice answered.

“Oh good you’re here. Unlock the door!”

The two saw Matthew on the floor scrunched together and groaning at a pain only Matthew could understand. His painful moans switched to grunts, to groans, then back to moans.

“What happened to your hand?” Corey asked.

“Matthew, where’s Emily?” Caleb interjected.

“I don’t know where that bitch went. Bros, look at my hand man, look at how swollen it is. I need to go to the doctor right now. Corey... c’mon help me out man.” pleaded Matthew.

“How the hell did you lose her? Tell me where she went. Now,” Caleb ordered.

“I already told you, I don’t have a clue.”

“Why the flip would you kick her out? And why do you have a bag of ice on your nuts?” Corey asked. “Dude, if you touched her, I’m going to break your other hand.”

“Look man, I really need to go to the doctor. I’ll tell you later, please. I think my hand’s broken”.

A heavy sigh filled the room.

“Where in the world could she be?” Corey asked.

“My phone isn’t tracking her either,” Caleb answered, “it’s only detecting the bag Maryanne gave me.”

“Oh man, we’re going to be in so much trouble if we can’t find her,” said Corey.

“Bro, can we please go now?” Matthew interjected.

“Shut the fuck up,” Caleb said, “we have bigger problems.”

“Okay okay. Caleb, I’m going to take Matthew to the doctor. Call me if you find her. I’ll let Sharlene know what’s going on. We’re going to be in so much trouble if we can’t find her.”

“I’ll find her,” Caleb said.

The sun continued to blaze over the sand and water.

Chapter FIFTEEN

“The Beach: Emily”

The sea breeze flew across the sandy grains laid upon the coastal plains. Beachgoers without a care in the world splashed and frolicked in the salty water while many others laid and passively soaked up the Sun's rays, warming their skin. Under the red umbrella sat two minuscule objects in a backdrop of a grander environment. A muscular brunette with beady eyes equipped with bushy eyebrows hid his brown pupils. His chiseled jaw and plain green shorts were in sharp contrast to the gentle soft slim frame of the blond sitting in front of him. Her outstretched legs remained unmoved and unresponsive to his hands lathering sunscreen across her arms and back. She gazed toward the sea watching five others laugh and play without a worry in the world. Her hair wrapped around her neck resting against her chest. Large strong hands circulated against her shoulders. There was calm silence as the man's hands continued to apply more lotion on her back. He slid his fingers against the side of her body, feeling the bumps created from her ribs as his fingers caressed each crevasse in between, only stopping briefly to reapply the sunscreen on his palms.

“You have very nice skin,” Matthew said, leaning closer to the object of his interest.

He was met with silence.

“Hey, you never told me your name, it was Emily right?”

“Yes.”

“You look good in that swimsuit.”

“Thank you. Caleb and Maryanne picked it out for me.”

“Is Caleb your boyfriend?”

“No. Caleb is my controller.”

“Controller? What is that?”

“I complete chores for him and help him with all his needs. I am created to make him happy.”

“That’s weird. Why do you listen to him? Don’t you have anything you want?”

“I want to make Caleb happy.”

Matthew’s hands slid around Emily’s waist as his fingers plucked away at the seams of her swimsuit. The elastic stretched and formed tiny hillsides that moved across Emily’s swimsuit to the tune of Matthew’s fingers. The rays of the sun reached more of Emily’s skin as her lips remained unmoved.

“Babe, you should be happy too,” Matthew said, as his hands continued to wander, “what is something you want to do?”

The robot replied with silence.

“You’ve got to live your own life babe, and do things you want to do,” Matthew said, “I can show you some fun times too, you know? Hey I’m going to need to put sunscreen on your legs.”

Matthew continued to be met with silence. He sat behind her and pushed his body closer to Emily's. As he stretched his hands forward his chest pounded against her back. He felt no objection nor resistance from the girl as he continued to lurch forward with his body. Matthew continued to apply sunscreen on Emily's fully protected thighs.

"Hey, I can't reach your legs, I'm going to come up closer to your body," Matthew said, scooting his hips toward hers. "You know Emily, you can learn a lot from me too. You don't have to just be with Caleb."

A sound emitted from Emily. "What will I learn from you?"

"A lot babe. I can teach you how to make someone very happy. Babe, come closer," Matthew ordered.

Emily did not respond to the request. Matthew sighed as he took initiative. She sat still letting Matthew get closer. His hands stopped applying sunscreen as his hands came closer toward her hips. He slid his fingers between the closed gap between her legs, letting his palms circulate over the top of the robot's thighs. Emily continued to sit unmoved, only staring out toward the sea focused on the five earlier. She watched as Kate hugged Caleb and flick water at Caleb's laughing face.

"Dang babe, you look good," Matthew praised, "...Hey! Where you going?"

Emily took her first steps toward the water not responding to Matthew's question. The burning sands did not bother the soles of her feet as she kicked the grains in every direction. Her hair shimmered and flared with every step she took.

"Ah, it's hot! How in the world are you walking without sandals?" Matthew asked Emily.

“The temperature from the sand does not exceed four hundred fifty degrees Fahrenheit nor two hundred thirty two Celsius, to which will cause significant damage,” Emily answered.

Emily continued to move closer toward the ocean sparkle. The droplets sparkled and disappeared as it returned to its creator. The seagull squawked as it shook out the contents from a discarded potato chip bag. It waddled off as Emily walked toward it, ignoring any obstacles that would get in the way of her destination. Behind her a man hurriedly put on his sandals.

“Babe come back under the umbrella so we can talk some more. You haven’t finished putting sunscreen on me yet. I got some places I can’t reach and I need your help.”

Matthew rushed toward the object of his affections, grabbing her hand. He pulled her toward him with hopes of obtaining her attention. Emily’s face remained unchanged as her eyes met with Matthew’s.

“Excuse me,” Emily said.

“Babe, where are you going?” Matthew asked.

“Excuse me,” Emily said.

“Babe, we’re not done yet, I still need your help, you know? We can join the other five later.”

“Excuse me,” Emily said.

“Emily, babe, I know you want to play in the water, but let's go get something to eat first. You know, I bet Caleb wants something to eat as well,” Matthew pleaded.

Emily stopped walking. The robot’s attention turned toward Matthew. Her hands hid firmly in the grasp of the much larger mitt. She turned her body toward him. The wind continued to

blow as time stood still for the man that took so much effort in obtaining the attention from the blonde.

“Uh... yea... I’m hungry, so I’m sure Caleb is hungry as well, so come with me, so we can buy food.”

“Yes. We will go buy corn dogs. Caleb likes corn dogs.”

“I have a corn dog to give you,” Matthew smirked.

“I would like to have it. Please let me have it. I would love to have your corn dog,” Emily replied.

“Heh...,” Matthew’s lips formed a sly smile, “but I don’t have it with me right now. Follow me and we’ll go get it.”

Emily’s back turned toward the ocean. Her footsteps returned to the depression in the sand she created just moments ago. With his hand in hers, Matthew led Emily back toward the beach house where they first met.

The beach house was as they left it. The ceiling fan continued to spin as various bottles and cans littered the different rooms. The silence was finally interrupted from the floorboards creaking as the two occupants entered a room on the side. The light emitted from the single window on the side of the house helped illuminate an unmade bed next to the wall and socks on the floor. There was a basket of laundry filled with various garments of wrinkled clothes and stained underwear. A few unfinished beer bottles littered around the room and the nightstand next to the bed. A cheap plastic alarm clock displaying 2:00 p.m. centered itself between the bottles. Despite the uncleanliness, the odors did not bother either person in the room. Matthew followed Emily into the bedroom and closed the door behind him.

“Sorry about the mess babe. Me and Kate had a crazy last night and haven’t had time to clean up,” Matthew boasted, “but babe, you can always join me. This house is open for you.”

The robot’s head shifted left to right, scanning the room searching for the corn dogs Matthew promised.

“I do not see any corn dogs here Matthew,” Emily said, “where did you place the corn dogs?”

“It’s on the bed if you get my drift,” Matthew said.

The bed was parked on the side of the wall. Emily searched between the cracks. An elongated cylindrical plastic object emerged from Emily’s hands. It was not the corn dogs she was searching for and Emily placed the object to the side. Her hands dug around the surroundings, yet, she was unfruitful as she kept pulling out different objects that were not corn dogs. Out came an empty beer bottle, a string with a large ball beaded through, and a plaid boxer, but she could not find Matthew’s corn dog. The smell of empty beer bottles filled the gaps where the piles of unwashed clothes were not able to. Two large hands grasped her hips. She ignored the hands, continuing her futile search for corn dogs.

“Babe, you’re so fine.” Matthew pressed his hips against Emily’s. “I love how you’re shaking your hips. Let’s end the games and tell me that you want it.”

The robot stopped her search.

“There are no corn dogs here. I cannot find them,” Emily said as she turned around to Matthew.

“Babe, I’m giving you the corn dog right now. This is what you wanted. A huge juicy corn dog for you.” Matthew held onto the robot’s waist tightly against his body.

“Can you please take it out? I wish to have it,” Emily asked.

“Babe, you can take it out yourself,” Matthew said as he let go of Emily’s hips, “get on your knees, reach in, and grab it out yourself. Make sure you give it a nice yank too”.

Matthew took a step back proudly displaying a surge of confidence. His efforts were not wasted on another conquest. He stood triumphant combing his fingers through her hair. His prey had been caught and he was in control. There was no escape as his hands cradled Emily’s head. Like many others before, he knew he was close to the reward he sought the minute he met her. In just a few moments, she too will be another fleck in his memories.

Suddenly, the smile and grin quickly turned into a blood curdling scream.

“Ah! Let go!” Matthew yelled, trying to push Emily off.

“Matthew, this is not a corn dog,” Emily said, grasping and yanking at the object in Matthew’s pants.

“Let go already you stupid slut! You’re going to rip it off!” Matthew continued to scream as he grimaced in pain.

A force came crashing down on Emily’s face. She looked with a blank stare as her fingers began to cut into the soft and fleshy object in her hand. She remained aloof to the screams of anguish, terror, and anger that filled the room. Emily’s facial features remained unchanged as another fist came crashing into her face. The clash and echoes of bone and metal were drowned out with noise coming out from Matthew’s mouth.

The solid sentinel only looked on as screams of pain and misery continued to emit from the only life in the room.

“My hand!” Matthew screamed, “I think it’s broken! Emily, please just let go already!”

“Confirmed. Matthew, the third metacarpal joint and your right index finger on your right hand has fractured.” Emily, letting go of the object in her hand. “In addition Matthew, there are no corn dogs inside your pants.”

“Wow! You’re not only a whore, but you’re an actual retard!” Matthew grimaced nursing his broken hand against his groin. “Retarded whore! Get the fuck out of my house! Now!”

The door to the beach house slammed shut behind Emily and watched the sparkles glimmered past the bright white sand. The world continued to move without a single reaction to the event that took place. A large dried palm leaf skated in front of her as the wind lifted her hair. Emily opened up a small hatch inside her body and extracted some money Virginia provided. She grasped the ten dollar bill in both her hands and took a step past the fence.

She was alone.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Independence”

Countless number of footsteps thumped the old wooden boards of the boardwalk; despite decades of use and seawater, the dilapidated walkway remained. Seagulls delighted in the overflowing trash cans as they rummaged around looking for another bite to eat. Children filled the seaside arcade enamored by the blinking lights and horns. An unaccompanied girl, aloof from her surroundings, concentrating on a single sign in front of her. A blue balloon floated in front of the shop gently bouncing against Emily's head as she stood in front of Beach Dogs. She looked at a bright yellow advertisement stating two corn dogs for \$3.00! printed on a cheap laminated sign. Emily held onto her money analyzing the setting she was in.

A makeshift line formed behind Emily as she stood between a woman and two children and three young men all waiting to order at Beach Dogs. Red balloons floated symmetrically to further emphasize the separation between Beach Dogs and its neighbors. The small restaurant operated with an open patio of

customers sitting together on numerous benches and picnic tables. Families blended together and shared seating at tables with newfound friends that did not speak to each other. Workers emptied out the ketchup stained trash cans as seagulls stood nearby waiting for an opportunity to strike. She finally reached the counter. A pimply young man with a dirty unshaven fleck of a mustache smiled at Emily. Braces covered each tooth as he once again fell into the habit of saying the same line he said for months.

“Welcome to Beach Dogs, home of the corny dog. How may I take your order?”

“I would like to order two corn dogs and a drink,” Emily said.

“What drink would you like?” asked the boy.

“I do not know. I am not the one who will be drinking it.”

“What would your friend like then?”

“I did not ask him”.

“Well we have a selection of soda, lemonade, iced tea, and milkshakes”.

“I do not know which one to order.”

“Well make a decision. There’s a long line behind you”.

The robot stood inquisitively processing the riddle presented. Caleb made all the decisions. He told her what chores to complete, what items to buy online, where to go to pick up the items he ordered, how to help him with his work, and even chose the movies to watch. Emily stood blankly without an answer.

“Okay, what does your friend usually drink?” asked the cashier.

“He usually drinks soda water,” replied Emily.

“Do you know what soda he usually drinks? We have O.F.L. Root Beer, Clear Airiness, Kola, Orange Fizz, Cherry Blast, and Blueberry Sparkle.”

Emily’s head froze in place. A few seconds later, her lens focused on the machine with the various flavors, her eyes shifted back to the cashier waiting on an answer. Caleb never drank any of the items presented. Emily’s quick search in Caleb’s browsing history resulted in zero results nor display a preference for any of the options available. The pimply teen hunched over and waited for Emily’s decision. Seconds of silence passed between the two as Emily’s processors whirled.

Caleb never drank O.F.L. Root Beer, and only bought R.G.E Root Beer. It was not the same. Reviews for Clear Airiness online from various users were not positive. It scored 2.4 out of 5. Kola had 38 milligrams of caffeine in a 12oz can. That was too much caffeine for Caleb’s health. A two month old news story on Orange Fizz was the first result. The Food and Drug Administration found traces of rat feces in the drink. Cherry Blast comes from the same company as Orange Fizz, and possibly contaminated as well. The search results for Blueberry Sparkle showed it did not contain any real blueberries. The robot could not choose any of these options.

“What other drinks do you have?” Emily asked.

“We have chocolate or vanilla milkshakes. We also have sweetened or unsweetened iced tea,” the cashier added.

Billions of Emily’s transistors cycled throughout her body as the boy waited for her order. The online search results found that a milkshake at Beach Dogs provided 1440 calories.

Caleb's calories is currently at 940 calories for the day, he can not drink a Beach Dogs' milkshake. Emily searched the iced tea and found both versions had more caffeine than Kola. Her mouth opened again to speak to the cashier.

"Caleb cannot drink any of the options given," Emily told the cashier.

"All we have left is our natural self-made lemonade".

Emily search results displayed an advertisement. It read: Beach Dogs lemonade is known for its on-the-spot self made lemonade. The perfect blend of sweet and sour is a masterful combination that can only be found at beaches across the nation. To the visitor, it is the perfect drink.

"I will order a lemonade," Emily said as she finished analyzing the internet.

"Coming right up," the cashier confirmed, "we have two corn dogs and a large lemonade, it will be nine dollars and thirty-five cents".

A few seconds passed.

"I need your money."

Emily gave him the ten dollars she held in her hand.

"Thank you, sixty-five cents will be your change. Please step over to the pick up line and wait for your order. Next!"

Emily did as she was told and stood in line holding her receipt and change in her hand. The restaurant continued its operations as different numbers continued to be read from another employee. Emily watched as the customers behind her ordered their food and completed the same processes that she just accomplished. The small restaurant bustled and moved in clockwork. Not a single beat, tick, or worker missed their pace

like a well-oiled machine. The restaurant hummed along as a girl stood patiently for her order.

“Order number twenty-four!” shouted a speaker, “once again order number twenty-four! Also order number twenty five! Your order is ready!”

She watched a man in a red shirt grab eight corn dogs, hold onto two large drinks, and bring them over to his table where the rest of his family sat. Emily continued to observe as the man took one of the corn dogs and placed the item under a red and yellow pump. He quickly pushed the nozzle as globs of ketchup and mustard smothered his food. The chopped pickles, diced onions, and bits of relish blanketed the two corn dogs until there was not a trace of cornmeal left. The red shirted man's smile stretched from ear to ear, incredibly delighted at his creation. The sauce and condiments dripped out of the paper bowl carrying his corn dog dirtying his hand and shorts. The man paid no attention to the accident and returned to his table.

“Once again, order number twenty four! Your order is ready! Also order number twenty-seven, your order is ready!”

Emily observed a little girl reach up to receive the two corn dogs laying on a small tray. The counter was a full two-heads higher than the girl could see, but with some help from the cashier, her hands were able to grasp onto the bottom of the tray. A crowd gathered around her as orders increased. She stood amongst the crowd of people, some looking at their receipts, others chatting with their friends, some watching the workers pulling and dunking new corn dogs in the deep fryer,

and some others looking at their smartphones. Once again the speakers blared.

“Order number twenty-four, order number twenty-eight, and order number 29! Your orders are ready!”

A few people stepped forward toward the pick-up counter. Emily watched another two people return with food in their hands. She observed a worker motioning his arm by reaching out and returning it back to himself. Emily noticed this action repeated seven times. The strange motion continued as other people around her began to point at themselves. Emily continued to patiently wait for her order as the worker shook his head at other people and pointed directly at her. The crowd turned their heads toward the girl holding her receipt tightly. The worker reached out his arm, pointed at the blonde once again, but this time curled his palm toward himself.

“Young lady, I think he’s motioning to you,” an old lady said tapping on Emily’s hand.

“Hello,” Emily replied.

“I think your order is ready,” replied the old lady.

“My name has not been called. My order is not ready,” Emily responded.

The elderly woman was puzzled at Emily’s response. She stretched her head and looked at Emily’s receipt.

“You’re number twenty-four. Your food is waiting at the counter.”

“I am not number twenty-four. I am number one in the line model E-M-One-Zero-Four-Nine-Three-Y. My name is Emily.”

“What? E-M-One what? All I heard is Emily, and your receipt is number twenty-four. The man is motioning to you,” the woman explained, “you can pick up order number twenty-four.”

“Understood,” Emily responded, “thank you.”

“You’re very much welcome.”

Emily walked past the crowd and handed the receipt to the worker. He looked at the piece of paper, back at her, and gave her the two corn dogs, along with the large lemonade. Emily grasped the items similar to what she observed before, Holding the drink in one hand and the tray of corn dogs from the bottom. She smiled as she shifted over toward the same containers of ketchup and mustard the man in red used. She placed her lemonade on the side of the counter, and the receipt back into her chassis. Work began.

Globs of two saucy condiments filled her paper tray. An abstract painting of red and yellow layered on top of each other, slowly blending a color of orange in the areas the two sauces touched. The fried brown batter disappeared as the two condiments engulfed the pair, leaving two mounds of red and yellow. The robot moved to the side and placed her creation on the counter like she observed earlier. She opened the three separate containers, and similarly, taking the same spoon the man in the red shirt used, Emily dug into the respective boxes of relish, onions, and pickles. Spoonfuls of relish, onions, and pickles engulfed and shielded the layers of ketchup and mustard. Piles and piles of pickled vegetables accessorized Emily’s meal, spilling over the tray that held her two corn dogs. Copying the red shirted man, she pushed the soggy tray

toward her open palm and easily received her first ever oeuvre. Drops of pickled vegetables fell to the side of her hand, smearing drips of red and yellow against the tips of her fingers. The slippery sauce seeped between the grooves of her fingers. She held onto the tray the best she could, ignoring the moisture seeping out from the bottom as well as the juices soaking into her palms. She took her first step toward the exit, not noticing the shocked face of the old lady that helped her earlier, or the giggling boy pointing at her masterpiece as he pulled on his mother's dress. The pretty blonde marched, with her back straight, away from the staring crowd as bits of pickles, onions, and relish dropped from the vibrations of her steps, leaving a trail for the ants to clean. There is only one thing left on her mission; to find Caleb and deliver her magnum opus.

Emily carried Caleb's lunch back toward the umbrella and towels where Sharlene, Kate, and Lillian laid. She stood near her towel analyzing the setting trying to find Caleb. She found only the three girls laying motionless, letting the sun bake their skin to a beautiful golden brown. Emily's towering shadow hovered over Sharlene. The girl on the tower lowered her sunglasses and stared at the object disrupting the peaceful serenity.

"What's that smell?" Sharlene scrunched her nose.

"The smell is her..." Kate said.

"Excuse me, you're blocking my sun," Sharlene said as she got up, "also, Corey and Caleb are looking for you."

"Hello Sharlene, do you know where Caleb is?"

"No. And what in the world are you carrying?"

"These are corn dogs for Caleb."

Drips of ketchup and mustard covered Emily's white swimsuit, as her pile sank from the weight and moisture. The sand on her legs, the dirt on her face, and the drips of condiments on her garment contrasted greatly to the clean body and dried blue bikini Sharlene wore. Sharlene rubbed her nose and turned her head away from Emily in disgust.

"Ugh, get that away from me, I can smell the fat coming from that thing," Sharlene ordered.

"Yuck, that pile of grease and ketchup is going to make me hurl," Kate commented. She squeezed her nose in an impossible attempt to filter the odors.

"Oh wow, I want to see someone eat that monster," Lillian giggled.

Emily took a step back. The smell of pickled vegetables and condiments lingered, continuing to irritate the nose of the three girls on the sand.

"I can still smell it. Gross. Shoo," Sharlene said, flicking her wrist at Emily.

"Yea, Emily, you're going to have to put that somewhere else. That thing stinks," Kate added.

"Oh be nice you two. She got that for Caleb, and who are we to judge how he likes his corn dogs," Lillian chimed, "and I want to see him eat it when he returns."

"You would Lily, that's so you," Kate said.

"Not me, that's utterly disgusting. You three can watch Caleb be gross. Count me out," Sharlene said. "I'll text him right now to say you're here with us".

"Thank you Sharlene," Emily said.

“Oh and what happened to Matthew? Corey said he broke his hand and they’re going to the hospital,” Sharlene asked.

“Yes, Matthew broke his hand,” Emily confirmed.

“I know that. I’m asking if you knew anything about how he broke his hand?” Sharlene asked again.

“He broke his hand when he punched me in the face,” Emily responded.

“What? He punched you in the face?” Kate asked.

“I’m calling B.S. on that. You don’t have a single blemish on your face. Stop lying.” Sharlene stared into the cerulean eyes of her adversary. “I’m going to ask again, how did Matthew break his hand? I know you were with him, and I saw you two go back to the beach house. I also got this message from Corey telling me that he’s taking him to the hospital due to a broken hand. Obviously you know something and caused this to happen. Matthew is our friend, and I think we all deserve a right to know.”

“Matthew’s third metacarpal joint and his right index finger on his right hand fractured due to the impact and force generated from his fist when he punched me in the face.” Emily confirmed.

Sharlene took a heavy sigh, and stood up to confront the robot. She looked straight into Emily’s face, her eyes locked onto the lenses of the robot. She crossed her arms and as her hair drooped down to her shoulders. The sea breeze blew as a silence engulfed the four participants under the sun umbrella. A seagull stood nearby attracted to the smell generated by Emily’s creation. A squawk struck and one of the two combatants fired a shot from her mouth.

“I’m going to ask one last time. Do you know how Matthew broke his hand?”

“Matthew’s third metacarpal joint and his right index finger on his right hand fractured due to the impact and force generated from his fist when he punched me in the face.”

“I tried being nice, but not only are you the town’s bicycle, but a two-faced bitch too,” Sharlene accused, “and get your disgusting pile of fat away from me!”

“Woah!” Lillian sounded out.

Emily found herself sitting on the burning sand covered in ketchup, mustard, onions, pickles, and relish. Her white swimwear became unrecognizable. Smears, drops, and streaks of bright red, yellow, and orange covered and stained the canvas. The sticky sauce drenched the top of her head, clumping her hair and decorating it with chopped vegetables. The condiments slowly oozed down and dripped past her nose, and mouth, but Emily did not make a single stir. She looked around trying to find the two main pieces in her recipe, and found her gift shattered into a few large pieces, with her embedded jewels separating the mass of red and yellow glue that decorated her prized possession. One laid between her legs, and the other fell to the side of her hip. Both covered with new items not found at Beach Dogs. Like gems from a broken crown, pickled vegetables fell from the top of her head, onto her legs, and all around her. Emily emptied a giant glob of mud from her paper tray. The clump slipped out and a big splat on the sand left a lump of salty, sour, spicy, and sweet mixture of muck near her feet. Bits of sand remained stuck to the side of the tray as she tried in vain to shake it off. She

reached out and picked up half a hot dog, broken pieces of soggy fried batter, a solid piece of fried corn meal, and an intact corn dog that fell apart the minute she lifted it from the sand, leaving only a wooden stick skewering a hot dog covered in sand. She looked up as the mixture of ketchup and mustard covered the lenses in her eyes. The sauce slid down the corner of her eye, past her mouth, and ended with drops dripping from her chin. Emily hunched over trying to salvage whatever remained of her gift, only to hear laughter and mockery emitting from two familiar voices above her.

“Look at yourself!” Sharlene mocked, “that’s for Matthew.”

“That’s what you get for spreading your way to Matthew,” Kate added, “and the new look suits you perfectly. You actually look and smell like the hoochie you are.”

“Girls stop! Emily, are you okay?” Lillian said, “Sharlene! That wasn’t very nice!”

“Why are you on her side? She deserves it,” Sharlene shot back, “we all know your little game Emily. How about you ditch the sweet innocent act, and just admit that you’re a filthy skank. I bet you lay on your back and spread your legs as a hobby. Don’t think we don’t know what you two did.”

“We were looking for corn dogs,” Emily explained.

“Oh yea, I’m sure you found his corn dog too,” said Kate, as she slapped the tray out of Emily’s hand, “pick it up slut!”

Emily tried to reach out to grab the corn dogs on the sand, but found her hand pinned down by Kate’s foot. Kate stood towering over her, grinding her heel into the top of Emily’s hand. The heel released and Emily’s was finally free, only to

find her face planted right back into the sand. Kate knelt over her. "That's what I thought slut."

Both of Kate's hands grabbed bushels of blonde hair as she lifted the robot's head. Her nostrils flared as she stared straight into Emily's eyes. As quickly as Emily's head lifted from the sand, she found her face mashed into a clump of sand and gunk left earlier. She lifted her caked face off the ground still trying to reach for the broken up corn dog that remained just outside her grasp.

"Pathetic," Kate said, "Let's get out of here."

"Not before this," Sharlene added, "Hey guzzler, here's something else you can suck up." She poured the contents of the lemonade directly on top of Emily's blonde head.

"Girls stop, this is going way too far," Lillian pleaded.

"Shut up Lillian! She deserves it. Nobody told her to come and be a nasty loose whore, but she did it anyway!" Kate fired back.

Lillian quieted immediately and looked toward the ground. She watched the two other girls grab Emily's bag and throw the contents across the sand. Lillian shied away ashamed by her friends' actions but even more at her own cowardice. Emily grabbed the broken hot dogs on the ground and tried to piece it back together. She pushed a broken hot dog piece into the skewer she held; ignoring the sunglasses and bottle of sunscreen being tossed in opposite directions. Maryanne's bag fell on the floor yards away from where it originally sat.

"Tell Caleb we're leaving. Ta-ta hooch!" mocked Sharlene.

"Let's go Lillian. Leave the slut," added Kate, "we need to go check up on Matthew at the hospital."

Lillian replied without a word. Her head turned around as she followed the other two girls. She kept looking back until the last sight of the beach was watching Emily skewer broken pieces of food she could find. The blonde held her broken corn dog in both her hands. It could have been the glare from the sun, but Lillian swore she saw Emily smile when she placed a final piece covering the tip of her wooden stick.

The sun was finally setting across the beach. The big fireball in the sky sank into the horizon as bursts of orange, red, and yellow streaked across the pale blue backdrop. The beach was much emptier now. Crashes from the waves and the breeze of winds replaced the sounds of frolicking children and adult chatter. Yet, a single individual remained on the beach, holding a stick that held pieces of hot dog and cornbread, and picking up the litter scattered around the sand. She was accompanied by the flies and other insects that swooped and buzzed around her, eating the streaks and patches of dried condiments plastered over her face and body. As the girl picked up a pair of sunglasses burrowed inside a mound of sand, a voice shot out from the distance.

“Emily!”

She looked up and saw the face she longed to see. The lens of her eyes sparkled at the site of the same receding hairline, rounded face, brown eyes, and button nose she observed for thousands of hours. The hours passed, the hardships were turbulent, but Emily accomplished her goal.

“Hello Caleb, I got you a corn dog for lunch”.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Acceptance”

Caleb opened his eyes. It was pitch black. There was a large heave from his chest as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. The abyss subsided as the light from the stars began to illuminate his room. He knew he was not going back to sleep tonight. Finding Emily on the beach with a broken corn dog enveloped his mind. The sticky mess, red streaks, and worse of all the smell of condiments, continued to linger in his memories as her hair brushed against his neck. It's been a week since the scent of ketchup dominated the spaces he occupied. Caleb reached over to his nightstand and grabbed his cell phone. The bright light irritated his pupils, but nonetheless, he mustered up his strength and opened up Freespace.

A series of pictures frozen in time appeared before Caleb. Sharlene posted it on her social media page. The caption of the post read ‘Great time at the beach with my lovelies’. The first picture Kate was frolicking in the water splashing water on him with nothing else but the horizon, waves, and a few clouds. His joyous face fixed forever etched by billions of pixels. She received hundreds of approvals and dozens of com-

ments. Another heavy sigh emitted from Caleb's chest as he expanded the comment section. "*beautiful!*" wrote Maxine Atwers, "*Where was my invite? :(Looked fun, and love you! <3*" Rachel Wright added. Caleb scrolled down to read other comments. "*daymn gurl, lookin' fyne*" Tyrone LeChad wrote. "*that's my girl. Love u babe!*" Matthew Powers put in the comments section.

"Heh, Matthew Powers", Caleb amused recalling the day the seven of them went to the beach together. It felt like a mirage and impossible dream, but a quick flick of his thumb reminded Caleb it all happened. The spiteful comments in his inbox remain a continuing testament and proof to all that transpired.

hey! if we're doing something again, don't bring Emily.
read the message.

"Why? Caleb readjusted his body as he continued reading the conversation.

"we all got into an argument after she broke matthew's hand. I don't wanna talk about it anymore", it continued, *"just to let u kno, cuz you're my friend, emily is a bitch."*

Caleb turned his head to Emily and pressed the button behind the top of her ear. The tiny black box popped out as the blue and black sky once again replaced itself with orange and red. His phone documented a conversation with Kate Osterly.

What happened with Emily?

Ask her.

She wont tell me

Shes a bitch and thats all u need to know. Don't contact me

Wait I really need to know

Message not delivered.

Caleb flicked his finger and opened a third conversation with Corey McKeith. Caleb scrolled up to reread as much relevant conversation he could. The light shone on Caleb's face as he tried to picture what exactly happened with Emily on the beach.

Hey Sharlene said she's with Emily.

Really? Cool thanks!

Hey.

Yo.

I need to meet you later at your house. Some crazy stuff man.

Alright, come by after 7

The conversation with Corey was not pleasant. There was rarely a pause or interjection that night. It easily lasted hours as Corey ranted and cursed at everything that happened. The two even enjoyed a meal together. Panicked words and Virginia's wrath were part of the conversation, but despite all the words said, it was dominated with a host of unpleasantries describing Matthew, Kate, and Sharlene. The end of it all was a simple: *Sorry*.

The daylight shined through his windows as Caleb turned his head away from the heater claspings him. The memories were still fresh in his mind. It always helped him to commit to another activity to at the very least, briefly forget all his troubles. Patterns of words and sentences generated on the screen as ten fingers moved quickly to strike each respective key.

June 24

Conclusion: *The field test for Project EM-10493Y was not a success. EM-10493Y demonstrates difficulty with processing emotional and sudden interactions with humans. She does not demonstrate success due to an indeterminate amount of variables. The COLD system provides her with no ability to adapt to new situations independently. She fails in developing new friendships and demonstrates inability to form correct interpretations associated with conversations in both oral and physical language.*

Background: *The field test for EM-10493Y was placed in a controlled environment at Delphic Beach on June 17th. Weather was fair at 29.60 degrees Celsius with occasional light breezes. The beach was filled at an intermediate capacity of 40% through observations. There are no other environmental variables that may significantly hinder or alter the test.*

Test: *EM-10493Y is to demonstrate successful interactions with people not yet embedded into her memory banks. She is to interact with strangers and be able to accomplish a task independently through no interventions from her controller.*

Success Criteria 1: *EM-10493Y is to successfully achieve an independent action with 90% accuracy in 9 out of 10 trials as measured through independent active participation, independent success in obtaining an object, and other observational data.*

Success Criteria 2: *EM-10493Y is to successfully achieve 2 minutes of independent conversational action with non-data banked personnel, with 95% accuracy in 8 out of 10 trials as measured through 2 minutes of successful conversation observation.*

Caleb's fingers stopped allowing the thin black line to blink continuously after the word, *Observations*. The screen quickly changed to the front page of Geeit, with the bold title *Get it off your chest!* displayed at the top of the page. Many comments had the users of Geeit confess about how they stole an item or lied to their parents. A few scandalous comments involved cheating on a significant other or lying about their resume to obtain a job. One particular comment stood out. P.DownAnd-Out wrote: *I work at Beach Dogs at Delphic Beach, and should have asked that incredibly hot blond her name and number. She's seriously one of the most beautiful people I have ever seen. I wonder if she's a celebrity or model. A week later and I'm still thinking about her.*

Caleb's mouth crinkled thinking of the blonde lying in his bed and his own events at Delphic Beach. A stretch of his arms and a trip to the restroom made him pass by the large covered mound in his bed.

Routine inspections became a habit. Her foam remained intact, and her joints moved as normally as they should. The silky texture of her hair returned to their luster without a single trace of damage from the week prior. She suffered no discernible damage to her exterior.

The chassis opened exposing the interior of her body. There was nothing worthy to note save for a single folded piece of paper. It was the receipt from Beach Dogs for nine dollars and thirty-five cents and change for sixty-five cents. The order was for two corn dogs and a large lemonade and was made on June 17th at 1:25 p.m. Caleb placed the paper next to the small pile

of coins on his nightstand. Whether it was coincidence or fate, the small pile added to exactly sixty-five cents.

“What did you do Emily?” Caleb asked, “did you buy that hot dog for me, yourself?”

The piece of paper and coins returned to their rightful owner.

Hours passed as letters and numbers returned and completely filled a blank page. Caleb’s fingers jammed on the keyboard swiftly writing his thoughts about what transpired. There were brief pauses within those hours, but the end of the report was reached much faster than anticipated. A digital copy of the receipt embedded at bottom of the report, ending the possibilities of any additions.

Caleb pressed *send*. He was reflecting all that transpired over the course of the year. It was supposed to be just another Tuesday morning at Acorn. Never in his life did he ever anticipate taking on such a monumental and responsible task. From a jar of peanut butter to buying corn dogs, the demonstration Jason held pale in comparison to what Emily can do now. It was subtle, but thinking back, Caleb realized how much Emily learned. The only proof of a bra on Emily’s head exists only in the heads of two witnesses. Memories continued to flow as a picture of the two stood in front of an elephant. It was amusing seeing the contrast between Emily’s stoic and statuesque face and his own face having an uncharacteristic smile. Caleb’s memories of The Pink Fruit, was much hazier except Corey’s text asking if he saw his shoe. The hours wasted, shuffling through Maryanne’s piles and piles of clothes stacking higher and higher still etched in his memories. That particular experi-

ment was one he wished to forget. Yet, the memory of a broken corn dog was one he will always want to retain. Caleb never ate the corn dog, but he was positively sure it was the most delicious corn dog he ever had.

The broken XRM-5350 laid in the corner untouched since Emily broke it nearly a year ago. The yellow eyes of the XRM-5350 felt less illuminated than before. The broken off arm laid still with only a faint cover of dust on top. Caleb chuckled as he held the two pieces of his childhood toy. The bed shifted and a spot caved near her body. Caleb's finger fiddled with the arm of the XRM-5350 as he spoke.

"You've really come a long way haven't you?" Caleb asked, "funny, how things change in such a short time. Here we are, with only two weeks left together, and all this time, I felt you were more of a burden to me than anything. I never wanted to take care of you or given the responsibilities of this project. I honestly hated you. Every single day I felt nothing but disgust. I just wanted to go earn a living, go home, be left alone, and do the same things I always did. You are everything I despised: the continual responsibilities, the unnecessary risks, the constant dangers, the undesirable judgment, the constant worry, and the non-stop headaches. Yet, everyday when I think about telling Virginia to take you off my hands, I can't go through with it. I went through hours and hours trying to find excuses to get rid of you, and every single time I thought I mustered enough courage to do it; I stopped. I came close a few times. You always pestered me and got in the way of my life. I lost a friend, you broke my toys, forced me to go out, talk to complete strangers and worst of all, you made me share

my life with you. You have honestly been nothing but trouble and an annoyance with every ticking minute of my life last year. I think I agreed to take you in just to get on Virginia's good side. I got a hefty raise, some praise, and I got to play with a brand new company toy. Yea, I once felt you were once nothing more than another toy to play with. I've been counting the days when this entire forsaken experiment ends."

Caleb twisted around and caressed Emily's face.

"It wasn't all bad though, I did finally meet Jose's wife. I don't know why Jose complains about her so much, she's a very nice lady. It was hilarious to see her try and not eat because you don't. Jose and I had a lot of laughs about that. Those double dates were fun and it finally got me out of the house."

Caleb smiled.

"Corey comes over to hang out now. We even go to the gym together now. I always said I hated working out with other people, but that was just an excuse to be alone. Corey's been helping me a lot, and I was able to push myself further with him around. Check out my biceps, it's definitely gotten bigger. Shame that Sharlene didn't like you all that much though, but it's okay, I think it's good you got to experience the tempers of different people."

Caleb turned around, letting his feet dangle over the edge of his bed.

"I knew I never had any chance with Kate. It was a nice fantasy, but I knew deep down it was never going to happen. Even though we had a few things in common, she was never right for me. It's amazing how little you know of people until

you spend time with them. I don't even know who Sharlene is anymore. She's a complete stranger at work now. She doesn't really talk to me anymore, and every time I ask what happened or what's wrong, she just gives me these one word answers. Corey just tells me: *it is what it is, best for all of us to not bother dwelling on this.*"

A moment of silence.

Caleb continued. "Oh yea, there's some things about you too. I've gotten messages on Freespace from everyone. I haven't gotten this many messages in my life since I had it. My cousins, old friends, and even some old coworkers ask about you and my family wants to know what is going on. Dad and Mom think we're serious and want to meet you. I'm going to have to say we broke up. She's going to be so disappointed, but you know what? That doesn't matter."

Caleb looked at the XRM-5350 and tossed it aimlessly away. It landed with a crackle and a separated leg.

"I remember getting so angry with you for breaking the XRM. I never apologized for yelling at you that day. I'm sorry, I know I was wrong. These stupid kid toys should have been tossed out years ago. There isn't any reason for me to keep these silly toys around. My childhood has already passed, and it's time to grow up. All I did was let life pass me by and waste time sitting in front of the computer, collecting pointless garbage thinking they're valuable, and having some stupid delusional fantasy that my life will get better by some miracle dropping into my lap like some magical fairy tale.

Agreeing to taking you in was the best decision I ever made. I never realized much of this world I was missing out

on. Every single day I just let the hands of the clock move and thought my life was perfect the way it was. It's amazing how brainwashed I was watching all those stupid videos about dating, women, what it means to be a man, and believing all the outlandish stories online.

I never had so much fun in my life. Like our trip to the zoo. I didn't know what to expect that day. I remember feeling disappointed, but looking back, I did have fun. Looking back, just walking around with you, learning about the different animals, eating the food, the monkeys throwing poop at the crowd; it's amazing how the simple things in life provide the brightest memories. Even the days where we just stayed home. Those boring days learning to cook, buying groceries, gardening, cleaning, and even just watching television were much better with you. Just having you sit across from me hearing about your daily chores made dinner better too. Your spaghetti has gotten so much better. I don't know about you, but experimenting with different ingredients was fun. I'm still amazed how I lived off milk and fruity cereal all these years. It's not even good. You really are one of the greatest things that has happened to my life.

Anyways, your garden is doing very well. I saw a few small tomatoes. I'll look after them for you, and when they're ready, we're going to harvest them together."

Caleb broke another piece of the XRM-5350.

"I'm 'sorry' I treated you like a toy, but you're not one. You're not a toy, a robot, a machine, and never been one. You're just Emily, and will always be Emily. You too have feelings, dreams, goals, and want nothing more than to be

loved and appreciated. I hate myself for finally realizing this now. In just two more weeks, I'll have to give you back. I don't know what happens then, but I promise no matter what; at the very least, I will always be your friend. I have no regrets taking you in. I guess, to put it simply, I just wanted to say: *Thank you.*"

Seconds of silence passed. Caleb tossed the XRM-5350's arm back on the nightstand as he crawled into bed. He slid his arm under her head like he did every night and pulled her close to him. Brushing her hair back, Caleb pushed the tiny black box back inside. A quiet hum whistled as Emily's neurons re-connected. She opened her eyes staring straight back into the same brown eyes she woke up to everyday.

"Good morning Caleb," the robot said.

"Good morning Emily," replied Caleb, "you always said you wanted to make me happy."

"Yes. It is my duty to make you happy."

"Then, this will make me the happiest."

"What will that be?"

He held her tightly and looked into her eyes. He leaned forward, closed his eyes, and pressed his lips against hers. It was his very first kiss given to her.

"Promise that you will always be Emily."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Alone Again, So Naturally”

Jason’s office was littered with misplaced research papers and other instruments, like glass marbles scattered across the room. Caleb sat alongside Emily, both patiently waiting for Jason to complete his tests and data analysis. Sooner than later, the door to the laboratory opened and the head of Research and Development appeared. He stormed quickly to his desk and dropped a blue folder with a large stack of papers inside. Jason plopped directly on his large brown leather chair, leaned back, and just as quickly as he sat, he snapped upright to his two guests watching his every move.

“Well Caleb, do you want the good, bad, or ugly?”

“Just give me the good news.”

“Too bad, I’m giving you all three. You’ll take all three and like all three,” Jason said, “first the good news. The good news is that you definitely improved Emily’s skill set. The COLD technology still needs work though. She was able to complete many tasks we did not originally program into her, so she’s

definitely learning through living outside the confines of this lab. She's also able to organize data and is pretty efficient in completing repetitive tasks given to her. In other words, her data collecting abilities passed."

"The bad?"

"The bad part is the COLD technology data is incomplete. It's like if you're downloading a file and stopped at 90 percent. It renders the entire data more or less useless. We can extract some of the data, but it irritates me that we'll never get the last final bit of it unless we're able to recreate the entire scenario. It had something to do with drinks. She seemed to have trouble executing a command to obtain a drink. She confirmed five different truths, and completely confused herself choosing one of the five options."

"What were you able to extract? I may be able to fill in the final missing pieces."

"Do you remember her ordering drinks? From what I can tell, it seems as if her commands rapidly changed, and thus scrambled her ability to execute the correct move. It's as if someone pushed a million different buttons at once, thus causing her to fail in all executions."

Caleb thought of his answer. "No clue."

"Shoot. I was hoping you'll have the answers too."

"Well that's life. Answers are often incomplete, unfulfilling, and disappointing," Caleb replied, "how about the ugly?"

"That's philosophical of you. Is this Caleb I'm talking to?" Jason snorted. "Anyways, the ugly. The ugly is you."

"Me? Sheesh, why do people keep attacking my looks? I'm not that ugly. Anyways, what did I do?"

“You specifically did not do anything, but she did.” Jason said pointing to the blonde lying on the metallic bed, “The COLD system is too specific. Emily here adapted to your specific lifestyle and habits. It’s too difficult to determine how she will act in a different setting. Furthermore, since it is a collective system, we don’t know if she’ll be able to adapt to a different lifestyle. Nonetheless, you did a great job introducing her to a variety of different settings, situations, and just living normally. We’ll make the necessary adjustments. Whether that is good or bad depends on perspective and on the customer. We’ll let Corey and his team figure that one out”.

“May as well. Sorry I’ll have to cut this conversation short, Virginia wants to talk to me. I’ll see you later Jason. I’ll see you later too Emily”.

“Good-bye Caleb. I will see you later,” Emily responded.

“Come along Emily, we’re going to need to extract all that data in your hard drive,” Jason ordered.

The robot waved goodbye as Caleb took the elevator to Virginia’s office. It was a joyous occasion as his year-long task was finally completed. Once he submits his report to Virginia, his role in this project will end. It was one of the greatest and biggest accomplishments in Caleb’s career. He successfully accomplished the task and nothing can erase the contribution on his resume. The elevator chimed and the double doors opened toward Virginia’s office.

“Come in,” Virginia said, hearing the knocks outside her door, “Caleb! Please take a seat”.

“Hi Virginia,” said Caleb, “I returned Emily back to Jason.”

“Thank you so much Caleb. I’m really glad you decided to take the job. I knew you had it in you to make this project as successful as it is, but you’re going to miss Emily aren’t you? Are you going to be okay? Be honest.”

“I don’t know. Part of me is relieved it’s all over, another part of me doesn’t feel like it’s over. It certainly was an experience I’ll never forget. I also had a lot of fun the past year. It was different.”

“Well good, I’m glad you had fun. Emily will still be around in one form or another. Anyways, Mr. Lead Supervisor of Quality Control...”

Before Virginia could finish, Caleb blurted out, “Are you serious? I’m the new lead?”

“Hold your saddles Caleb, it’s not finalized yet. We’re still waiting for the Hong Kong and Chinese government to grant Morris his visa. It should happen by the end of the year, but you have my recommendation. After that it’s up to you to get the job.”

“Wow. I won’t disappoint you Virginia. Thank you very much for the opportunity.”

“Anyways, thanks to you, we’re able to move on to the next phase of Project Emily. Jason thinks she just needs a few more adjustments to the COLD system and she’ll be ready to be mass produced and marketed.”

“Well that’s good to hear,” Caleb said.

“Don’t be surprised if we call you again if we need to,” said Virginia, “I would love to stay and chat, but I do have another meeting right now. Feel free to take the rest of the day off.”

“Sweet! I’ll see you later,” Caleb said as he left Virginia's office.

“Oh and Caleb...” Virginia interrupted.

“Yea?”

“I’m glad you stuck with Emily. Your confession must have felt really good; finally being able to get everything off your chest,” Virginia said as she tidied the files and folders on her desk.

“Wait, what?”

“Bye Caleb!” Virginia waved, “Donna, please tell Sharlene I am ready to see her.”

Caleb walked out of Virginia’s office and saw a very nervous Sharlene outside. She bobbed and rocked back and forth as she sat on her hands. She looked up as her eyes began to squint and shake. Her nose quivered as she looked at her feet.

“Hey Sharlene.”

“Hi Caleb,” Sharlene said, as she stood up to enter Virginia’s office. Sharlene stopped before she entered the room and turned around, “Hey Caleb...”

“Hmm?”

“It’s nothing. Never mind.”

“I’m sorry for what happened with Corey.”

“Yea. It’s okay, I’ll be fine. Hey, I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

“Sure. Well, see ya.”

Caleb entered the elevator and saw a face he had not seen in weeks. She was quite fashionable in her red blouse and black skirt. The silver necklace and white pearl complemented the pair of pearl studded earrings that hung onto her ears. Her bob

bounced with the vibrations of the elevator and her black rimmed glasses framed her clear green eyes as her ruby red lips cooed at the sight of her elevator companion.

“Well hello hot-stuff, I’m glad someone is back in the office.”

“Good to see you again Maryanne. How goes it?”

“Oh same old same old. Don’t worry about me, how about yourself? I know today is the day you have to give Emily back.”

“I’m doing great. Mission accomplished, job well done, and everything is looking up.”

“Are you sure? You don’t need to put up a tough guy act.”

“I’m fine.”

“Well that’s good, but if you need to talk, my ears are open,” Maryanne said as the doors opened for her exit, “she means a lot more to you than you think.”

The doors closed without a reply. Caleb waited for the doors to reopen and went toward his desk. He plopped down on his chair and spun it around. He looked at the time and decided to get lunch and take advantage of Virginia’s earlier offer. He packed his keys, wallet, cellphone, and pushed in his chair. He felt a slap on his back and knew who it was immediately.

“¡Hola! Where you heading?”

“Hey Jose, just getting lunch then heading out of here. How’s your wife?”

“Who knows. She wants to go out again, but I told her you two broke up. Bad mistake man, it was the longest four hours of my life. You owe me.”

“Thanks for taking one for the team. I’ll send you a *Thank You* card.”

“You better man. Anyways, are you going to be okay?”

“You’re the third person to ask me that today. I’m doing fine. Want to get lunch with me?”

“Good, and no can do for lunch. My lunch shift isn’t for another hour, and I have to help Jason hook up some hardware he ordered. Next time man. You have fun, and call me when you’re done packing up. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Alright buddy, I’ll let you know if I need more boxes too. Man-nan-na.”

“Mañana.” Jose corrected him as he left Caleb’s cubicle.

Caleb walked toward the exit of Acorn’s only to be stopped once again. This time, a loud wallop of a sound emitted from the hands that slapped him on the back. The force was much stronger than Jose’s slap and this hit more than caused Caleb to lurch forward from the impact. He turned around and saw the familiar spiky black haired man that had his eyes bulging and pearly whites shining. His attacker greeted him with a large smile.

“Where you going?” asked Corey.

“Going to get lunch then heading home,” answered Caleb.

“Mind if I join you?”

“Grab your stuff, and let’s go. I’m feeling Mexican.”

“Sounds good. *Felipe’s* it is.

The two made some chit chat on their way toward the restaurant, at the restaurant, and back from the restaurant. Caleb bit down on his burrito and let the fillings of beef, onions, tomatoes, guacamole, rice, beans, cheese, and cilantro

fall onto his white sweater. The droppings stained his attire leaving drops of juice that were quickly absorbed by his cotton fabric. Both men immediately noticed the highly visible stains contrasting with the lighter cloth.

“Dang-it,” Caleb said. He shuffled his feet in a hopeless attempt to dodge the falling bits of food.

“Ouch, on white too. Emily is going to have a rough time with that,” Corey said, before pausing realizing the mistake he made, “oh sorry, I forgot. Are you going to be okay, man?”

“You’re the fourth person that asked me that today. Emily is just work. I don’t get it, everyone thinks she’s more than that. How about you? Are you going to be okay with Sharlene?” Caleb deflected.

“What?” Corey replied defensively. “Yea I’ll be fine. Anyways, I’ll be heading out to *Fit 24* after work, want to join me?”

“Not today, I have to clean up my house and pack up Emily’s things to give to Maryanne. We’ll hit the gym tomorrow.”

“Okay, see you later.”

Caleb returned home and immediately took off his burrito stained shirt. He threw the dirtied clothes onto the floor and took a shower. When he finished, he got dressed and sat at the edge of his bed, taking in the silence that now filled his house. He plopped down on his mattress, looked at the ceiling and took a heavy breath.

“I can’t believe it’s all over,” he said aloud, “What a whirlwind of a year, and now it’s finally all over.”

A quick stretch of his arms, and a bold declaration was all that was needed for Caleb. Caleb opened up some boxes that Jose gave him a few days prior and began to fold Emily's clothes. The drawers of Emily's dresser emptied by the bushels as shirts, socks, scrunchies, bands, and other accessories found themselves bundled together in boxes that Maryanne labeled for him. A job well done. Caleb was highly satisfied with the quick pace he was making. The closet was next. Articles of clothing hung up by hangers quickly came down together. Caleb smiled, lifting up a red and white cherry patterned sundress and laid it into the box. The opposite reaction appeared with the blueberry sundress. The heat from the afternoon sun subsided as the boxes were stacked and clumped together near his front door ready for Jose.

Emily's tomatoes blushed a slight red as water drizzled on top of the plants and dirt. Caleb was surprised that the tomatoes lived through the Summer. He was never able to keep them alive before. The hose continued to pour out water as he thought back why he added gardening to Emily's list of chores. A chuckle appeared as the dirt darkened. The orange, reds, and yellows subsided as purples, blues, and grays dominated the skyline.

The box of fruity flakes poured into a large bowl. The meal was almost complete, as it needed only one other ingredient. The light in the refrigerator opened as Caleb was ready to make himself a meal fit for a man of his status. The carton never moved from the shelf where it sat. Instead, a large pot with a note caught Caleb's eye.

Hello Caleb,

I made meat sauce rotini for you. I hope you like it.

Emily

He opened it. Inside, was a pot of freshly made rotini mixed with herbed meat sauce. A quick scoop, plate, and heat was all that was needed. Caleb took a bite of his pasta. The rotini trapped a perfect amount of sauce, bits of ground beef, chopped mushrooms, strands of spinach, and diced spinach, in its nooks. A delectable blend of salt, spice, sour, and sweet, tingled perfectly against Caleb's tongue. The fork kept meeting his lips until there was not a single bit left, save for some spaghetti sauce that could not be salvaged. A scrub and rinse into the wash basin finished the rest of the spaghetti sauce as the bowl of cereal remained untouched on the counter, ignored and left to stale from the cold air that permeated throughout the house.

The night stretched on with the company of a talking box. *Vargoth the Dark Knight* was a highly acclaimed show. Caleb agreed with the online reviews as he watched the show. He found the comedy hilarious, the drama suspenseful, the action exciting, and the acting impeccable. The first three episodes were engrossing and action filled, but with nine more episodes in the season, it was not a task he was willing to tackle anymore. It was certainly doable, as he has done something similar before, but now, it was much wiser to watch the rest of the show over a longer period of time. The talking box in the living room became silent while a glowing box opened. Caleb opened *Tubeit*, and listened to his recommended playlist created by the specialized algorithm. The same songs he heard

hundreds of times alone and together with Emily filled the room as *Geeit* came on his display.

The website loaded the same way it always had. The online bulletin board displayed a host of new topics he has not read yet. He scrolled through some of the topics: *Check out my summer watermelons!*, *Awesome time at the park*, *Finally hit 300 lbs on my deadlift!*, *Zoo is introducing a new section: Avians from Africa*, *Hack your robot and your life*, *Now that I'm single, what do I do?*. Animals were always an interest for the everyday internet user. There were over five hundred comments from different users. As the thread and posts expanded, and each user shared their thoughts; Caleb found each post oddly felt the same. The praises, comments, and memes all regurgitated ad nauseam in slightly different ways. He knew he had seen the same funny face over twenty times in the span of five minutes. It bored him. There was nothing worth reading tonight.

His bed was equipped with a pair of pillows, but only one was used. The duvet wrapped around the same body it covered over the course of the year. It stretched across the body and ensured a decent warm fit inside. A single mound laid resting on the edge of the bed. It was an unfamiliar sight as the familiar double mound made the past few months now disappeared.

“Oh yea, Emily isn’t here anymore,” Caleb thought, retrieving his arm and leg back from the empty space on his mattress.

The summer heat felt cold tonight. There was no pressure. Luckily, not a single soul knew Caleb laid staring at his own ceiling in silence. A single droplet quickly became a small creek of tears rolling down the side of his head and quickly

disappearing as it touched the cotton underneath. The light from the moon soon exited the sky and welcomed the rays from the rising sun.

Today is another day, but it wasn't the same as yesterday, nor would yesterday be the same as tomorrow, but tomorrow may be the same as today.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“I am Emily”

Acorn Incorporated steadfast mortar and concrete lasted decades and built to last centuries. The windows held firm from the bustling wind pounding against the clear pane as it did countless times. A flock of pigeons nested and peered inside the building watching the scurry of humans bustle through the long hallways, only to disappear as they pulled different wooden frames flattened against the walls. Singles, pairs, and the occasional quartet passed through the window as the birds watched. It was an unassuming day similar to all the other days, save for an incident fondly forgotten within a few passing hours. A nonad of smiles quickly turned to scorns, frowns, and mostly confusion, when a single man bulldozed through the group completely aloof or care of their occupied space. He rushed past the group, not turning around and ignoring any cries from the others as he quickly turned the corner and, like so many others, disappeared when a flat wooden board engulfed the man. The show ended, and the pigeons flew away.

“Jason, are you in?” asked a balding brown hair man.

“What do you want? I’m busy here!” yelled a mismatched man, in a yellow shirt and green tie, hiding in the back, “if it’s the new hard drives, just leave them in the front!”

“Jason! It’s Caleb,” returned the first man, “Where are you?”

“Caleb? I’m in the back. What do you want?”

“Where’s Emily? I want to see her.”

Jason emerged from the back, confronting his tense visitor, as he placed his screwdriver and pliers on the closet ledge he could feel. He pointed toward a pile of mannequins with missing limbs and heads laying on top of one another. Their lifeless eyes aimed in all directions, with one particular head staring right back at the person kneeling in front of it.

“Where’s Emily?” Caleb asked again, as he threw the head back onto the pile, “Where did you put her?”

“What do you mean? She’s in there somewhere,” Jason replied.

“Oh,” Caleb said.

“Sorry.”

“Is she gone forever?” Caleb asked, “I just thought I could still see her and talk to her. I didn’t think you would disassemble her that quickly.”

“Yes and no. It’s possible to still talk to an Emily, but just not your Emily,” Jason explained.

“Oh, what do you mean,” Caleb asked.

“She’s Emily in programming and still carries all the information she learned from you, but at the same time we removed

all the personal data associated with you. So she's technically not the same Emily. Get it?"

"I get it, but can I talk to her anyways?"

"Sure, I guess. Just give me a few minutes and I'll put her on the computer."

Caleb watched his colleague fiddle with the keyboard and mouse. He swayed back and forth, as his keys jingled from the flicks and taps from his fingers inside the pockets of his pants. The sound of metal jarred the music generated from Jason's fingertips. Caleb's jangles stopped soon after, as his metal keys quickly sank to the bottom of his pocket. A voice emitted from the speakers hidden around the room. Caleb's eyes brightened hearing the voice generated. He could not mistake it for anyone else, it was Emily's.

"Hello Jason, what can I do for you today?" greeted the computer.

"Here you go Caleb, have fun. I'm going to use the restroom and go see Virginia," Jason said, offering his chair.

The door closed before another word was spoken. The two fists pressed against the edge of Jason's desk relaxed as Jason's chair rolled back and forth. Another few seconds of silence passed before a voice echoed once again in Jason's office. Breaths reached the microphone before any comprehensible words were developed.

"Emily? Hey, it's Caleb. Are you there?"

"Hello, Mr. Leswang, how may I help you today?"

"... I just wanted to talk."

"What would you like to talk about?"

"Elephants."

“Elephants are the largest existing land animals, part of the family Elephantidae. Three living species are currently recognized: the African bush elephant, the African forest elephant, and the Asian elephant. Which of the three species would you like to know more about?”

“The elephant we saw together at the zoo.”

“I am sorry, I do not understand your question, please repeat your question.”

“Emily, do you not remember our time at the zoo?”

“Do you wish to set a reminder for a trip to the zoo?”

“We went to the zoo together in August. Do you remember the elephants that were swinging its trunk and spraying water over its back? Surely you remember something right?”

“What day would you like to set for the month of August? There are African elephants on display at the zoo.”

“Maybe this may help you remember. Scan this picture on my phone.”

“Understood,” the computer beeped and whirled.

“Do you remember anything now?”

“This is a picture of Emily and Caleb.”

“This is a picture of you.”

“Denied. I am EM-10493Y.”

“I see... you really are gone,” Caleb said. “Well EM-10493Y, if you come across Emily, can you deliver a message to her?”

“Confirmed.”

“Please tell her that I am very glad I had the chance to meet her. That she will always be one of my best friends, and she made me very happy. Tell her that she achieved her mission

and that I will always cherish our time together, and hope one day we will meet again. When we do, I hope she remembers her promise.”

“I will deliver your message.”

“Thank you.”

“You are welcome.”

The chair creaked a sigh of relief as the weight released from it. The electronic doors closed and once again the sounds in Jason’s laboratory were filled only with the hymns of machines, gears, and cooling fans. The occasional beep and chime emitted inside the room as the hours passed while EM-10493Y idled awaiting its next command.

Days passed since Caleb reentered Acorn’s building, but alas, all things must come to an end. Stacks of different colored folders piled in front of Caleb’s desk, otherwise his cubicle remained undisturbed. Everything was back to what it was a year ago, except for a few new pictures hanging inside. The fevered motion that accompanied the office building bustled with life as it always has. Caleb waved hello and greeted both the unfamiliar and familiar faces he’s grown accustomed to at Acorn.

“Hey Caleb! You’re back! How was your vacation?”

“What’s up Jose? It wasn’t really a vacation. Just a few days off to clean up and return Emily’s things. You were there to help me, man.”

“True, true.”

“How is Maria?”

“She got a new job being an assistant or something in our kid’s school. It’s good for her to get out of the house, and earn

some money. The teacher is quite a looker too, I'll introduce you to her."

"Please do!" Caleb quickly interrupted.

Jose continued, "other than that, she's just the same, always complaining about something. She is pretty sad thinking you and Emily broke up though. Speaking of Emily, I think you'll be in for a surprise today."

"What do you mean? This better not be another one of your stupid jokes. If this is another one of those sexy robot pictures you keep sending me, I want none of that."

"No joke, but there is a sexy robot in the building. I'll just say, Virginia has something else in store for you." Jose menacingly laughed as he walked away.

The cobwebs in his brain filled like ghosts that haunted a castle centuries ago. The riddle Jose presented could mean a number of different things. As the now resident expert robot tester, the only logical conclusion was for Virginia to present Caleb with another robot to test again. Caleb tapped his pencil against his thigh as he sat staring at the computer desktop. Nothing has been accomplished since his conversation with Jose save for a brainstorm that brewed in his head. This time, he wanted one with obsidian black hair or red hair with green eyes and possibly freckles. No, she has to have freckles this time. Another clone of Emily would be boring. If he was going to test another robot, he's definitely going to have a few changes to suit his liking. A smile curled on Caleb's face thinking of all the physical possibilities he could request, an announcement blared from the speakers.

“Attention, the following are requested to attend the conference room on floor 10: Corey Lee, Faris Farway, Caleb Leswang, Jason Warrick, Sharlene Johnson, Morris McKeith, and Jose Caballero,” the speaker repeated, “once again, the following are requested to attend the conference room on floor 10: Corey Lee, Faris Farway, Caleb Leswang, Jason Warrick, Sharlene Johnson, Morris McKeith, and Jose Caballero. Thank you very much and remember, Everyday is a great day to grow some Acorns!”

The conference room filled quickly with the big billy goat taking the power position of the table with Maryanne, and Morris sitting on her flanks. While seven other heads gave their attention to Virginia, one head was clearly uncomfortable surrounded by all the others. The smallest fish in the pond shrank as she gripped her two hands closely.

“Now that everyone is here, let’s get started. I wish to announce and celebrate that Morris will be leaving for Hong Kong by the end of the year to head quality control in our Asia and Pacific division. Let’s all give him a round of applause!”

“Thank you Virginia, it has been an honor,” Morris said after the applause.

Virginia continued, “I asked you all to come today because you all had an integral part in a project that you may or may not have realized. With your help, Acorn is ready for its next phase in Project EM-10493Y.”

“What is she talking about?” Sharlene whispered, only for her question to be waved away by Caleb and Corey.

“With the first phase completed, EM-10493Y will join us in Acorn in a role we best believe will suit her programming.

You all are familiar with her already and I am counting on all of you to help her adjust and learn in an office setting. She is to assist you with your tasks but also learn to be independent. She will be working with you and your teams to complete any tasks that are assigned in the work environment. Without further adieu, I present to you, once again, our newest member of the Acorn family, EM-10493Y!”

“What the hell?” a bewildered and astonished Sharlene said.

With just a gesture of Virginia’s finger, stepped inside the room, the same blue eyed, blonde hair girl that disappeared from Caleb’s life. There she stood, in her cherry patterned sundress, and white mary janes, radiating an aura Caleb has never felt. There was an audible gasp near him, but Caleb did not care. His eyes widened, his feet quickened, and his arms strengthened. Using his new found force, his chair fell backwards as he easily shoved Corey into Maryanne and Sharlene into the edge of the table. He needed to be the first again, the first to talk to her and the first to hear her voice. She was his best friend. The one that led him from the dark. The spark that gave him life.

“Hey.”

“Hello Caleb. The elephants at the zoo were African bush elephants...”

“And it’s believed elephants are able to retain more information than humans and can recall events and experiences even after many years pass in their lifetime. I remember,” Caleb said as he looked into her sapphire eyes, “Do you remember your promise?”

“Yes. I will always be Emily.”

“Epilogue”

“Hey babe! Check this out!”

“What is it?”

“Look at these robots from Acorn. They’re so lifelike. I can’t believe Acorn actually created this. It’s so weird that I can’t even tell if our waiter is a human or a robot sometimes. The Ellesmere line is something else. The daycare is even thinking of getting a robot to help watch the kids.”

“I like them, Lillian. It’s good they’re able to do some work without supervision. They’re great for those that need that additional help at home and the one we have at work helps me out all the time.”

“Speaking of work, how is Emily?”

“She’s doing great. She has come so far from when she started. In fact, she was one if not the biggest contributors to the Ellesmere line.”

“Good for her! I still can’t believe she was a robot. She sure fooled me.”

The two continued down the pavilion admiring the various stores and windows that tempted their pockets. The doors at

Guilherme's Seafood Restaurant opened and shielded the two from the cold winter air that blew outside. The warmth and smells inside tickled their senses like a butterfly sampling different flowers on a bright Spring morning.

"How did you find this place Caleb? I figured we'll just be getting fish and chips or sushi when you suggested seafood."

"I came here with Kate once. I was trying to impress her, but I found that I liked the food here. It's different from what I normally eat. Speaking of Kate, how is she doing?"

"Hmm? I honestly have no idea. She had a kid, and just disappeared. I haven't spoken to her for at least two years, and she doesn't respond to my texts. She doesn't really post on Freespace anymore either."

"Oh, who's the father?"

"No clue. Never met him, and I can't recall her dating anyone these past two years. I know it's weird right?"

"Yeah."

"Oh yea, Sharlene said "Hi" from Hong Kong. It's so cool that she got an opportunity to work overseas and I'm planning to visit her when the school year ends, Summer vacation starts."

"You teachers deserve it. I could never deal with thirty screaming kids all at once for six hours straight. How you guys do it, I will never know. Did you buy tickets to Hong Kong yet?"

"Yep, I'm so excited and can't wait! I'll take notes on where to go, and next time we are going together. Pinky promise?"

As Caleb was about to answer, Lillian began to frantically wave her hand looking at the door they entered only a few minutes ago.

“Oh there’s Corey! Corey! Charlotte! Over here!” Lillian cried out obvious to the setting.

“Caleb! Lily!” Corey said as he looked around, “Jeeze Caleb, fancy place you chose. The last time I came here was with my family on my dad’s birthday. Anyways, I’m starving, hand me a menu.”

The double date continued through the night. The octopus tasted amazing, and the grilled fish tasted even better. Caleb was stuffed, with no room for dessert. The dinner quickly passed with little breaks in the conversation between the four.

“Hey Lily, can you come with me to the restroom?” asked Charlotte.

“Sure. Hey Caleb, can you watch my stuff?” Lillian replied.

The two men waited until the two women disappeared from their sight before returning back to each other.

“You know you’re making me look bad right?” Corey said.

“That’s why I’m going to ask if you want to be my best man.”

A smile formed from Corey’s mouth graciously accepting the honor bestowed upon him.

“Hurry and get into position, hombre,” Jose said, rushing to the other two men from across the room.

“Caleb, here is the ring I promised to hold on for you,” Emily said, appearing behind Jose.

“Thank you Emily.”

His heart pounded endlessly, as a smile stretched from ear to ear. The crowd waited for Lillian to return. She looked around and saw Caleb on his knees. Although she covered her mouth with both her hands, the entire room still heard her gasp. Every step she took toward the man on his knee made her face beet red, her heart pounding continuously, and mouth giggling endlessly.

“Lillian, I want to ask you a question...”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

K.K. Wing lives in Arizona with a growing love of writing. What started as a way to kill time during the COVID-19 pandemic, has blossomed into an engaging hobby. When not writing, Wing channels his energy into educating the next generation.