

Chapter One

Activation

Life Extension Unit K47 silently toggled out of standby mode and opened his eyes. In the microseconds that his human's memories were reviewed and updated from Life Extension's cloud server, all critical systems were checked and found to be at one-hundred percent readiness. The server sent back the appropriate activation sequence and K47 was permanently switched into active mode.

As required by the Federal Artificial Intelligence Act of 2025, the LEU completed its self-diagnosis, generated a 128-bit password which was sent up to the server, and initiated the disconnect sequence. The wireless bridge that connected K47 to the company's cloud server was severed, thus ending all external input to its systems. The federal law required the unit to complete its tasks without outside interference, and the company was obligated to comply.

Gyros spun up and K47 ran through a series of upper body dynamics, raising and lowering his arms, clenching and releasing his fists, and several neck twists to the limits of his artificial tendons. Then, sixty-three stories above Manhattan's Monday morning chaos, the android—a nearly perfect clone of the man who had died moments ago—stepped off his charging pedestal and straightened his tie.

Walking over to the full-length mirror next to a pair of carved oak doors, K47 examined his five-foot, ten-inch body without passion or comment. From the wisps of red hair, mostly on the sides of his head, he ran his fingers down to his waist, checking for defects. The skin was deep, wrinkled brown, but the underlying muscles gave the outer layer a crisp form. Staring at the blue-green eyes, he ran a few focusing tests and found his visual system operating at peak efficiency.

K47 turned from the mirror and scanned the office around him. On the far side of the room was a large wooden desk with three monitors and a video telephone. Its polished marble surface was devoid of clutter and reflected the overhead lighting in a soft glow. The row of file cabinets next to his abandoned pedestal were made of the same highly varnished wood and held a display of shooting trophies, some over two-feet tall. One area of the office had a glass and chrome coffee table and was surrounded by leather sling chairs. Returning his gaze to the desk, he nodded once. That was where the work he was programmed for would be done, everything else was just for show.

Morton Finley Cunningham, who K47 had been modeled to resemble down to the mole on his left shoulder and the scar on his chin, owned the building where his LEU was currently sitting at the oak and marble-topped desk where his business took place. He also owned the

seventy-one-story skyscraper next door and three other properties on the opposite side of Sixth Avenue. His nine-bedroom house in the Poconos featured a helipad, a swimming pool larger than most used in the Olympics, and a kitchen with three refrigerators, a wine cooler, and a seventy-inch state-of-the-art television. Morton hadn't been there in months since his most recent ex-wife got the right to live in the house for as long as she wanted and contact between them was limited by the divorce agreement. Morton's home was the four-thousand square foot penthouse above his office.

To celebrate his sixtieth birthday and the first anniversary of his last divorce, Morton had hired National Geographic's most experienced guide and his team to take the multi-billionaire places the civilized world had yet to visit. He gave them one month to complete the mission starting on the first of June. The risks were high, but the rewards would be worth the effort. Rumors of miraculous cures for the maladies of the first world sparked his desire to seek out these natural potions if they in fact existed. Suffering from several of the illnesses that beset a man of his age, Morton saw the expedition as a chance to extend his life as well as helping others. The Cunningham Group was underwriting the entire expedition. Netflix had already slotted time for a documentary film of whatever they found, and every major research center in the country had scientists standing by. Beginning the expedition at that time of year meant dealing with the rainy season, but Morton Cunningham had no interest in the weather. He knew the risks were high going in, but not to the point where he was deterred.

An adventurer by design and desire, Morton Cunningham and his National Geographic team were exploring the headwaters of the Amazon when Life Extension's cloud servers lost contact with the chip in his forearm. Every Life Extension LLC customer had been chipped with a powerful transmitter that was connected to their servers in California. The customer's vital signs were tracked around the clock. Loss of signal meant the purchaser had died, as their body could no longer generate the minute amount of power needed to keep the signal alive. The activation sequence only worked if the purchaser was dead. According to their literature, the system was foolproof.

As far as Life Extension LLC was concerned, Morton Cunningham's life had come to an unexpected end on the twenty-first of June—the first day of summer.

Life Extension LLC began selling android clones to wealthy business people shortly before the second mission to Mars was announced. The mechanical duplicates were designed to carry a rich person's affairs to their logical conclusion in the event the upper crust socialite passed away unexpectedly. The units were physically identical to their purchaser and their internal memory core was loaded with every detail of the person's life. Transfer of those memories, thought patterns, and reactions were done upon delivery and updated by the user as they saw fit. Equipped with the owner's vocal patterns, a Life Extension Unit spoke exactly the same, even when switching to another language.

The LEU's purpose was to finalize contracts, pay any outstanding debts, and see to the dispersal of funds to the heirs. For those who could afford the seven-figure price and thousands of dollars of monthly maintenance, it was the perfect way to guarantee their empire would be dealt with in a manner consistent with their desires and lifestyle. Lawyers could interpret a person's Last Will and Testament as they saw fit. Even a probate judge could rule that a certain statement had several meanings and then choose the one he liked best. An android was a machine with a program. It only had the ability to see issues as either black or white. Gray was not an option.

By federal law, the LEUs had no more than 364 days, one day less than a year, to complete their responsibilities. On day 365, whether or not the unit had finished, an internal purge program was run and the unit was forever deactivated. Upon purchase, and updated as necessary, a survivor was named to either collect the LEU or sign it over to the company for disposal. To date, no one had asked to keep the lifeless statue of the deceased in their foyer and the company had a series of warehouses around the world filled with used LEUs.

The earliest models in the A through G series consisted of only a few prototypes. None of them performed as required and Life Extension LLC teetered on the edge of bankruptcy for its first five years. Developments in artificial intelligence chips and a memory transfer device that could retrieve details with a one-thousand-fold increase in accuracy and depth helped the company turn the corner.

Models in the H, I, and J series had production runs of fifty units. Enhancements brought about each new series. Of the one hundred and fifty LEUs sold from those runs, only ten were still on pedestals and just one was currently active. Many of the units in those three series had been deactivated prior to their owner's demise.

Public opinion of the LEU project was mixed but weighted heavily against it. Those who couldn't afford a unit saw it as just another threat to humanity's freedom from machines. Hollywood had done its best to portray robots as evil and the public took that as gospel. Three were dumped in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean from a yacht while revelers drank champagne and shot bottle rockets in celebration. One Model J unit was crucified and burnt at the stake across the street from the Federal Courthouse in Selma, Alabama.

Despite the massive public outcry to stop production, Life Extension LLC managed to construct the K series at a small facility in Mexico. The units were smuggled across the border in the middle of the night and distributed to their owners, who collected their purchases at a remote warehouse several miles deep into Texas.

Units in the K series included a new artificial intelligence chip that not only learned faster, but also applied simulated human emotions to the decision-making process. Unbeknownst to designers and engineers, K40 through K50 had been outfitted with a much more powerful beta version of that chip by the CEO of Life Extension LLC. Dubbed the SHURP for Simulated

Human Response Processor, the chip was supposed to go in the soon to be released L series, but a class-action legal suit by a contingent of heirs was threatening the company's future.

Perfection had come with a cost. Life Extension LLC never produced the L series. The lawsuit prevailed although the active units were allowed to fulfill their contracts. Many of the K series units in standby mode were deactivated by their owners in order to avoid heavy tax penalties invoked by the new law, but not Morton Cunningham's K47.

Powering up the laptop on Cunningham's desk, K47 retrieved the last password Morton had created from his memory and tried to login to the company's secure web server. His goal was to download the files from the asset management system and begin his task when Kathleen O'Connell, Cunningham's personal secretary burst into the office.

"Mr. Cunningham?"

K47 looked up from the screen and shook his head once. "No. He's dead."

Turning toward the now empty charging pedestal, Kathleen covered her mouth with one hand while pointing at him with the other. "You're sure?" She took a deep breath. "This is real?"

"Yes, Kathleen. Morton Finley Cunningham died eleven minutes and forty-one seconds before you walked in here." He rolled the chair back from the desk and stood, holding out his hand. "You can call me Mr. Cunningham if it pleases you or I will also respond to K47."

Kathleen took a step back and shook her head. "He's really dead?"

"Yes, Kathleen. Now twelve minutes and twenty-four seconds."

The shaking began at her shoulders. It was followed by sobs, as the woman had been closer to Morton Cunningham than any of his three wives, two children, or the never-ending stream of distant relatives. They'd been together for twenty-seven years, had several torrid affairs in the early days, and shared secrets that even K47 had yet to discover. There was nothing about Morton Cunningham's life that he'd kept from his personal secretary and confidant.

Kathleen had forsaken marriage and children to spend *her* life working for one of the richest and most benevolent humans on the planet. Her loyalty had been rewarded with a penthouse across the street and a houseboat in the Florida Keys that she used for vacations. Her salary was whatever amount she needed each week. Morton had never refused her or questioned the check she gave him to sign on Friday morning.

Coming around the desk, K47 walked over to the distraught woman and tried to wrap his arms around her shoulders.

"Don't touch me!" Kathleen backed up to the massive wood doors, holding her arms out in front. "You're not Morton. You goddamn machine! Oh my god. Morton's dead and Satan has taken his place. Don't you touch me."

K47 cocked his head to the side. "Only my body is a machine, Kathleen. My mind is Morton Cunningham's mind. I talk exactly like him. I know how much you love maraschino

cherries in your coffee and that you insist on scented toilet paper in all the bathrooms. Every aspect of your life with Morton Cunningham is intact in my memory."

"You don't know shit, you mechanical demon." Sliding carefully away from him, she was able to pull the door open and use it as a shield between herself and K47. "He swore that you'd never come off that pedestal. He promised me that by the time he died, you would have rusted into a small pile of chips and plastic on the floor. We decorated you with lights at Christmas along with all the marble statues. Morton swore his body would outlast yours."

"They designed my body to outlast any human lifespan." K47 shook his head. "My body is impervious to illness or disease. I can't imagine why he would tell you that although I recall the conversation now that you mention it."

"So was the devil's." Kathleen crossed herself and wiped the tears from her face with the sleeve of her blouse. Her shaking seemed to be quelled, but her eyes were filled with fear.

"Kathleen, I'm here at Morton Cunningham's request and desire to handle his affairs. I can assure you that neither God nor Satan has any bearing on my tasks."

Covering her mouth with one hand, she pointed at him and nearly spit the two words. "Your tasks?"

"Yes. Mr. Cunningham's assets have to be distributed. There are contracts that are in the middle of negotiations that must be settled. His estate—"

Kathleen shook her head. "How can we be sure he's dead?" Gathering some courage, she stepped out from behind the door. "You can't do a goddamn thing until there's proof that Morton Cunningham is dead."

K47 closed his eyes for a second. When he opened them, he spoke to her as though she were a student and he a professor revealing critical knowledge. "He must be dead or I would not have been activated. That's how the Life Extension LLC system works. It's foolproof. The chip has been used successfully hundreds of times. If you understand the core programming of our system you would understand that it is infallible."

"Bullshit. What if the damn chip failed? What if he's somewhere out of range and the signal got blocked? What if he's hurt? In a coma?" Her breathing was getting fast and shallow. "I know Morton Cunningham better than you. Better than your damn computers. He's lived through danger that would have killed lesser men. Talk about nine lives? Morton Cunningham has ninety-nine lives and he's not even used half of them."

"You are going to hyperventilate." He took a step toward her. "Please, sit down."

Kathleen yanked a hair pin from her bun. "One more step and I'll jab this thing in your eye. Maybe that'll short circuit your satanic brain."

"Kathleen, you're not being logical."

"No? Then let me be sincere." Sliding back behind the door, she glared at him. "I don't care how much you think you know, but you don't have all the keys to the kingdom. I made sure that Morton had a backup plan if something like this ever happened."

"I have all his memories."

"Really?" She smiled. "Tell me what's taped to the bottom of his laptop."

"A key, as I recall."

"What does it open?" Kathleen held a palm up to his face. "And don't tell me a lock."

"Well, it does open a lock." K47 crossed his arms over his chest. "All keys open locks."

Kathleen shrugged and moved a single step away from the door, but held onto it with one hand. "True. But what lock does that key open?"

He looked left for a moment and then right. "I don't know. How is that possible?"

"Because one of the caveats to your system was that Mr. Cunningham had to constantly update your memory banks." She shook her head slowly and finally released her grip on the door. "In the beginning, I kept after him to do the daily update. Then it was just a weekly update. And if I'm not mistaken, the most recent update would have been about a month ago."

K47 verified the date. "You are correct."

"Then you have no idea what this key is for or why. However, I can tell you this, until the lock is opened, all of Morton Cunningham's personal assets are frozen. Even his personal laptop on the desk has been denied access."

"Why are they locked?"

"He knew this Amazon trip was going to be at least one month, but he was ready to go for a full year if necessary. Nothing is totally secure anymore. Leaving data in the cloud or even behind the world's greatest firewall is a risk. He found a way to get around the electronic swamp and secure his fortune." Kathleen scratched her ear. "He knows about it and I know about it. You have the key, but you have no idea what to do with it. So screw you, robot."

Ignoring the epithet, K47 nodded once. "That is correct. However, the contract that Mr. Cunningham signed with Life Extension LLC requires that all employees cooperate fully with the Life Extension Unit once it has been activated."

Kathleen snorted. Her voice was overrun with anger. "You might be correct, but we're going to have to run this by the Board of Directors and their legal advisors before you do anything. I don't give a shit what you think your tasks are or what the hell you think you have control over, but right now, you don't have jack shit."

His voice was hard, emotionless. "That will take up valuable time. I only have a year to complete my assignment."

"Sounds like a personal problem, you spawn of Satan. I'll see you rot in hell before you destroy our lives here." Screaming for Security, she ran out of the office and slammed the heavy door closed.