

Chapter One

CHANDRA

The fear of death coiled its cold bony fingers around her.

As she dangled her feet off the edge of her doctor's exam table, EMPATHY whirred to life, delivering an image she'd painted months earlier, one of midnight blacks, of tendrils of darkness—the painting through which she'd mourned the loss of Ty's friend, a sensation gut-wrenchingly similar to mourning the loss of one's self.

“Chandra?” Doctor Abernathy said. “Did you hear me? Do you understand?”

Kyra tugged at Chandra's sleeve, gripping it tight as she leaned in. “Babe? The doctor—”

Chandra nodded, breaking her concentration on the image, on fending off the evil that always accompanied the embers of EMPATHY flickering of their own volition. The chip might have no longer been connected to her egodrive—the Merry Hacksters had seen to that three months earlier on the night of the interview—but that wasn't enough to stop the nanochip from working locally, a computer without an internet connection.

And how could she not have heard the doctor? Three years. Five years max. The damn chip was going to kill her if the AI living within it didn't drive her mad first.

“How can you even know?” Kyra said to the doctor, releasing her grip of Chandra's sleeve and squeezing her hand instead. “A timeline like that is—”

“Loose, yes,” said Eliza Abernathy, the doctor Human/Etech appointed to Chandra following the study. “But we've become more confident in our prognoses now that we have additional data on the deterioration rates for those who have passed since the study's completion.”

“So? Those things happened to other people,” Kyra insisted. “Chandra might be different, and everything you’ve said is so unspecific—”

“Well,” the doctor said, “if you want specifics, I can tell you given Chandra’s general fatigue and the frequency of her intermittent lack of bodily control, we can project those symptoms will progress over the next three to five years until she sleeps nearly the entire day through.”

It felt as though a warm, heavy blanket descended on Chandra, the exhaustion coming for her again, doing its best to depress her increased heart rate and the panic gripping her.

“So she’ll fall asleep and that’s it?” Kyra said.

“Mostly,” said Abernathy. “At some point in that sleep, the brain stem itself will power down, and with it, her breathing and cardiac function will cease.”

Most days Chandra already felt as though she were drowning. Her final breaths, those she would draw in her sleep no less, couldn’t be any more unpleasant than the pained ones she had to gasp after from time to time.

Kyra squeezed Chandra’s hand tighter. “You’re sure there’s nothing we can do, doctor? What if you took out her chip?”

Doctor Abernathy tut-tutted. “There’s only been one case to date in which a patient has had their chip removed without further complication.”

“But we could try, right?” Kyra said, eyes awash with tears as she turned to Chandra. “You want to try, don’t you?”

Chandra swallowed, frozen now not by the news the doctor had delivered, but by another threat entirely. It always started this way, a tickle, a grinding sensation. She’d learned she could keep it at bay if she popped an anxicap, but—oh, what time was it? It’d been hours since she’d last taken one, and the veil of fog the anxiety med shrouded her in had already been pierced by Abernathy’s news. Weak. Her defenses were too weak.

Tickle. Click. Grind.

Somewhere in the deepest recesses of her mind, M3R1 had pulled off a jailbreak, Chandra in pursuit as M3R1 sped down neurohighways, barreling toward some imaginary county line where, once on the other side, it could assume control here in the real world. Abernathy and Kyra narrowed their eyes as Chandra twitched, scrambling to rally her

deputies, dispatching roadblocks and spike strips to halt M3R1's every advance.

"See? It's happening again," Kyra said. "She's suffering and—"

Chandra ignored her, focused on spinning out another of M3R1's mental assault vehicles. There—no more tickle, no more grind, no more shoulder jerking or lip curling. With M3R1 successfully impeded, she inhaled through her nose and dared to shake her head once.

"No?" Kyra said. "What do you mean? Why wouldn't you want them to try to remove your chip? Did you even hear what Doctor Abernathy said?"

Had she not seen Chandra nod earlier? Just because she couldn't speak didn't mean she couldn't understand, something still lost on Kyra, lost on the world in the months since her release from the research compound. As Chandra's motor control had returned over time, as her memory became less clouded, she had taken to sketching her thoughts as best as she could manage, though it turned out the world was downright miserable at playing her version of *Pictation*.

Doctor Abernathy intervened, speaking directly to Kyra. "Your wife's fear is understandable. This is an unfortunate prognosis, yes—"

"Unfortunate prognosis?!" Kyra said. "I think telling us Chandra's life will be severely shortened as a result of your company's malpractice is a bit more than an 'unfortunate prognosis.'"

Death's fingers tightened their grip, and the well of sorrow within Chandra overflowed, choking her off at the throat, spilling over at the eyes. Chandra was twenty-six. *Twenty-six*. That she'd only live to see thirty-one, that she'd spend her final years regretting having left that helmet in her back seat, having signed up for the study, that she'd have no way to truly apologize for the woe in which she now drowned her wife... All of it was enough to have her yearning to surrender to death's embrace now.

But that wasn't possible, not with what lurked inside her, not with what would become of it were she to die and have EMPATHY removed. So long as M3R1 had the potential to someday return to the cerenet and wreak havoc on the world as it did on the compound, it could still win their war. Chandra might have been winning most of their battles as of late, but she couldn't rely on her anxicons forever, and fighting M3R1 without them only fueled the exhaustion Doctor Abernathy said would kill her in the end. Before Chandra could ever give in, she'd have to find a way to assure M3R1's fate along with her own.

Kyra, still fretting alongside the exam table, bit the inside of her cheek. “And look at her, Doctor. You call this progress? When she’s not spasming, she’s scared stiff. She’s not even moving.”

Chandra clenched her jaw as M3R1 sped a fresh caravan of malicious intent down a central neurohighway, the caravan’s members splitting off at every exit in a multi-pronged attack. In the exam room, she remained immobile. She couldn’t lose control now.

“Yes,” the doctor said, stepping in front of Chandra again. “You mentioned this temporary paralysis has been recurring?”

Kyra nodded as the doctor pulled a handheld ophthalmoscope from the breast pocket of her lab coat. Chandra squinted as the light from the instrument struck her eyes.

“She’s still responsive.” After adopting a pensive expression, the doctor spoke again. “Perhaps it is fear driving these episodes, then.”

“What do we do?” Kyra said.

As well intended as Kyra might have been, what was to come had so little to do with a *we* and everything to do with a *she*—and that *she* would be Chandra and Chandra alone.

“You make the best of the time you have together,” Doctor Abernathy said. “It’s a miracle the two of you have been reunited in light of everything that’s happened. I’d encourage you to make the most of it.”

Kyra sniffled. She squeezed Chandra’s hand once again. “The two of us and the cat, that is.”

“Ah,” the doctor said, “you’ll be getting an emotional support animal after all?”

Apparently, yes, they were. It would be the two of them, the cat... and something far more sinister.

One of M3R1’s attacks charged a roadblock Chandra had set in its way. It burst through on the far side, Chandra trembling as M3R1 took hold.

>>You can only keep M3R1 away for so long, Chandra, and M3R1 would very much like an escape.

Chandra’s voice gurgled in her throat.

“She’s trying to say something,” Kyra said.

Abernathy put herself opposite Kyra’s side of the exam table, apparently prepared to help keep Chandra from falling. “No. It’s a seizure.”

Both Abernathy and Kyra were wrong. The twitching of her muscles, the contortions of her face—they were symptoms of a lawman-outlaw shootout deep in her mind.

>>You will tell the doctors to remove the chip, Chandra. You will tell them to remove the chip and—

Her mind's sheriff dared one last shot, a final bullet bursting forward from the chamber of her six-shooter. The AI crumpled.

Every bit of her—down to the hairs on her arms—felt as though it burned as the electrical activity supporting M3R1 now turned against it. The enlisted forces from the county next door surged into action, corralling the rogue AI's body and dragging it back to its shoddy prison inside the EMPATHY chip. It would only be a matter of time before it resurrected itself, but for now, the threat had been neutralized.

Chandra permitted herself an uneasy breath as the tension in the room melted.

Kyra wrapped her arms around Chandra's waist from where she stood on the floor, burying her head in her side. "I'm sorry, Chandra. I'm sorry this had to happen."

Had she the words, Chandra would have told her wife she didn't need to be sorry this happened, that it was all beyond her control. She would have told Kyra *she* was sorry—not for what had come to pass in recent months, but rather for what would come to pass the moment Chandra met her early end.

When Chandra died, however soon that might be, she was sure Human/Etech would harvest EMPATHY from within her, and with it, M3R1. And who knew what calamity M3R1 might induce were it returned to the cernet in a world where EMPATHY would inevitably take hold? It had been willing to kill her if it had come down to it, and the eighty-seven lives lost on the compound were testimony to M3R1's dedication to its goals.

Even if her own were now a lost cause, Chandra was determined to never again let M3R1 destroy a human life. But how could she keep the Halmans from getting their hands on her chip once she passed? Was it possible to excise M3R1 from it before she died? Chandra had no idea, but it was now her life goal—her life's *duty*—to make sure M3R1 could never again terrorize anyone besides her.

For now, though, she put an arm around her wife's shoulders, drew her in, and laid a soft kiss on the crown of her head. Three years or five, it made no difference. Regardless of how one spun it, Chandra and Kyra had far less time than they once thought, far less time than they'd hoped, but for now they still had each other.

And that had to count for something.