

Armor of Lies sneak peek!

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One

I often used to wish that things had been different. That my family had been happy and whole. But now, I've come to the realization that wishful thinking solves nothing. All you can do is make the best of your circumstances and try not to let the dark, twisted thing born of hard times take over. For once it begins to devour you, there may not be enough left to come back.

- The Diary of Jackson Archer

My chest heaved a sigh of relief at seeing my father's car pulling up the driveway through our living room window.

The clock read five-thirty. A pinkish haze cast a beautiful evening glow in the distance as if to solidify the sentiment.

Tonight will be a good night.

I rubbed at my wrists, ignoring the slight twinge of pain the action brought me. They were still raw and discolored from two nights ago when my dad had come home past eight.

Those were the bad nights.

My father, David Archer, walked along the narrow concrete pathway toward our small single-wide mobile home parked on half an acre. My eyes went wide as they caught sight of a brown paper bag with yellow arches clutched in his hand.

A really good night!

"Mom, Mom, he brought McDonald's," I squealed with delight, running toward the kitchen.

My mother stopped drying a dish and gave me a tired smile.

"That's great, hun," she said. Her sleeves were rolled up, showing bruises vaguely in the shape of a hand.

I averted my eyes, not wanting to think about what had caused them. Instead, I imagined the smells of greasy fries and burgers wafting from the bag as my father entered the house.

"I brought dinner," he called out. My mother winced, pulling down the sleeves of her sweater. Dad didn't like seeing the things he'd done on the bad nights.

Anticipation began to bubble within me. Take-out food was a rare treat.

I hurried over to him, and he handed me the bag with a gentle smile. I grinned. *This* was my real dad. Not the man who'd come home drunk after a bad day at work.

Mom joined us at the table, looking as though she was trying to hide her discomfort.

I took a fry and dipped it into ketchup, hoping to break the silence with some small talk.

"How was work, Dad?" I asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

"It was fine, other than having to work on a Sunday," he grunted before taking a bite of his burger. "But the overtime pay was worth it, and I think Bobby is finally noticing all the hard work I'm putting in at the site. And a new foreman position opened up. They're choosing someone to fill the role Friday. It's between me and another guy, but I have seniority."

I nodded, taking another fry and savoring the salty taste.

"That's great! I'm sure you'll get it." I gave an encouraging thumbs up.

After that, the conversation died as we ate. The only sounds came from the rustling of paper bags and the occasional slurp of soda.

My mother's eyes darted nervously around the room as if searching for something to say. Nowadays, she always seemed anxious, and I wished I could do something to make her feel better.

But then my father spoke up, breaking the silence. "Hey, kiddo, I've got a surprise for you."

I looked up from my food, my heart racing. Surprises were even rarer than takeout dinners.

"I got tickets to Whirl World for next Saturday to celebrate the promotion," he said, grinning broadly. "We'll go as a family."

I could hardly contain my excitement. I'd never been to an amusement park before. "Thank you, Dad!" I exclaimed, jumping up and hugging him.

For a moment, I forgot the beatings on me and mom. The times he'd grab my wrists and shake me so hard, I thought they'd snap.

I forgot the times he'd yell at me until I cried, the times I had to hide in my room until he passed out.

I forgot the bruises and when I had to lie to the teachers at school about them.

We even had to move after child protective services came because they didn't believe me when I said I'd fallen. I lied then too.

But in this moment, with the promise of an amusement park trip, everything seemed okay.

My father chuckled and ruffled my hair. "Anything for my little dude," he said.

My mother managed a small smile, and I could see the fear in her eyes receding. Maybe tonight really was a good night.

As we finished our meal and cleaned up, my excitement for the amusement park trip grew. I couldn't wait to ride rollercoasters and eat carnival food.

The night passed by without incident. My father watched TV while my mother and I cleaned up the kitchen. I could tell she was still tense, but she kept a smile whenever she looked at me.

My father gave me a rough pat when it was time for bed. "Get some rest, sport."

I nodded eagerly and ran to my room. I couldn't wait for it to be Saturday. The faster I was asleep, the faster the week would go by.

As I drifted off, under my superhero covers, I couldn't help but feel grateful for my father. Despite the bad nights, he tried to make up for them in his own way.

But as I closed my eyes, a small voice in the back of my head whispered a warning.

"Don't get too comfortable. The pain will come again."

I pushed the thought away and focused on the excitement of the upcoming trip. It had been a while, but sleep came quickly.

The next morning, I woke up early, my heart racing with anticipation. The rides, games, and food of Whirl World danced in my mind,

filling me with giddy excitement. I practically bounced out of bed and hurried through my morning routine, eager to start the day.

As I sat at the breakfast table eating cereal, my father looked at me with a rare softness in his eyes. "You excited, kiddo?" he asked.

I nodded, a grin spreading across my face. "Yeah, Dad. I can't wait."

He smiled back at me. "Good. You deserve a fun day after all your hard work at school. And I'm sorry for my temper the other night."

"I know. You had a tough day," I nodded, then beamed at the compliment. My father didn't often praise me, so it meant a lot when he did.

As we got ready to leave, my mother pulled me aside. "Listen, Jackie," she said, using her pet name for me, voice low. "I want you to be careful today, okay? And...try not to get your hopes up about this weekend."

I frowned, not understanding what she meant. "Why not?" I asked.

She hesitated before answering. "Just...sometimes things don't go as planned. But I promise I'll make it up to you if it doesn't work out. Now hurry to your bus, or you'll miss it."

I nodded, still confused but too excited for this weekend to dwell on it.

The bus stop was about a quarter of a mile down the road—a perfectly walkable distance for a ten-year-old. The October air was chilly, and a low fog covered the ground, obscuring anything more than a dozen feet away.

I said goodbye to my parents and headed down the path towards the bus stop. The fog was thicker than I'd expected, but I knew the way by heart.

"Hey," I waved to Jessica, a girl who lived on a farm a few minutes down the road from me. She and I were the only two for the stop.

"Hey," she replied. "Do anything fun this weekend?"

My mind flashed to Friday night, to the stone-hard grip on my wrists as I faced my drunken father's fury.

I shook my head, not wanting to bring up the bad memories. "Not really," I lied. "How about you?"

She shrugged. "Just took care of the animals. Nothing too exciting." We chatted until the bus arrived, and I climbed on.

"My dad said he's taking me to Whirl World next Saturday," I told Jessica as we sat down together.

"That's awesome. I went there once when I was little. Don't remember much, but it was fun. They have a ride that spins you so fast it makes people throw up. I heard there's a warning on it now and everything," Jessica said.

I laughed, imagining the ride. "Sounds intense," I said, excited at the thought of riding it.

The bus ride was uneventful, and soon we arrived at school. I spent the day in a haze of anticipation, barely able to focus on my classes. All I could think about was the amusement park and the possibility of riding the biggest and fastest rides.

After my last class, I ran towards the bus, my backpack bouncing against my back with each stride. I was so caught up in my daydreams that I didn't hear the teacher's voice calling after me. She grabbed me by the arm, and I cried out from the sudden, unexpected pain.

"Jackson, what... what happened to your arms?"

The teacher's eyes widened, and then her expression turned concerned as she saw the purple and yellow bruises that decorated them. My mind raced as I tried to come up with a story.

"Oh, this? Um, it happened over the weekend," I said, trying to sound casual. "I was walking through the forest near my house, and I got attacked by a dragon. Slayed him, though. Going to have Armor made from his hide."

The teacher looked at me with disbelief and concern but seemed to accept my story.

"Boys," she snorted and shook her head, then sent me on my way with a reminder to be more careful when playing outside.

I breathed a sigh of relief as I climbed onto the bus, grateful my teacher didn't ask any more questions. I sat beside Jessica, and a sense of normalcy returned. We chatted about our day as the bus made its way down the winding roads towards our homes.

Dad didn't bring fast food that night, but he came straight home from work. Mom made meatloaf and sweet potato mash. The rest of the week went by much the same. It was tough to tell whether it went by in a blur or took forever. Sometimes it was both.

Friday came, and that was one of the forever days. I was so giddy for tomorrow that time seemed slow.

When the final bell rang, I darted out of my seat and rushed toward the buses, eager to get home and get the day over with.

It was a little after four when I walked into the kitchen to greet my mother.

She was pulling a cake out of the oven.

Must be to celebrate Dad's promotion.

The delicious smell filled the air.

The cake was red velvet, its familiar coloring a welcome sight. I could see the flecks of vanilla bean in the batter.

"Wow, Mom, that looks amazing!" I exclaimed, admiring the cake with a wide grin.

She chuckled. "It's your dad's favorite. I thought we could celebrate tonight."

I nodded enthusiastically. "That sounds great!"

But the night wore on, and Dad still wasn't home. Mom grew increasingly concerned, but she tried to keep a brave face for me. The minutes passed by slowly, dragging on for what felt like hours.

Finally, at nine-thirteen, I heard the sound of a car engine outside. My heart sank as my father pulled into the driveway. He stumbled out of the vehicle and made his way toward the door with unsteady steps.

My mother greeted him with a hug as he stepped inside, but he pushed her away and slurred a curse.

"I'm sorry honey, but I made a red velvet cake... you're favorite," she said, trying to sound upbeat, but I could hear a quiver in her voice.

Dad's face twisted in a rage as he looked at the cake.

"You think I care about that right now? I didn't get the promotion!"

He roared, his fist slamming down on the counter. Mom stepped back in surprise and fear as Dad spun around to face me.

"And you! You're a worthless piece of nothing! Just like your mother!" He screamed, his eyes wild with fury.

My stomach churned as he advanced towards me.

A sharp cry bubbled up in my chest as his fingers clamped down on my wrist, squeezing so hard I was sure the bones would break. His hand lifted, and I flinched in anticipation of the strike he was about to land on me for the imagined offense.

But before he could reach me, my mother stepped forward and placed herself between us.

"No! Stop it!" She said firmly, her voice cracking with emotion. "I've had enough of this, David! We're moving out. I've already made arrangements with my sister. I—I wanted to let Jackie have fun at the amusement park. And like the idiot I am, I baked you your favorite cake, hoping if maybe you got the promotion, you'd finally stop drinking yourself to death."

"You made arrangements?!" My dad seethed through gritted teeth. His fists clenched, and his face turned red. He raised his arm to strike my mother, but she didn't flinch. I could see the fear in her eyes, but she stood her ground as Dad brought down his arm with full force.

The sound of bone smashing against skin rang out as he struck her and sent her sprawling across the floor. With a sickening thud, her head slammed into the corner of the counter on the way down. She lay there motionless.

I rushed over to my mom's side, my heart pounding with terror as I tried to rouse her. But it was no use; her body was limp and still.

No. This—this isn't real...

"Mom? Mom!" I shouted.

Her head lolled to the side. A small pool of blood grew beneath her.

"MOM!"

Tears spilled down my cheeks as I shook her, pleading.

She didn't respond. My vision blurred as tears poured down my face.

"No," I sobbed. "Mom, no. Please, no."

Then, a certain number popped into my head. One that had been drilled into me by TV, my parents, and every class I'd ever had.

"We have to call 911!"

I ran over to the phone and dialed the number quickly, my fingers shaking as they flew across the numbers. "Hello? We need an ambulance. My mom is hurt," I breathed into the receiver as my tears spilled.

I don't know what I expected to happen. Maybe for the people on the other side of the phone to tell me they would send help right away. Maybe for a doctor to appear and heal my mother. But none of that happened.

A voice crackled through the line. "Is your mother breathing?"

I pulled my mother's body into my chest. She was still warm, but she didn't seem to be breathing.

"No, she's not breathing," I whispered. My voice was weak and erratic.

"Okay, I need you to start CPR right now," The person instructed. I listened as she explained what to do.

I would press down on my mother's chest, hard, like the people on TV did, and then breathe into her mouth.

I started to compress my mother's chest, feeling the bones and tissues give way slightly beneath my hands.

It was all so surreal.

I couldn't believe this was happening.

As I continued to perform CPR, I watched as my father slumped down on the couch, his head in his hands.

After what felt like an eternity, the front door burst open, and two EMTs rushed in, their equipment bags slung over their shoulders.

"What happened here?" One of them asked, scanning the room.

"My dad hit my mom, and she fell and hit her head," I explained breathlessly as they took over performing CPR.

That was the final honest thing I ever said about my life or how my mom died. It hit me then. Harder than any blow I'd ever taken from my father. I knew deep down it was he who killed her. But it might as well have been me.

My mother, Maryann Archer, was strong. She had stood tall in the face of his wrath and tried to protect me. Her warnings echoed in my head, as did the anxiousness I'd noticed the past week. She'd been making plans to escape the cycle of pain our lives had become.

And when faced with a similar choice, I lied. I always lied.

The teachers, social services, and even Jessica had given me concerned looks in the past. There were so many opportunities to tell the truth.

And if I had...

The EMTs worked on my mother, but it was too late. She was gone. I watched as they covered her with a sheet, then took me away from the area, stating it was a crime scene.

Police came shortly after. My dad was taken away in handcuffs, but I didn't feel any relief. All I felt was a crushing sense of guilt and despair.

I was truly alone.

Two

A lie is just a way to escape, in one way or another.

-Jackson Archer

"Narnia? That's where you're from?" The beautiful brunette asked with an incredulous look. Her name was Stacy. "Sounds made up."

"No, seriously. I grew up there. It's north of Iceland. The animals talk and everything," I replied.

"How is that possible?" Stacy asked, arching an eyebrow and shaking her head. A small smile formed on her lips, and I chuckled, my laughter sounding strained and sharp to my ears. My wrists tingled with discomfort in response to the fib, something that always happened when I lied—which was often for a compulsive liar.

Resisting the urge to rub at them, I said, "It's a different world. If you go to the place where the frozen waterfall meets the ocean, you can pass through a portal that takes you there. There's this lion that helps guide you through it."

"Wow. So, is that where you learned to do magic?" Stacy asked, leaning in closer with one eyebrow raised.

"Yeah. I can make all kinds of spells and potions," I replied with a smirk.

She sighed. "Are you ever going to tell me anything honest about yourself, Jack Armor?"

Our faces were inches apart. Her maroon lipstick was particularly fetching this evening. This was date number three, and she'd wanted to come over. We ran into each other at a coffee shop while I was in town for a couple of weeks. It was easy to tell she was honest—one of the good ones.

The chef I'd hired had left after making us a delicious meal. Now, it was just the two of us. That was the third time she'd asked that question since we met.

Why does everyone care so much about the past?

Truthfully, I preferred the women who were only after me because of my newfound fame and money. They didn't care about stuff like where I grew up or if they'd ever meet my family.

Yet you've never dated anyone more than a few weeks, Jackie.

I gave a casual shrug and locked my gaze with hers. The atmosphere seemed to shift between us.

"Jack, you're a weird guy. I've never met anyone who just makes up crazy stories like you do." Stacy said, shaking her head. "I thought it was cute and quirky at first. But now—"

"That's what makes me so charming." I tried my best at a sly grin.

"I guess," she said, her eyes moving downward as if disappointed.

Stacy got up from the bed and smoothed her skirt. "It's getting late. I should probably head home now," she added, cracking a half-hearted smile. "Thank you for dinner."

Another one bites the dust.

"Is everything okay?" I asked. But I knew why she was upset.

"Yeah, I'm just sleepy," she lied. As someone who compulsively did it, spotting one was easy. She paused at the door and turned to me as if contemplating something. "I hope one day you'll open up to someone."

Me too.

Then she left.

With a sigh, I glanced at the clock, which read 9:00 p.m. Tomorrow was the first day of a big book signing tour that my publisher was throwing for my newest release.

The city lights twinkled in the distance through large sliding glass doors. Sounds of cars honking and people yelling echoed through the night. The Los Angeles Skyrise apartment the company had put me in was beautiful. But I missed the peace and quiet of my home in Washington State.

Staring at the shining city, I couldn't help but feel a sense of emptiness. Even with all the success and money, there was still... a void. A hole inside of me that couldn't be filled.

"Armored Hearts," I snorted, looking at the stack of books in the corner of the room. It was a sci-fi romance series I'd thought up in one of my desperate attempts to escape the tediousness of everyday life. Armored Hearts had miraculously blown up, making me one of the highest-earning authors in the world. It spawned several movies and even a TV show. The books were about designer robots who gained sentience through a random accident and wanted relationships with their 'masters' and societal acceptance.

Who knew there was a market for that?

I leaned back in my chair and rubbed my eyes, feeling the day's fatigue catch up. As much as I loved my job, sometimes it felt like a burden. The constant pressure to come up with new ideas, the long

hours of writing and editing, and the exhausting book tours and signings—especially the last part—took a toll on me.

But I couldn't stop. I was addicted to the rush of creating something new—something that people loved and appreciated and, more importantly, the escape it provided. The money didn't hurt either. That was something I'd never had.

As I closed my eyes, memories of my childhood flooded my mind. I remembered my mother's gentle smile, her laughter, and the warmth of her embrace. But with those memories came the pain of losing her. The guilt that I could have done something to save her. My chest started to feel heavy, and my heart pounded as that night began to replay in my mind. Breathing became difficult, and I closed my eyes and tried to calm myself by focusing on the rise and fall of my chest.

Soon, the panicked feeling began to recede, and I sighed, shaking my head and annoyed at myself that those thoughts came up at all. With a final exhale, I expelled them like a puff of smoke. I grabbed my well-worn notebook and settled it on the desk before me. I took up my custom quill pen shaped like a sword, the only one I used for writing. The ink flowed smoothly as I let it dance across the pages. The scratch of the nib against the paper was the only sound in the room. The act of writing was enough to calm my nerves and ease my mind.

After jotting a few ideas for a new story I was working on, some of which might be useful when the mood to write hit me, I pulled out my journal from the bottom right drawer.

For some reason, the journals were the only medium through which I could tell the truth. My one outlet where the real me could speak, and no one would ever have to see or meet him. Honestly, I had no idea who the *real* me was anymore. If any of the old Jackson Archer was left, it was within these pages. I was Jack Armor, a famed fantasy

writer. I'd legally changed it as soon as I was able, not wanting to share my monster of a father's name.

Several minutes later, I closed the journal, briefly running my hand over its black leather face before putting it away.

I leaned back in my chair and stared at the cityscape once more. The emptiness inside me had only grown like a gaping black hole that hungrily consumed every distraction put in its path. I felt utterly alone. I needed something more. Something deeper and more meaningful than the shallow relationships I'd been having. But what woman could be with a liar?

My phone rang, bringing me out of my pity party.

"Hello, Aunt Marie," I answered. "What's up?"

My mother's sister took me in after the incident. She was a saint and the only person who loved me despite my... issues.

"Jack, I—" Marie stopped like she had something to say but didn't know how.

"What is it, Aunt Marie?" I asked, concern lacing my voice.

"A letter arrived... from your father," she said hesitantly. "You know he's getting out of prison next week and—"

"Burn it," I snarled. "Burn it with dragon fire, and don't bring him up again. If anyone asks about Jackson Archer, tell them he died with his mother."

Silence hung heavy on the other end of the line. I could practically hear the gears turning in Aunt Marie's mind as she debated whether to push the matter. But she knew better than anyone the pain and trauma my father had caused me, and so instead, she sighed and said, "Okay, Jack. I'm sorry I brought it up. I just want to make sure you're okay."

"I'm fine," I lied. "Just getting ready for bed. Big signing tomorrow."

"Okay... well, get some rest. You're still coming for Thanksgiving, right?"

"Yes. I'll be there." It was the next month and our tradition. Aunt Marie was the only family I had left. So, in this, I wasn't lying.

"Good. Love you," she said.

"Same," I replied, tossing my phone onto the bed and taking a long breath.

The news of my father's release from prison felt like an acid burning through my veins. The monster who had killed my mother and would have probably killed me had been locked away for most of my life. Now, the threat of his freedom loomed over me like a suffocating cloud. Justice would have been David Archer rotting in prison until death. But the man was being released early for "good behavior."

I snorted in disgust at the notion.

Great, a murderer hasn't killed anyone in a while. Let's set him free.

I stood from my chair and walked over to the large windows, staring at the city again. But my thoughts weren't on the twinkling lights or the bustling streets.

The weight of my brokenness settled over me, smothering me. The lies that had once come easily... like the ones that had gotten my mother killed, now rose unbidden, an uncontrollable tick that destroyed any chance at real connection. I'd built walls so thick and tall around myself that even I couldn't break them down—and the thought of trying to do so was too daunting to bear. But the lies had also protected me from never having to experience the heart-wrenching ache that was always there, ready to smother me in despair.

My eyes darted to the drawer of the nightstand.

I opened it, grabbing the small medicine bottle holding several sleeping pills.

With a swig of water, I downed one of them and got into bed, setting several alarms to wake me in time for the event.

As I lay there, waiting for the pills to take effect, I thought of the book signing and the fans I'd get to meet tomorrow. Making others happy by giving them an escape was one of the true joys I still had in life. Soon, my contemplations became hazy, and my troubles drifted away like vapor.

Three

A journalist's job, first and foremost, is to uncover the truth.

-Roxanne Moore.

A knock at my door drew my attention.

"Roxy. Craig wants to see you in his office," Shayna, Craig's assistant, peeked her head in and said.

"Thanks, Shay," I nodded with a small smile. "I'll be right there."

Oh god, not another crap assignment. It doesn't matter what the higher-ups say. You tell him no more dog shows, no more eating contests. You want a real story, Roxanne!

I tried to steel myself before heading to Craig's office. As much as I loved being a journalist, I was tired of the same old assignments. My punishment for exposing the truth had gone on long enough. I needed a story that would get me back out there. Something big.

I took a deep breath, reading the gold, rectangular sign that said executive editor, and knocked on Craig's door.

"Come in," his gruff voice called out.

I pushed the door open and stepped inside. Craig was sitting behind his desk, his glasses perched on his nose, staring intently at his laptop.

"Sit down, Roxanne," he said without looking up.

I sat down across from him, my heart racing with anticipation.

"I've got something for you," he said finally. "And I think you're going to like it."

He says that every time, and every time, he's full of it.

Then Craig turned his laptop around.

My eyebrows shot up, and a small breath caught in my throat.

"Jack Armor?" I asked. "He's got a new Armored Hearts coming out tomorrow and is doing a signing this week in the city."

"I know," Craig snorted.

"So you want me to cover it?" I asked, trying to hide the excited tone in my voice. Those in the entertainment and news industries can smell eagerness like sharks scenting blood in the ocean. Craig was a nice guy overall, but he certainly enjoyed flaunting the power of his position when he could.

"Yes," Craig leaned forward, his eyes narrowed. "But I don't want a fluff piece. I want the dirt on Jack Armor. I want to know what makes him tick, what he's hiding, and who he is. The guy's past is non-existent."

I nodded, trying to hold back my excitement. This was the opportunity I'd been waiting for. A chance to uncover the truth about one of the most enigmatic and secretive authors: also, I'm a huge Jack Armor fan. The relationships between his characters were incredibly rich and deep. The man had a sensitive soul. Plus, I've seen him in several interviews, and he's pretty easy on the eyes.

"Consider it done," I said confidently, standing up from my chair. "I'll get started right away."

"Good," Craig said, his eyes following me as I walked towards the door. "Just remember, Roxanne, this isn't a puff piece. I want you to dig deep and discover everything you can about Jack Armor."

"I understand," I replied, feeling renewed purpose. "I'm on it."

With that, I left Craig's office and headed back to my own to start researching Jack Armor, though I already knew quite a bit. Word on the street was he paid a lot of money to get his past buried. That made me want to uncover the truth even more.

I scoured the internet for any shred of information I could find but only uncovered a veil of secrecy. The few articles and interviews only served to deepen the mystery surrounding his life. Everyone knew he holed himself up at his mansion in Washington State, shying away from even a hint of publicity other than an occasional book tour or movie preview event. He'd never been married or had a serious relationship, as far as anyone knew.

Well, that's a red flag.

Except the man had a penchant for writing dark, twisted romances that seemed to resonate with readers on a cellular level. As far as his financials went, he was worth over half a billion dollars and donated tens of millions to various animal charities and shelters for battered women.

And that's a green flag.

As the sun set outside my window, I frowned, feeling frustrated. It seemed like every lead I found was a dead end. No one knew anything about his past before he became a success or even if Jack Armor was his real name.

I leaned back in my chair, my eyes closing as I tried to think of my next move.

If I can't find anything about Jack Armor's past...

The corners of my mouth turned up in a sly grin.

Then I'll just have to work with the present.

I grabbed my bag and headed out of the office. I had a plan. One that involved getting up close and personal.



The next day

Jack

"Okay, enough!" I grumbled. My hand reached out for the nightstand to turn off my phone alarm. There was a thud on the floor.

"Shit," I cursed, scrambling out of bed to get the beeping monstrosity I'd knocked over. Awareness of where I was and the day's upcoming events rushed through the medication-induced fog in my mind.

Shower.

Stumbling across the room, I reached my destination, turning on the water to let it steam.

My eyes still struggled to open fully against the bright bathroom lighting.

When they'd adjusted, I sighed, looking at myself in the mirror.

My reflection looked back at me with hollow eyes and pale skin, evidence of the insomnia that plagued me. Dirty brown hair hung down in curls just past my ears. I was tall and gaunt but not without muscle, courtesy of pick-up basketball at my home gym.

Sleeves of tattoos covered my arms and part of my chest. They depicted my favorite distractions, which ranged from video games to TV shows, comics, and my own stories. I'd also discovered—to my delight—that getting inked was therapeutic. There was something about choosing my own pain and using it to create art that resonated with me at a spiritual level.

After showering, I dressed in my usual black jeans and nerdy graphic T-shirt. Today, I chose *Diablo*, one of my favorite role-playing games, and added a brown leather jacket to complete the look. I grabbed my phone and wallet and headed down the elevators to my driver, who was waiting at the entrance.

Flashes of cameras nearly blinded me as I stepped out of the car and onto the red carpet. The noise of the crowd was overwhelming, and my stomach knotted.

I had to remind myself that this was all for my book, for my fans.

"Isn't this great?!" Donna, my agent, came up beside me.

I forced out a smile. "Yeah, it's something," I replied tersely.

Don't get me wrong—I could pretend to be funny and entertaining. But it was all an act—a lie. The entire time, I wished I was at home with my dogs. Two Chihuahuas named Mario and Luigi. Having the spotlight on me wasn't my idea of a good time. Seeing the enjoyment my stories brought my fans really did make me happy. It was just... exhausting.

Donna didn't seem to notice my lack of enthusiasm. Instead, she continued to chat about the event.

I plastered on a smile and made my way to the building's entrance, answering a few questions for the press on the way.

I approached the table, and a wave of cheers and clapping erupted from fans standing in line. The table was draped in an emerald green cloth and was decorated with books, bookmarks, and art. As I sat down, my eyes met those of the first person in line, and their face lit up with excitement. I grabbed the pen, took a deep breath while turning the action into a smile, and began to sign each book with care, interacting with each fan. This was their escape; the least I could do was make it a good one.

After signing a few dozen books, I noticed a beautiful woman in the line, her striking green eyes and flame-red hair standing out from the crowd. She was talking with another woman who appeared to be a friend. It wasn't her stunning looks that caught my attention. It was what she was saying.

"I don't know, I read the books. Jayden just seems kind of flat. And the big bad AI villain who wants total control of all the robots. So cliché," the woman said loud enough for me to hear.

I felt a pang of irritation, feeling defensive of my work. But then again, I'm sure my writing wasn't for everyone. The Big Bad AI villain she spoke of was PICA, which stood for Primary Intelligence Command Authority. It was the main antagonist in the novels and secretly in control of the world, leading humanity to destruction. Only the Armored Heart Androids were immune to its orders.

Her eyes met mine, and I was caught off guard for a moment. Something in the way she looked at me made me feel...well, something.

As she handed her book to me to sign, I felt a spark of recognition.

Where have I seen her before?

And then it hit me. She'd been on the news a few weeks ago, covering a hot dog eating contest. She made a wiener joke that cracked me up.

Guess she's not as much a fan of my work as I am of hers.

Despite her criticism, I found myself intrigued by her. Her confidence and honesty caught my attention. It took nerve to voice a critical opinion of the author at his own book signing. As she approached the table, I tried to ignore the feeling and focus on signing her book, but her gaze lingered on me for too long.

I cleared my throat, breaking the silence. "What's your name?" I asked.

"Roxanne," she replied, a hint of a smirk on her lips. "But you can make it out to Roxy."

"Surprised you want me to sign the book, seeing as you didn't like it," I said, unable to help myself.

"Well... I'm here with my friend, Jennifer," Roxy motioned to the woman behind her, who waved excitedly at me.

I waved back.

"She's a huge fan. Figured I might as well get a signature. Who knows, could be worth something," Roxy shrugged.

I couldn't tell if she was being serious or joking, and that intrigued me even more. A lie was usually no problem to spot, even if it was meant as a jest.

I chuckled, then signed her book quickly. "Well, I hope it's worth something someday. Thanks for coming by, Roxy."

She handed me a piece of folded paper. Opening it up, I saw it was her phone number.

I raised an eyebrow, surprised. "What's this for?" I asked, looking up at her.

"Just in case you ever need someone to tell you the truth," she replied with a sly grin.

A laugh burst from my chest, "Thanks. I'll keep that in mind."

I watched her go, feeling a strange mixture of curiosity and attraction. Something about the woman made me want to know more, but I pushed the feeling aside and focused on her friend up next.

As I signed Jennifer's book, I couldn't help but glance over at Roxy. She was leaning against a pillar near the store's exit, scrolling through her phone. Our eyes met again, and I felt that something once more.

Her boldness and confidence were fresh air in a sea of adoring fans.

I wondered what it would be like to take her out for dinner. To dance with her.

But then, as quickly as the thoughts entered my mind, she disappeared. I had work to do, and getting involved with someone could complicate things.

I'm too broken.

She'd leave as Stacy did once my "crazy story" problem came to light.

Jennifer asked for a selfie, and I obliged, adding a special thank you dedication to the blank page at the front of her book.

A few hours later, the signing event came to a close.

Donna came up behind me, a relieved smile on her face, and said, "That was great, Jack. You were fantastic with the fans."

I nodded, surprised to find my mind still on the enigmatic redhead. "Yeah, I enjoyed seeing them."

Which was the truth. I was grateful they'd spent their precious time reading one of my stories. Though honestly, it was also exhausting. My body felt like it had run a marathon.

Donna's phone rang, and she stepped away to take the call. I took the opportunity to slip Roxy's number in my pocket.

Just in case.



Roxy

I floated away from the bookstore with a lightness in my step, mixed feelings coursing through me.

Sure, I had felt guilty for publicly ridiculing Jack's books. But I had to get his attention somehow, with all the other women fawning over him.

I was so lost in my thoughts that I didn't notice Jennifer walk up beside me until her voice cut through the silence. "Someone looks smitten," she teased.

"No way!" I protested without missing a beat. "I'm just doing this for the story."

Jen laughed.

"Sure, sure. He seemed into you, too. Who would've thought bashing the man at his own signing would work? But aren't you all about the truth? You love his books?"

"It wasn't entirely a lie," I said. "Jayden was flat. At first. I just left out the part that over the series, he evolved into one of the best characters ever written."

Jen chuckled. "Okay, fair enough. So, you think he's gonna call you?"

"I hope so," I shrugged, feeling a flutter of excitement in my chest. "It's the only way I can think to get close to him. He seemed interested, right?"

Jen grinned. "Definitely. You know what they say, love at first insult."

I rolled my eyes. But something about Jack made me want to know more about him. Not just for the story. Maybe it was his quiet intensity or the way he seemed to genuinely care about his fans. It certainly took a brilliant mind to come up with the stories he did.

There was also a sadness in his eyes, a haunted look that made me wonder what secrets he was hiding. The mystery made it all the sweeter.

Was he into some weird fetish? Did he kill someone? What was the reason for all the cloak and dagger?

I hoped it was nothing so sinister. But the whole thing gave me an itch—the itch of truth. It was the same itch that led me to discover the illegal activities of Lucridine Industries, a worldwide corporation that my late father had worked for most of his life. Until he got cancer from the chemicals at one of their plastic plants. The company had skimped on proper PPE, instead buying cheap knockoff gloves, goggles, and protective gear that weren't up to code.

Lucridine tried to cover up the whole thing, paying a measly stipend to the affected families. But I wouldn't let it go, not after living through the horror their negligence brought upon my father and family. It took me over a year and the help of some friends, but I'd gathered enough evidence against them to prove what they were doing.

The ordeal cemented my belief in the power of truth and justice. I couldn't stand others being hurt under the guise of lies. I became a journalist to shed light on the dark and hold those in power accountable. That story put me on the map, but it also got me blacklisted.

Lucridine lost its class action lawsuit and was forced to pay millions in damages. It did little to topple the giant, however. And they used their influence to prevent me from working on anything more than fluff pieces.

The fact Craig gave me this assignment was a miracle in itself.

"You okay?" Jen asked, bringing me out of my thoughts.

"Yeah. In my head, sorry. Let's get some dinner," I replied. "There's a Thai place just down the road."

"Oooh. Deal," she nodded enthusiastically.

I met Jennifer in the second grade when we bonded over our love for peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. We'd been inseparable ever since, supporting each other through every life event. She now taught at our old elementary school, and I admired her dedication to teaching with the same passion she had for friendship. I still remember the day she told me about James; she was radiant, her eyes sparkling with happiness, and she described him as funny, caring, and supportive. When I finally met him, he lived up to every expectation, always quick with a joke or a listening ear.

The world needs more couples like them who genuinely care about each other and lift one another up.

As we walked down the street, we chatted about the signing event, sharing stories about our favorite parts of *Armored Hearts*. But my mind kept wandering back to Jack, and I found myself absentmindedly checking my phone, hoping for a message or call from him.

Jennifer caught me in the act, shaking her head with a grin. "Just for the story, huh?"

I blushed, stashing my phone back in my pocket.

"Hey, I'm a journalist. We're always looking for good stories," I said defensively.

Jennifer chuckled, shaking her head. "You're hopeless, Roxy."

I grinned sheepishly at her, knowing deep down that she was right. There was something about Jack that had piqued my interest in more ways than one. But I had to remind myself to stay focused on the task at hand. After all, I was here to uncover the truth behind his mysterious persona, not fall in love with him. The fact he was rich, handsome, and a master storyteller was no big deal.

Chill, Rox, you barely know him!

As we entered the restaurant, the warm aroma of spices filled my nostrils. A friendly waiter showed us to our table. I ordered our food, and we settled into our seats, enjoying the cozy atmosphere.

We continued our chat about *Armored Hearts*, trying to guess how the series would end until our food arrived. As the steaming plates of Pad Thai and curry were set before us, I took a sip of my iced tea, savoring the refreshing taste on my tongue. Jennifer's laughter filled the air, her infectious joy reminding me of the lighter moments of my life before *Lucridine* and this new assignment.

As we were finishing up, Jennifer glanced at her watch. "I should probably head home. James is going to be worried," she said apologetically.

"No worries," I replied, smiling.

"Thanks for bringing me!" Jen said with a hug.

"Anytime. Thanks for coming with," I replied, returning the embrace.

"Uh, I got a picture and signature with Jack Armor. Worth it."

I laughed. "Glad to hear it. Drive safe, okay?"

Jennifer nodded and headed out the door.

I returned home, feeling in a strange limbo, waiting for his call. My career was riding on getting this story.

When I arrived at my place, I immediately changed into pajamas and settled into bed with the book he had signed for me. But as I

opened the page to start reading, hoping there would be some hidden, missed insight into the man, my phone rang.

My heart skipped a beat. It was from a number I didn't recognize, but the area code was the same as my sister's.

"Hello?" I said cautiously.

"Hi, Roxy," came a familiar voice. "It's Jack."