

## *Prologue*

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*November 15, 1971*

EMMANUEL LEXER BREATHED A SIGH OF RELIEF AS THE WHEELS of his 747 touched down on the runway at John F. Kennedy International Airport. *Thank God it wasn't a plane crash*, he thought. He'd cut short his spiritual retreat in the Amazon due to an overwhelming sense of dread. Even though Emmanuel was a world-renowned psychic, his abilities never seemed to be of any help when looking into his own future. Now thoroughly exhausted from worry, he couldn't wait to get back to his little studio apartment and fall into bed.

The passengers poured off the plane, and as Emmanuel made his way toward baggage claim, a snippet of the evening news caught his ear, triggering that all too familiar sense of dread that hit him like a two-by-four in the back of his neck.

Moving closer to the television, he heard, "...unveiled the Intel 4004 today, the world's first single chip microprocessor."

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“Exciting, isn’t it?”

Emmanuel gave a sideways glance at a short man riveted to the TV screen. “What is?” he asked.

“The Chip,” the man said, pointing to the image displayed next to the anchorman. “That little thing has made it all possible.”

Emmanuel’s brow creased. “Made what possible?”

“For machines to possess intelligence.” The man’s eyes danced with wild anticipation. “Think of all the possibilities.”

The psychic stared at The Chip, and in one stinging instant his head filled with hundreds upon thousands of images—images of the future too unspeakable to comprehend. He staggered back, pinching his nose as blood came gushing out. Then he fell to the ground, shaking with a violent seizure.

“Get a doctor!”

“Call an ambulance!”

Swirls of people, concerned voices, blurred images.

For a moment, Emmanuel came to. He couldn’t breathe, couldn’t feel his body. Fighting to stay conscious, he grabbed hold of the airline representative hovering above him, and in a strained voice he whispered, “April 18, 2095.” Emmanuel’s eyes shot wide as he gasped for air. Two seconds later, he was dead.

The official cause of death, determined by a New York medical examiner, was a massive coronary. The autopsy report never shed any light on what caused the psychic’s jet-black hair to turn stark white. Nor was any explanation given for the million particles of crystallized ice found in his veins.

Emmanuel Lexer was twenty-three.

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*April 6, 2095*

THERE WAS A DEADNESS TO THE SILENCE. AN UNRESOUNDING stillness permeated Britannia Stone's domicile. Not just hers in particular, but all domiciles across the world were designed to be airtight. Hermetically sealed to keep out dust, pollen, and insects. Soundproofed to eliminate any unforeseen interference. And with the temperature controlled at an even seventy-two, it was certain every world citizen would receive a good night's sleep.

Britannia slept as she always did—on her back, with her hands by her sides. And the thin sheet covering her naked body rhythmically fell with each breath she took. Steady, even, calm.

At the exact second, five days a week, a melodious, gentle chime rung three times as iridescent, true white light illuminated the sterile, precise, minimalistic bedroom.

Britannia's ice blue eyes popped open as the domicile com-

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puter, DC 3000, spoke to her in a warm, soothing, female voice. “Good morning, Britannia Stone. Today is Wednesday, April 6, 2095. The time is 6:55 a.m.”

Fully awake, Britannia swung her legs over the bed, hopped to her feet, and hit the motion control button on her nightstand. With an electric hum and a quiet whoosh, the bed deflated and disappeared into the wall.

“Breakfast preference, please.”

“The usual,” Britannia answered the omniscient voice above her. She paused at the closet keypad and punched in six numbers. As she continued into the bathroom, the closet doors automatically flung open behind her.

Inside the closet, Britannia’s clothes were divided into four color-coded sections. The automatic rack spun past the black section, the dark gray and the brown and forest green, eventually landing on the navy blue section. A hydraulic servo whine initiated a steel tong arm. It unfolded itself, clamped onto the selected blue blazer and pulled it off the rack.

In the bathroom, Britannia stood up from the toilet seat and walked out of the frosted glass-enclosed water closet. The toilet flushed with one efficient surge as a chrome panel at the back snapped open. A cloud of disinfectant dispersed, followed by a beam of ultraviolet light. It flashed twice, drying the seat instantly.

Britannia studied herself in the mirror. A smile of approval formed at the corners of her mouth. She was a fine specimen of modern technology. Biologically, Britannia was almost thirty-eight. Physically, she appeared barely twenty. Then again, everyone in her world *looked* young because they *were* young. Proper

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nutrition and exercise, which doctors continually touted as the solution to eternal youth, were only part of the reason everyone appeared so young. This attainable fountain of youth could actually be credited to society itself. Medical advances had slowed the aging process to a crawl. Those between the ages of twenty and forty looked twenty. Forty- to sixty-year-olds looked thirty. And no one, not even the one hundred twenty-five-year-olds, ever looked over the age of sixty. People felt young, looked young, and thought young because their lives were run entirely by state-of-the-art computers and advanced technology.

Life was easy.

Britannia moved toward the body scan located just outside her shower. “Activate scanning system.”

With an electric buzz, side panels slid open revealing a thin red laser beam. Britannia routinely waved the inside of her right wrist over the light, enabling the laser to scan her barcode. A hologram of light instantly appeared in front of her, pulsing, awaiting incoming information.

“Scanning system activated,” her domicile computer announced.

Britannia knew she lived in a good age. Computer science had advanced tremendously over the last fifty years. Moving far beyond storing information, computers actually created it. They were the only tools in the workplace and, like the light bulb, they’d become an essential necessity in every citizen’s life. From organizing a daily schedule to monitoring a person’s health and environment, computers erased guesswork, human error and, of course, stress. All citizens were where they should be, as they should be, twenty-four/seven.

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“Initiate sequencing.” Britannia threw her long chestnut hair over her shoulders as she wrapped her graceful fingers around the scan’s sensors. A dozen laser beams activated from the side panels and skimmed over her sleek, perfect body.

The hologram filled with scrolling numbers—a detailed analysis of her blood, organs, circulatory, skeletal, and nervous systems—ultimately reaching the final results in a flashing message: ANALYSIS COMPLETE.

“All vitals functioning within optimal range,” DC assured.

Britannia looked up at the fisheye lens above her and smiled. “Thank you, DC.”

She stepped inside the shower. Water jets turned on. Spinning terrycloth brushes moved into position as frosted glass slid across the doorjamb. With everything as it should be, Britannia raised her arms, closed her eyes, and her uncluttered mind thought of... nothing.

THE BEDROOM DOOR INCHED OPEN WITH A LOW GROANING creak. Bright feline eyes peered through the crack onto a rumpled-up work shirt and a ball of tightly wound, bright red yarn. The house cat, Paws, inched through the door. A moment of indecision, then a streak of black and white pounced on red. The cat entangled herself in her only toy, stopping abruptly as she heard the rustling of covers in the bed above her. A tired, male moan, and then the movement ceased.

Paws maneuvered her way through piles of old magazines and well-worn books before effortlessly jumping onto the windowsill to get a better view of the mound in the bed. The mound made strange noises to the cat's ear—erratically changing between heavy breathing and a deep snore. Paws' short attention drifted onto the blind's cord. She began tugging on it, swatting the string back and forth until the blinds finally gave her the result she'd intended.

The once dimly lit room was now much brighter as the

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morning sun broke through the partially opened shade. Beams of light cascaded over the body buried under two pillows and a be-draggled coverlet.

Without warning, the old-fashioned alarm clock clanged loudly. The mound moved with a disgruntled groan. A pillow tumbled to the floor as a hand groped for the clock, found it, and switched it off. The hand then disappeared back under the covers.

Paws jumped from the windowsill onto the bed with a disapproving meow.

“Go away,” a husky voice growled.

Ignoring her owner’s bad mood, Paws motored onto his chest and defiantly lay down.

With an irritated grunt, John Ettinger threw back the covers from his ruggedly pleasing face. His black hair, with emerging streaks of silver, stood high on end. An eighth inch of black stubble lined the edges of his square jaw and his determined, cleft chin. Warm, chocolate eyes stared at the obstinate feline cleaning her paws.

“Okay, Paws, I’m up,” John said, stretching his arms over his head. He dragged his calloused fingers through his scraggily beard and stared at the clock. Five after seven. He hoisted himself out of bed, instantly felt a sharp pain in his ankle, and winced. Being an Inactive meant he felt every day of his thirty-nine years.

On mornings like this, when his throat scratched like sandpaper and his dry joints screamed from stiffness, he was tempted to give up his archaic ideals, become a citizen, and join society like the rest of the world. But he hadn’t been raised that way. His parents had chosen to stay outside the global system, as had their parents before them. And when he was old enough to decide for

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himself, John, too, walked the same path. He remained outside society—away from those who had tinkered with the genetic code and had managed to eradicate that unexplainable, instinctive feeling of knowing the difference between right and wrong, good and bad, truths and lies.

John knew the difference, but he was one of only a few. And the incredible responsibility of trying to teach others how to ascertain the difference had driven him further into isolation. The knowledge he had was a double-edged sword. Though he was free, he had to cope with a difficult existence and daily struggle for survival. Ignorance, he'd finally come to realize, truly *was* bliss.

In shorts and a worn-out T-shirt, John staggered to the kitchen with a yawn. Stumbling to the counter cluttered with tools, old appliances, and half-finished projects, he noticed that the automatic coffeepot had not turned on. He peered closely at the internal clock, tapping his finger on the glass. The timer had indeed stopped working.

“That’s just great.” John grudgingly started the coffeepot himself, realizing he’d just added one more manual task to his already labor-intensive life.

With insistent meows and the touch of a circling soft tail, Paws prodded her owner to open the refrigerator door.

“It’s coming,” John said as he pulled out chicken leftovers from the fridge and divvied them between two bowls. “Scraps?” he called out. “Come on, boy.”

Scraps, a slow-moving, arthritic pit bull appeared with his tail wagging.

John set the bowls on the floor, side by side, then reached

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into the refrigerator again for a bowl of farm-fresh eggs. He turned on the stove's front burner, but the gas didn't ignite.

"Terrific," John grumbled, switching it off before he stuck his head in the oven. "I don't believe this." He noticed the extinguished pilot light and reached for a box of matches.

If he was a citizen and lived in a fully automatic, self-running, smart domicile, he wouldn't be having this nightmare of a morning. Of course, he'd be living a different kind of nightmare. Though he'd never been in one of those computer-run houses, he'd heard they felt like tombs—all sealed up with stagnant air. And someone was always watching. The thought made him shudder.

After several attempts at trying to light the pilot, John came to the aggravating conclusion that there had to be a problem with the ignition system—something he could easily fix, though not so quickly.

*So much for breakfast.* John got off his knees, closed the oven door, and resigned himself to a single cup of strong black coffee.

S YLVIA STONE, BIOLOGICALLY SEVENTY BUT PHYSICALLY FORTY, eyed the digital clock on the cafeteria wall before turning her attention to eight blindfolded children sitting up straight at a long dining room table. A breakfast hologram hovered in the center displaying a glass of orange juice, a piece of cantaloupe, three fiber-crisp crackers, and an egg-colored block of protein.

“Morning, children.” Sylvia’s voice was warm and gentle, despite the severity of her appearance. She was rail thin with a pointy chin, narrow lips, and a turned-up nose. Her hair, the color of coal, was typically worn back in a tight ponytail or an even tighter bun. Her skin was so white it appeared translucent, something Sylvia had never grown accustomed to. She masked her physical flaws and insecurity about the way she looked by wearing long sleeves and ankle-length skirts. Still, her unusual appearance seemed to mirror what she felt inside. She was not like everyone else. Not perfect. Not indistinguishable.

This feeling of inadequacy was what brought Sylvia to work

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at the Nostradamus School for the Gifted. The school taught and boarded others like herself—children who did not quite fit in. Nostradamus assumed Sylvia’s shortfall was the only reason students responded to her more favorably than the other educational designers. But Sylvia knew this wasn’t the reason at all. They adored her because she gave them what most of their parents had not. Unconditional love.

“Morning, Mrs. Stone,” the children chimed in unison.

“Can you tell me what you’re having today?” Sylvia walked behind the students as they typed their perceptions into an embedded keyboard. She glanced over their shoulders, checking their progress. Down the line, these bright youngsters were entering: JUICE, FRUIT, CRACKERS, EGG...

At the far end of the table, ten-year-old Kendall Knowlton typed in a more detailed and accurate perception: VITAMIN C, B-6, CALCIUM...

Sylvia touched the girl on her shoulders. “Well done, Kendall.”

Kendall took off the blindfold and smiled up at her educational designer.

“Do you know how exceptional you are?” Sylvia asked her.

Kendall’s smile grew weak. “My mommy doesn’t think so.”

Sylvia bent down, eye level with the little girl. “That’s not true.”

“She left me here, didn’t she?”

Sylvia put a reassuring hand on the girl’s back. “She wanted you to stay because you have very special abilities.”

“She’s scared of me,” Kendall stated with a bitterness she couldn’t hide.

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“No, she isn’t.” Sylvia unconsciously averted her eyes along with the truth. She stared down at her hands, rubbing her thumbs and index fingers together, thinking of how she should answer her. “Your mother felt...”

Kendall laid a hand on Mrs. Stone’s arm. “I know.”

Sylvia met Kendall’s discerning gaze and could no longer pretend that the little girl’s abandonment had been for altruistic reasons. She realized Kendall knew exactly what her mother thought.

A moment of regrettable commiseration passed, then Sylvia gave off a little laugh. Kendall’s expression was enough for Sylvia to know that she hadn’t improved her poker face. She couldn’t even sugarcoat the harsh realities that were often hidden from the innocence of children—not that she didn’t continue to try. But with Kendall, it was incredibly difficult for anyone to hide, distort, or alter the truth to the most psychic human ever recorded.

The little girl with cognizant eyes talked to Mrs. Stone as if she were the teacher. “It’s okay, Mrs. Stone. You don’t have to say anything. I know *you’re* not afraid of me.”

Sylvia caressed Kendall’s hand, suppressing another laugh. She adored how the little girl tried to sound so grown-up. “How about if I get approval for us to go see a virtual movie today?”

Kendall nodded with excitement.

“All right, then.” Sylvia stroked Kendall’s hair, then stood up and set her attention back on the rest of the psychic group. Hands folded in their laps, they sat motionless, waiting for further instructions. “Good job, everyone. Go ahead and eat.”

The children removed their blindfolds as Sylvia pressed a

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button on the wall behind her. Individual panels slid open in front of the children and up popped the meal that had been displayed in the hologram.

Behind Kendall, Sylvia checked the time. 7:25. A thought registered on her face—one that Kendall didn't see, but read nonetheless.

"No, she hasn't," Kendall muttered, almost to herself, as she took a sip of her juice.

Sylvia knew Kendall was talking to her, for she seldom spoke to anyone else. "Who hasn't what?"

"Your daughter hasn't left yet. That's what you were wondering, right?" Kendall gave her a sideways glance.

Sylvia nodded. "Yes, I was."

Psychic Kendall could sense Britannia easily through her teacher. She not only saw Britannia's image, but she could feel her essence, know her thoughts, tap into her spirit—a talent Kendall displayed so frequently that it had often unnerved her own mother.

"Stop doing that!" Kendall's mother used to scream. To have her only child crawl inside her head and become privy to her most intimate thoughts was more than Carrie Knowlton could tolerate. So, on Kendall's tenth birthday, Carrie told Kendall she was going somewhere new and exciting—someplace she'd never been.

It was all true. Kendall had telepathically read it for herself. Only when Carrie pulled into the school's drive did she allow herself to think of the whole truth. At that moment Kendall realized her mother was getting rid of her—discarding her like a useless piece of information. And all her psychic abilities could not

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help her understand why.

“She’s lonely.” Kendall could feel Britannia’s soul reaching out beyond her consciousness, searching for something she didn’t know she wanted.

“Britannia?” Sylvia asked.

Kendall nodded, connecting with the woman she’d never met. “But she doesn’t know it yet.” Kendall sighed with brief empathy, then sloughed it off as she did with her own loneliness and began to eat, unaffected, like any other ten-year-old.

Sylvia regarded the girl with a deep respect—not for her extraordinary psychic abilities, but for the wisdom she possessed well beyond her physical years.