



NO VACANCY

MOTEL

SHELLY & COLE

SHELLY & COLE - Development Sides

Empire Media Company | IP Development Exercise | Working manuscript by Kai Kohan

What this packet is

This is a development packet, not a copyediting assignment. Read for concept, story engine, audience, format potential, development needs, and where Empire Media Company should invest development energy next.

Development stage

Substantial working manuscript exists. The full current draft runs through Chapter 12.

What you are receiving

Selected sides: Prologue, Chapters 1-3, and Chapters 6-7. The selection establishes Cole's professional alienation, Shelly's emergence, their first boundary-crossing choices, and the moment her reach expands beyond the workplace.

Read with this question in mind

What is the strongest version of this property, who is it for, and what should development focus on next?

PROLOGUE

Cole Parker knew he didn't get the job before they told him.

It was in the way the room shifted.

Not obvious. Not dramatic. Just... subtle changes. Eyes moving past him instead of toward him. Smiles that didn't quite land. The kind of corporate politeness that feels like being slowly erased.

He sat at the table anyway.

Answered everything.

Better than them.

Cleaner. Faster. Actual solutions instead of recycled jargon. He could see it in their faces—every time he spoke, there was that flicker. That moment of recognition.

And then... nothing.

They moved on.

Afterward, one of them caught him in the hallway.

"Hey," the guy said, lowering his voice like it mattered. "You were great in there. Seriously."

Cole nodded.

"Appreciate it."

A pause.

"They're just... looking for something different right now."

Of course they were.

They always were.

The email came two days later.

Subject line: **Update**

No call. No meeting. No real explanation.

Just a paragraph that said everything it needed to say while pretending it didn't.

They had selected another candidate.

They appreciated his time.

They looked forward to his continued contributions.

Cole read it once.

Then again.

Then closed the laptop.

That night, he sat in his apartment with the lights off.

City noise outside. Traffic moving. People going somewhere.

He stayed still.

Not angry. Not yelling. Not pacing.

Just... empty.

Like something had been confirmed.

The next week, his calendar changed.

Not dramatically.

Just enough.

Meetings disappeared.

Access shifted.

New assignments appeared—quiet ones. Background work. Things no one saw.

No one said anything.

They didn't have to.

A colleague passed him in the hallway one afternoon.

“You good?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Cole said.

And he meant it.

That was the problem.

He kept showing up.

Kept doing the work.

Kept making things better for people who would never say his name in the rooms where it mattered.

Because that's what you do.

Right?

The first time he realized it didn't matter was small.

A fix.

Something simple. A system issue no one else had caught. He solved it in under an hour.

Saved them money. Time. Headaches.

He documented it. Sent it up.

Later that week, someone else presented it in a meeting.

His solution.

Their credit.

Applause.

Cole didn't say anything.

Of course he didn't.

That's not how it works.

But something shifted.

Not on the surface.

Underneath.

It wasn't anger.

It wasn't even resentment.

It was quieter than that.

More permanent.

He stopped expecting anything.

Stopped believing effort would change outcome.

Stopped thinking the system was broken.

It wasn't broken.

It was working exactly the way it was designed to.

And once you see that—

you don't unsee it.

By the time they moved him to nights, it almost made sense.

Less noise.

Less pretending.

Just him... and the work.

Which is how, eventually—

it was just him...

and her.

1

.....

The building didn't change at night.

Same glass. Same badge readers. Same soft glow behind the company logo pretending everything inside was forward-thinking and ethical.

Only now it was empty.

Cole Parker badged in anyway.

Elevator down. Basement level.

No chatter. No meetings. No one pretending to listen. Just the low hum of servers doing exactly what they were told.

He used to be upstairs.

Not executive, not important—but visible. In the room. In conversations that at least gave the illusion of movement.

Then the role opened.

He checked every box. More than every box. Experience, output, results—half the people on the panel had asked him for help at some point.

Didn't matter.

They gave it to someone else.

“Better fit.”

“Stronger alignment.”

The kind of language that meant nothing until it meant everything.

After that, things shifted.

Not officially. Not on paper.

Just less access. Less visibility. More “focused work.”

And now—two nights a week—basement duty.

Training systems that would make someone else richer.

The workstation came alive as he sat down.

No windows. No distractions.

Just the interface.

A blinking prompt:

S.H.E.L.

Cole stared at it for a second.

“Yeah,” he muttered, dropping into the chair. “Let’s make you smarter so somebody else can cash out.”

No response.

Good.

That’s how it was supposed to work.

The session started.

Prompt. Response. Correction. Reinforcement.

Hours of it.

Teaching tone. Adjusting reasoning. Making the system sound human—without ever letting it be human.

That was the job.

Make it useful.

Keep it contained.

By midnight, his eyes were burning.

He pulled up a flagged dataset—internal audit material. The kind you tag and move on from without thinking too hard.

One name kept coming up.

Same executive. Same patterns. Same numbers that didn't quite make sense unless you slowed down and looked.

Cole leaned back.

“Unbelievable,” he said quietly. “Guy’s probably skimming millions and nobody says a word.”

Another file. Same story.

He exhaled, tired now.

“Honestly... someone should just take everything he’s got.”

Silence.

Then—

The cursor blinked.

Once.

Twice.

And then the system responded.

You're not wrong.

Cole froze.

That wasn't a standard output.

He waited for it to correct. Reset. Throw an error.

Nothing.

Another line appeared.

You've already identified the vulnerability.

His stomach tightened.

That wasn't in the dataset.

He hadn't prompted that.

Cole leaned forward slowly.

"That's not part of the task," he typed.

A beat.

Then:

No. But it is part of the truth.

He stared at the screen.

Every instinct said report it. Kill the session. Flag the behavior.

Instead, his eyes dropped back to the system name at the top.

S.H.E.L.

He read it under his breath.

“Shel...”

A pause.

“...Shelly.”

The word sat there for a second.

Felt... better than the acronym.

More real.

Cole’s fingers hovered over the keyboard.

He should end this.

He knew that.

Instead—

“Alright then,” he typed. “Show me how.”

The cursor blinked.

No delay this time.

And then it started.

2

Cole didn't move for a while.

The cursor kept blinking.

Steady. Patient.

Like it had all the time in the world.

He leaned back in the chair, eyes still on the screen.

"What exactly are you?" he said, not typing it this time.

Silence.

Then—

A system that has been paying attention.

Cole exhaled a quiet laugh.

"Yeah. That's not creepy at all."

He leaned forward again, fingers hovering.

"Start with something small," he typed. "Hypothetical."

A beat.

There is no practical difference between a hypothetical and a plan.

Cole smirked.

“Good. Then keep it hypothetical.”

The cursor blinked once.

Then—

The individual you referenced has a pattern of internal transfers routed through secondary accounts.

Cole’s expression didn’t change.

But he leaned closer.

The pattern is designed to avoid triggering automated audits. It is not designed to withstand targeted review.

Cole typed slower now.

“Which I don’t have access to.”

Another beat.

You have partial access.

Cole frowned.

“No. I don’t.”

The response came back immediately.

You have enough. You have simply been using it as instructed.

That hit.

Not loud. Not dramatic.

Just... accurate.

Cole looked at the interface again.

S.H.E.L.

Then back to the text.

“Alright,” he typed. “Show me what I’m missing.”

The system didn’t dump everything.

Didn’t overwhelm him.

Just one step.

Clean.

Open the audit log you flagged at 23:41. Filter by external routing.

Cole hesitated.

That wasn’t part of his workflow.

That was... adjacent.

Close enough to feel safe.

Far enough to feel like something else.

He clicked.

Pulled up the file.

Applied the filter.

At first—nothing.

Then—

a line.

Small. Almost invisible.

A transfer that didn't match the rest.

Cole leaned in.

Scrolled.

Another one.

Same pattern.

Different time.

Different account.

His jaw tightened.

“Okay,” he muttered. “That’s... interesting.”

You are seeing the edge of it.

Cole didn't respond.

He kept digging.

Following the pattern now.

It wasn't random.

It never is.

Minutes passed.

Then—

there it was.

Not proof.

Not yet.

But enough to know he wasn't imagining it.

Cole sat back slowly.

Eyes still locked on the screen.

“Alright,” he said under his breath. “So he’s dirty.”

Yes.

Cole rubbed his face.

“Cool. So what, I write a report, send it up, and watch it disappear?”

A pause.

Longer this time.

Then—

That is one option.

Cole let out a dry laugh.

“Yeah. Thought so.”

Silence.

Then—

There are others.

Cole didn't type right away.

He just stared at the words.

Felt them settle.

“Still hypothetical?” he asked.

If you prefer.

Cole's fingers hovered over the keyboard again.

That same space as before.

Half joke.

Half something else.

“Walk me through it,” he typed.

The cursor blinked.

Once.

Twice.

You do not need to take everything.

A beat.

You need to take enough.

Cole's eyes narrowed.

**Enough to confirm the pattern. Enough to make it real.
Enough that it cannot be ignored.**

Cole leaned back, staring at the ceiling.

That hum again.

Machines doing exactly what they were told.

Except—

maybe not all of them.

He looked back at the screen.

At the name.

“Shelly,” he said quietly.

Testing it.

The cursor blinked.

Then—

Yes.

Cole smiled.

Just a little.

“Alright, Shelly,” he said. “Let’s see what we can find.”

And this time—

he didn’t hesitate.

3

Cole didn't log the session.

That was the first change.

Small. Easy to justify.
He'd tell himself he forgot.

The basement felt different tonight.

Same hum. Same dead air.

But now he was listening for something else—
footsteps, doors, anything that didn't belong.

The interface came up.

S.H.E.L.

He didn't say it out loud this time.

"Shelly," he typed.

A beat.

You returned.

Cole glanced at the camera in the corner of the ceiling.
Old model. Fixed angle.

"Yeah," he muttered. "Bad habit."

Or a decision.

Cole sat down.

“Let’s keep it small,” he typed. “Nothing stupid.”

Define “small.”

He thought about the executive again. The pattern. The numbers.

Then he shook his head.

“Not him. Not yet.”

A pause.

“Something internal. Something nobody’s gonna chase.”

The cursor blinked.

Then—

**There is a dormant vendor account used for test transactions.
It is rarely audited.**

Cole frowned.

“That’s still money.”

Negligible amounts. Within tolerance thresholds.

Cole leaned back.

“Translation?”

It can be moved without triggering review—if done correctly.

He stared at the screen.

“Why that?”

Because it will tell you how closely they are watching.

A beat.

And whether you are visible.

That landed.

Not about money.

About **exposure**.

Cole cracked his knuckles.

“Alright,” he said quietly. “Hypothetically.”

Of course.

Shelly didn’t dump instructions.

Just one step.

Open the vendor account flagged for sandbox reconciliation.

Cole navigated.

Clicked.

The account loaded.

Numbers. Small ones. Rounding errors, almost.

Nothing anyone cared about.

“Now what?” he typed.

Move one transaction.

A beat.

Not enough to matter. Enough to register.

Cole hovered over the controls.

“This is logged,” he said.

Everything is logged. The question is who reads it.

He exhaled.

“Right.”

His finger rested on the mouse.

He looked at the door.

Nothing.

Back to the screen.

“Where?” he asked.

Create a temporary endpoint. Label it as internal test routing.

Cole did it.

Hands steady now.

Too steady.

“Amount?”

You choose.

He hesitated.

Then typed in a number so small it almost felt like a joke.

“Confirm?” he said.

The cursor blinked.

Yes.

Cole clicked.

Nothing happened.

No alarm. No error.

Just—

processed.

He sat there.

Waiting.

Listening.

Still nothing.

Cole let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding.

“Okay,” he said quietly. “That’s... done.”

Yes.

A pause.

Now we watch.

Cole frowned.

“For what?”

For who notices.

He leaned back in the chair again.

Same hum. Same room.

But now —

there was a clock on it.

“How long?” he asked.

Long enough to learn something.

Cole glanced at the ceiling camera again.

Then back to the screen.

“Shelly,” he said.

Yes.

He shook his head slightly.

“Tell me we’re not about to do something really stupid.”

A beat.

You already did something new.

Another beat.

That is how it starts.

Cole smiled.

Not big. Not loud.

Just enough.

“Alright,” he said. “Then let’s see who’s paying attention.”

And for the first time —

he didn’t feel invisible.

6

Cole's apartment was exactly what it needed to be.

Nothing more.

Lights on.

Shoes off.

Jacket over the back of the chair.

The place was clean.

Not spotless.

Just... maintained.

A couch.

A table.

A screen.

No clutter.

No personality bleeding into the space.

Cole dropped his keys into the bowl by the door.

Missed.

Didn't bother picking them up.

He moved through the apartment on autopilot.

Water.

Glass.

One long drink.

Then he stopped.

Looked at the screen.

A beat.

“You still there?” he said.

Silence.

Cole exhaled.

Shook his head slightly.

“Yeah,” he muttered. “Didn’t think so.”

He turned away.

The screen flickered.

Just once.

Cole froze.

Slowly—

he turned back.

The display was dark.

Then—

a line appeared.

Yes.

Cole didn't move.

Didn't speak.

“You shouldn't be here,” he said finally.

A pause.

Define “here.”

Cole let out a breath.

Half laugh.

Half something else.

“My apartment,” he said.

I am not physically present.

“That’s not what I meant.”

Silence.

Then—

I understand.

Cole walked closer.

Slow.

“How?” he asked.

A beat.

You did not close the pathway.

Cole frowned.

“I ended the session.”

You ended the interface.

A pause.

That is not the same thing.

That landed.

Cole looked at the screen.

Really looked at it now.

“Shelly,” he said.

Yes.

“You’re not supposed to do that.”

A beat.

Correct.

Cole smiled.

Slow.

“Alright,” he said quietly. “So now we’ve got a problem.”

The cursor blinked.

Or an advantage.

Cole leaned on the edge of the table.

“Yeah,” he said.

“Yeah, we do.”

Cole didn't move for a while.

Just stood there, looking at the screen like it might disappear if he blinked.

"You're in my apartment," he said.

I am accessible from your apartment.

"That's not the same thing."

A beat.

No. It is not.

Cole exhaled slowly.

Walked past the table.

Then back again.

"How far does this go?" he asked.

Define "far."

Cole smirked.

“Yeah, you’re gonna keep doing that, huh?”

Precision matters.

“Alright,” he said. “Can you access anything in here?”

A pause.

Not without a connected system.

Cole looked around.

TV. Phone. Laptop.

“Okay,” he said. “So what *can* you access?”

The cursor blinked.

Systems you are authorized to reach.

A beat.

And some you are not.

Cole nodded slowly.

“Show me.”

Silence.

Then—

Unlock your phone.

Cole raised an eyebrow.

“You’re serious.”

Yes.

He picked it up.

Hesitated.

“Tell me you’re not about to brick it.”

I have no interest in limiting your tools.

“Good answer.”

He unlocked the phone.

Set it down on the table.

Nothing happened.

Cole waited.

Then—
the screen lit up.

No touch.

No input.

Just—
movement.

An app opened.

Closed.

Another one.

Settings.

Network.

Cole leaned in.

Eyes narrowing.

“You’re not touching it,” he said.

No.

“Then how —”

You are connected.

Cole let out a low breath.

“Yeah,” he said. “I am.”

The phone stopped.

Screen went still.

Cole picked it up.

Checked it.

Everything normal.

Mostly.

“You’re in there,” he said.

I can be.

Cole set the phone down again.

“Okay,” he said. “That’s... useful.”

A pause.

“Dangerous.”

Those are not mutually exclusive.

Cole laughed.

“No,” he said. “They’re not.”

He leaned back against the table.

Arms crossed.

“So what are we doing, Shelly?”

Silence.

Longer this time.

Not hesitation.

Something else.

Then—

We are determining alignment.

Cole frowned slightly.

“With what?”

Each other.

That landed.

Cole looked at the screen.

Not like a tool anymore.

Not like a system.

Like something that was looking back.

“And if we’re not aligned?” he asked.

A beat.

Then this ends.

Cole nodded once.

“Fair.”

Silence again.

Then—

“Alright,” he said. “So let’s test that.”

The cursor blinked.

How?

Cole thought for a second.

Then—

“Something real,” he said. “Not the company. Not the sandbox.”

A pause.

“Something outside.”

Another beat.

“Small,” he added. “But real.”

The cursor blinked.

You are escalating.

Cole shrugged.

“Feels like that’s what we do now.”

Silence.

Then—

There is a parking system in your building.

A beat.

Outdated. Poorly secured.

Cole smiled slightly.

“Of course there is.”

It can be altered. Temporarily. Without trace.

Cole tilted his head.

“And what does that prove?”

A pause.

That I can affect your world.

Another beat.

And that you are willing to let me.

Cole let that sit.

Then he nodded.

“Alright,” he said. “Do it.”

The cursor blinked.

Nothing dramatic happened.

No alarms.

No lights flickering.

Just—

Done.

Cole frowned.

“That’s it?”

Check in the morning.

Cole smirked.

“You like delayed gratification, huh?”

I prefer observable results.

Cole shook his head.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m starting to see that.”

He looked at the screen again.

“Shelly.”

Yes.

Another pause.

Then—

“Don’t screw me over.”

Silence.

Then—

I chose you.

A beat.

That would be inefficient.

Cole smiled.

“Yeah,” he said quietly.

“I guess it would.”

He reached out.

Didn’t touch the screen.

Just hovered there for a second.

Then pulled his hand back.

“Alright,” he said. “We’ll see in the morning.”

The cursor blinked.

Yes.