

## "Food for Thought"

By Michael Atkins

## Chapter 1: "Unity"

Chuck was so happy that L.I.N. was okay. He was thrilled to see her up and moving again. She hardly skipped a beat. It was amazing. She and Chuck were alone for the first time in a few days. They'd been alone all morning. It was Saturday. It was just after ten. It was sunny. The sky was dotted with white, puffy clouds. Chuck and L.I.N. sat in their living room. In the past, it was Hal and L.I.N.'s living room. At the moment, it was *theirs*. The whole house was dark. Not a single light bulb was lit. Well, Hal's laboratory was dotted with tiny, light emitting diodes on computers and whatnot. But, they were hardly noticeable. Chuck and L.I.N. sat on a couch. It stood along the north wall of the house. That was the front wall. The couch was upholstered with soft, black leather. A matching love seat stood on the west side of the room, making a corner.

The floor downstairs was carpeted with slick, checkered tiles. In the living area, an elliptical rug lay across the tiles. It was woven with rainbow colored fractals. An oak coffee table rested on top. It was four foot by four foot. A pair of red, boat shoes with white laces lay near the northern edge. They were L.I.N.'s. A pair of ratty, black sneakers lay next to those. They were Chuck's. Chuck sat on the middle couch cushion. He wore tan corduroys, a red, polo shirt with white stripes, and a pair of olive, argyle socks. L.I.N. lay in his arms. Her legs were knotted like a pretzel. She wore slacks that were cut high around her ankles. It looked like there was a garden growing on them. They were slathered with tiny, white daisies, pink begonias, canary daffodils, and crimson roses. L.I.N.'s pants were black everywhere else. She wore a white, short sleeved shirt with thin, vertical creases.

Chuck rested his right ankle on his left knee. L.I.N. stared at his foot. The heel of his sock had a hole in it. A one inch circle of Chuck's pale skin was showing. L.I.N. poked it.

Chuck jerked his foot away.

"Hey, hey..." he warned. He stared into L.I.N.'s emerald eyes and pointed at her. "Don't touch." L.I.N. gasped. Her eyes popped open.

"You're ticklish?" She grinned. "You never told me that!" She poked Chuck's ribs. Chuck slipped his arms away from L.I.N.'s waste and squashed them against his body. He scooted away and fought back a smile. He scanned L.I.N. up and down with his shiny, tan eyes. L.I.N. lifted her knees and faced him. She held up her pointer fingers and dangled her tongue from the corner of her lips. "I'm gonna get you..." Chuck looked down. The room was pretty dim. It was lit by rays of sunlight sneaking through cracks in rows of mini blinds. L.I.N.'s nails were painted neon orange. They glowed in the dark. They were easy to spot. Chuck grinned. He looked up. L.I.N. raised her eyebrows. She dropped her fingers beside her hips and scooted away. "Chuck, no!" she shouted. Chuck slipped his fingers around L.I.N.'s ankles and dragged her across the couch.

"You wanna tickle people?" he requisitioned. "Well fine, then." Chuck snaked his arm around L.I.N.'s calves. He laid his fingertips against the soles of her feet and fluttered his fingers.

"Gyah!" L.I.N. shrieked. She kicked her feet and filled the room with giggles. She lifted herself with her elbows and fought to catch her breath. She stared into her boyfriend's face and pleaded with her eyes. "Chuck! Stop it!"

Chuck blew a breath through his lips. "Say you're sorry!" L.I.N. squirmed onto her stomach. She gripped the nearest couch cushion and dragged herself away. Chuck stared at his girlfriend's butt and shook his head. "Oh, no, no, no, no, no..." He snagged a hold of L.I.N.'s heels and dragged her across his lap. L.I.N. kicked and squirmed. "Yous ain't goin' nowhere!"

Chuck assured her. He dug his fingertips into the backs of L.I.N.'s knees. L.I.N. pounded her fists against the closest couch cushion. She looked over her shoulder. She squashed her eyebrows towards the outer edges of her eyes.

*"I'm sorry..."* she gasped.

Chuck grinned. "Huh?" He tickled L.I.N.'s calves. "Could you repeat that?" L.I.N. buried her face in a squishy tuft of black leather. She filled a block of foam underneath with panicked laughter. She managed to lift her face off the couch and lay her chin in its place.

"I'm sorry!" she shouted. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" Chuck flipped L.I.N. onto her back. Then, he curled his fingers around hers. L.I.N. winced. Chuck fought back a smile. He turned towards his girlfriend and stared into her eyes. They were bright and sparkly, like two little jewels. Her lips were rosy and red. Her hair was deep sea blue. It was spread along the couch like a fan. It was puffed up with static. L.I.N. giggled. She tensed up and began squirming. "Don't!" she shouted. "Don't you tickle me again!" Chuck leaned forward. He inched his face towards L.I.N.'s. L.I.N. scooted away. "Chuck!" Chuck cackled. He slipped his arms around L.I.N.'s waist, bent over, and kissed her lips. He laid his forehead on hers and stared into her eyes. His shaggy, black hair draped down the sides of his face and brushed L.I.N.'s cheeks. L.I.N. exhaled a pair of shaky breaths through her nostrils. Then, she lay quietly and stared back. Her lips quivered into a smile. *"Don't..."* she whispered.

Chuck licked his lips. *"I'll make you a deal,"* he whispered back. *"I won't tickle YOU anymore, if you won't tickle ME."* L.I.N. giggled. She cleared her throat and nodded.

*"Okay!"* she rasped. She glanced towards her bedroom. She looked into Chuck's eyes and smiled. *"You know what we COULD do?"* Chuck turned his head and chuckled. He swallowed and faced L.I.N.

*"We already did that,"* he replied. *"Twice."*

L.I.N. took a breath and widened her eyes. *"Yes, I know!"* she whispered. Chuck licked his lips. He lifted his head and stared between L.I.N.'s eyes. L.I.N. tilted her head and squinted. "What?" Chuck pressed his lips together. He glanced across the room. L.I.N. wobbled Chuck's hands. "Chuck, what's the matter?" She shivered and scooched away. "You're gonna tickle me again. Aren't you?!"

Chuck smiled and exhaled through his nose. "No, silly!" He faced L.I.N. and shook his head. "I won't. I promise."

L.I.N. shrugged. "Well, what then?"

Chuck slid his lips to the side of his face. "You're okay with what he did? Hal, I mean?"

L.I.N. blinked. "You mean Mallory's ova?" Chuck shrugged. He nodded. L.I.N. smacked her lips. "You're not worried about *that*, are you?" She stuffed her fingers into a pocket on the front of her britches. She took out a little, plastic case and showed it to Chuck. It was a clear, composite container shaped like a circle. Little, multicolored tablets were tucked into tiny spaces along the edge. "It's okay. Hal gave me *these*."

Chuck smiled and took a breath. "No, that's not what I mean." He laid his hand over his heart. "I'm fine with all that." He licked his lips. "Um..." He looked away and thought. He stared into L.I.N.'s glittery, olive eyes. "He didn't even ask you."

L.I.N. nodded. "That's why he built me, I guess. So, I could have Mallory's children." She shrugged. *"I think it's great!"* She laid her palms on Chuck's shoulders. "Don't *you*?" Chuck stared between L.I.N.'s eyes. He smiled and nodded. He bent over and kissed L.I.N.'s forehead.

"Okay," he responded. He laid his forehead on L.I.N.'s and gazed into her eyes. "As

long as that makes you happy." He kissed L.I.N.'s lips. "It's sweet of you to do that for him." L.I.N. laid her fingers on Chuck's cheeks. She stared into his shiny, tan eyes. They looked like two new pennies.

"It's the least I can do." She blinked. "He built me. He's basically... my father." Chuck nodded, slowly. He laid his fingers on L.I.N.'s breasts. Then, he tilted his head and kissed her neck. L.I.N. smiled. She tilted her head back and exhaled a shaky breath. Chuck slipped his fingers below the bottom of L.I.N.'s shirt. He slid his fingertips along her belly. L.I.N. licked her lips. "*Chuck...*" she whispered. Chuck looked up and smiled. L.I.N. motioned towards the back of the house with her head. "*Brandy and Hal are right outside.*" She grinned. "*They're gonna catch us!*"

Chuck shrugged. "*They might.*" He cupped his fingers below L.I.N.'s chin and lifted her head. He bent over and wrapped his lips around her top lip.

Daisy Hill was highly intelligent. Her Stanford-Binet intelligence quotient was one hundred seventy-two. She was very proud of that. But alas, she felt like everyone she met was jealous of her academic fortuity. That's why she noticed people pointing at her and snickering. That's why she was picked on in school. That's why the eighth graders used to throw wads of gum in her long, blonde hair. That's why Bobby Richards pushed her down the stairs when she asked him out in the sixth grade. That's why people tripped her when she walked by. That's why everyone called her "Coochie" in high school. That's why she always ate alone when she took a lunch break. That's why Travis Elliot pulled down her pants in front of her fourth grade class. That's why she was always the last one picked for a game of kickball. It most certainly wasn't anything *she* did wrong.

Daisy was filled with wisdom. Or, maybe it was spite. She wasn't quite sure. She

needed to know more. She couldn't know enough. Was there enough to know? Or, was knowing enough? No. When Daisy learned, she only asked new questions. The more knowledge she acquired, the more she required. She felt cursed. She felt trapped. She was trapped in a useless, human body with limited intellect. She needed more. She needed to answer everything. She needed all the answers in one place. She needed... her own private library.

"What difference does it make?" she asked herself. She was surrounded by morons. None of them were using their brains, anyway. Why not borrow their brains and put them to work? Of course, the people who owned them would be killed in the process. "But, what difference does it make?" Daisy asked aloud. She stood in front of a shiny, crimson door. It had a slender, silver handle and three square shaped windows. The windows were arranged diagonally. The window beside the door's hinges was higher than the one in the middle. The window in the middle was higher than the one near the handle. The door was bordered with white, wooden paneling. The border was surrounded by a long wall covered with wooden siding. The siding was cream colored.

Daisy was tiny. She stood five foot, flat. She was wearing flats. They were shiny, red Mary Janes. The tops were strapped around a pair of skinny insteps wrapped in white stockings. A crimson skirt spotted with tiny, white diamonds draped to Daisy's knees. Her upper body was wrapped with a white sweater. A red, vinyl purse dangled from her right shoulder. A crimson scarf was knotted around her neck. It dangled to her navel. Daisy was very slender. At its thinnest point, her waist had a diameter of eight inches. Daisy's skin was pale and silky. Her face was solemn and stern. Her eyes were piercing and turquoise. Her lips were shiny and crimson. Her hair framed her face and dangled to her shoulders. It was soft and blonde. The hair above her eyes was chopped into a row of bangs. Two, thick circles of glass lay in front of

Daisy's sharp, colorful irises. The lenses were wrapped in thick, plastic frames. The rims of Daisy's spectacles were spotted with orange and black blotches. They resembled leopard print.

Diagonal windows in the door glittered across Daisy's thick, high powered lenses. Daisy stared at them and blinked. She lifted her arm and made a fist. She tapped the slick, red door with the tips of her knuckles. She glanced around. She was near the middle of the fourteen hundred block of Twelfth Street. It was a quiet neighborhood, and it was Saturday morning. The coast was clear. A deadbolt unlatched. A chain slid aside. Daisy stared at the silver handle on the red door. It was near the right side. It rotated, and the door opened a crack. A lady's face appeared. She was in her early thirties. Her eyes were hazy and teal. Crescents below her eyelids were puffy and dark. Her eyelids were droopy. Her face was pale and dull. Her hair was sandy and wavy. It was a sloppy mess. The lady curled her fingers in front of her mouth, pinched her eyes shut, and spread her lips. She choked down a bucketful of air and exhaled, lazily. She peeled her eyelids apart and stared through the lenses of Daisy's glasses.

"Yes?..." she sighed.

Daisy painted her face with a kind smile. "Hi," she replied. She squashed her eyebrows towards the outer corners of her eyes. "I'm *so* sorry to bother you."

The lady at the door closed her eyes and forced a smile. "It's okay." She inhaled through her nostrils and exhaled through her lips. She swallowed and met Daisy's eyes. "Is there something I can help you with?" Daisy looked over her shoulder. She was staring at a nineties model Station Cruiser. It was navy on top and tan on bottom. It was parked next to a row of sidewalk across the street.

"It's... my car," Daisy replied. She turned around. "I'm not sure what's wrong with it." She gritted her teeth. "Can I... please borrow your telephone?"



The lady behind the red door narrowed her eyes. "You don't have a cell phone?"

Daisy shrugged. "Forgot it." The lady nodded. She tugged the door aside. She wore a soft, white robe. It was drizzled with lime, plum, strawberry, and peach colored flowers. A pair of fuzzy, white slippers was wrapped around her feet. The lady motioned towards her left with her head.

"Come on in," she remarked.

Daisy looked at the ground and smiled. "Thank you." She stepped across the threshold. The lady closed the door and extended her hand.

"I'm Annabelle," she remarked. Daisy looked up. She stared into Annabelle's squinty, teal eyeballs. She slipped her fingers around hers.

"I'm Louise," Daisy lied. She shook Annabelle's hand. Annabelle smiled.

"It's nice to meet you, Louise." She unraveled her fingers from Daisy's and wandered where she motioned with her head. "My phone's in the living room." Daisy turned and watched Annabelle closely. She stared at Annabelle's fingers. Her fingerprints were all over them. She needed to get them off. Daisy popped a button loose near the top of her hand bag. She slid a red, vinyl strap out of the way and reached inside. She curled her fingers around a syringe. She looked up. Annabelle was facing the other direction. She stood in front of a glass coffee table with a wooden frame and four wooden legs. She bent over and grabbed a black, plastic rectangle off the top. It was a high end, touch screen cell phone. Daisy clenched the tip of the syringe in her fist. She slipped the body of the syringe and most of her hand inside the cuff of her sleeve. She closed her purse, looked up, and smiled. Annabelle turned around. She smirked and narrowed her eyes.

"You can come on in, Louise," she offered. "It's alright." Daisy took a breath. She

wandered into Annabelle's living room and looked around. The walls were coated with olive paint. The floor was covered with squishy, tan carpet. The room was furnished with red, leather furniture. Annabelle offered her phone. "Here," she remarked. "Who are you trying to call?" Daisy reached for Annabelle's phone. She hesitated. She needed a distraction. She glanced at an area of carpet behind Annabelle and stretched her eyelids to their limits.

"Oh... my God!" she shrieked. She pointed at the area of carpet behind Annabelle. "W-What in the world is *that?!'*" Annabelle flattened her arms against her ribs. She swirled around and looked.

"Ah!" she shouted. "What?!" Daisy popped a protective cap off the end of the syringe. She shook back the cuff of her sleeve, jabbed the needle into Annabelle's butt, and mashed the plunger with her thumb. Annabelle stood on her tip-toes and tensed up. Her eyebrows jumped to the top of her forehead. "Guh!" she barked. Her smart phone dropped from her fingertips. It toppled to the floor and bounced around. Annabelle's slick, white legs felt like noodles. Her eyes rolled back in her head. She crumpled to her knees and fell on her face. The syringe stuck straight up. It was sticking out of Annabelle's right butt cheek. Daisy stared at Annabelle's back. Her robe wadded and slid down her left shoulder. Her arms and legs were tied in knots. Daisy's eyebrows pointed down the bridge of her nose. She grinned. She cupped the sleeves of her sweater around her palms. She used them to swab Annabelle's palms. Then, she laid her purse beside Annabelle's head.

She opened her bag and found a pair of latex gloves. They were cornflower blue. They reminded Daisy of dissecting frogs in her college biology lab. She slipped the rim of one glove around the fingertips of her right hand. She dragged the rim of latex across her fingers and stretched it over her knuckles. She twisted her hand around and shoved her fingers into the

fingers of the glove. The rim of the glove snapped tightly around her tiny wrist. Daisy folded her fingers together. She shoved the latex between her fingers against her skin and squashed her fingers together. She wrapped the other glove around her left hand and looked around. She was fairly convinced Annabelle lived alone. But, she wasn't sure. The front door of Annabelle's home led to a hallway. It was covered with slick, white tiles. A long wall separated the hallway and a staircase. Annabelle's house was two stories.

Daisy turned around. A long, tall window overlooked the living room. Rows of thick, wooden blinds lay between Annabelle's living room and prying eyes. They were open just a little. A forty-two inch television stood in front of the window. It sat on a short, wooden stand. Daisy wandered across the living room. She stood beside Annabelle's television, laid her fingers below one of the blinds, and lifted it. She bent over and peeked outside. Her left eyeball scanned the neighborhood. Her pupil focused and shrank. Her penetrating, turquoise iris slid from the left corner of her eye to the right. Annabelle's neighborhood was silent and still. No one was the wiser. Daisy stood and lowered the slat of wood dangling from Annabelle's window. A long, pine cylinder hung from the right side of the blinds. Daisy wrapped her fingers around the wooden shaft and twisted it to the left. The blinds closed all the way.

Daisy looked over her shoulder. She spotted her purse. She wandered across the living room, opened her bag, and grabbed another syringe. Then, she crossed the hall and looked up the stairs. Annabelle's stairs were covered with fluffy, tan carpet. It was golden and new. It was the same carpet that covered the floor of Annabelle's living room. Daisy didn't hear anyone moving around, upstairs. She dangled the syringe from her teeth and lifted her right foot off the floor. She crossed her ankle in front of her shin. Like all Mary Janes, Daisy's buckled across her insteps with a pair of straps. Daisy laid the tips of her fingers on the strap across her right foot.

She found a tiny, chrome buckle near the outer edge of the strap. She pinched a piece of strap bordered by the buckle, rolled it out, and slipped her shoe off her foot. She repeated the process with her left shoe. Then, she snatched the syringe from her teeth.

Daisy laid her Mary Janes beside the bottom step, stood on the balls of her feet, and scampered up the stairs. The floor at the top of the stairs was covered with the same carpet as the steps. There was a bathroom across from the staircase. It was empty. The light was off. A wall separating the stairs and the downstairs hallway ended two feet after the top step. There was a doorway between the end of the wall and the bathroom. It led to a bedroom. Daisy flattened against two feet of wall at the top of the stairs. She clenched the syringe in her fingers. She squeezed it so hard, her knuckles turned white. They glowed beneath a thin layer of cornflower blue latex. Her fist rested against her thigh. She turned her head to the right and breathed quietly. She didn't hear anything. She slipped her head around the edge of the doorway and snuck a peek. The bedroom was empty. The room was dark. A mountain of sheets and pillows lay across the middle of Annabelle's bed. Her sheets and pillowcases were white with thin, blue stripes.

Daisy glanced down the stairs. She exhaled a quiet, shaky breath through her lips. She wandered downstairs and looked down the hallway. It led to Annabelle's kitchen. There was also a doorway along the wall separating the stairs and the hallway. It led to another bathroom. Daisy slipped across ice cold tiles covering the hallway floor. She flattened against the wall beside the bathroom and licked her lips. She peeked inside. The downstairs bathroom was empty. Daisy looked down the hallway. She could tell the kitchen was empty as well. There was a round, wooden table in the middle of the kitchen. A bowl of cereal lay on top. It was topped with milk. A box of Wheatie Puffs, a pitcher of milk, and a spoon were sitting beside the

owl. Annabelle was in the middle of making herself breakfast when Daisy came along. How unfortunate for her.

Daisy grinned. She had a *way* of grinning, too. It was hideous and twisted. The space between her eyeballs squashed into a stack of creases. The inner points of her eyebrows pointed towards the tip of her nose. The outer points of her eyebrows pointed towards the tips of her ears. Her eyelids peeled away. Her pupils shrank. Her nostrils spread like wings. The corners of her lips slithered up her cheeks. Her lips peeled apart and stretched to their limits. Her teeth caught rows of light and shined like pearls. The tips of her incisors pressed together and slid back and forth. Daisy raced back to the living room. She stopped halfway and slid across Annabelle's slick, icy floor. The souls of her stockings slipped across rows of tiles like butter sliding across a hot pan. Daisy stared at Annabelle's limp, lifeless body. It was crumpled in a tangled pile beside Annabelle's glass coffee table.

Daisy wandered across the living area. She bent over and yanked the syringe out of Annabelle's butt. She found the cap close by. She returned the cap to the syringe's needle and knelt beside her purse. It rested against Annabelle's right temple. Daisy popped a button loose along the rim of her bag and flipped back a strap. She dropped the used syringe and the unused syringe inside. She took out a laptop and a roll of duct tape. She laid them beside her purse. She stood, slipped her arms around Annabelle's waist, and lifted her onto the glass coffee table. Daisy wandered to the other side and grabbed a hold of Annabelle's wrists. She dragged her body across a pane of glass covering the top. She dangled Annabelle's arms beside a pair of fat, wooden table legs and returned to her purse. She snatched the duct tape off the floor. Daisy slipped off Annabelle's fuzzy, white slippers and slid them under the coffee table. She curled her fingers around Annabelle's left instep and laid her heel against a table leg.

Daisy peeled back the end of the tape with a row of shiny, red nails dangling from the tips of her fingers. She laid a chunk of tape against Annabelle's flesh, held it in place, and slid the roll behind the table leg. The duct tape began unraveling. It sounded like a pair of jeans being ripped apart. Daisy wound the tape around Annabelle's ankle ten times. Then, she gripped the end with the tips of her index fingers and thumbs. She tore off the roll. She patted a piece of tape hanging from Annabelle's ankle against her flesh. Daisy repeated the process with Annabelle's right ankle. Then, she taped Annabelle's wrists. She unraveled twelve additional inches of duct tape and laid them across Annabelle's lips. She swirled the roll around Annabelle's head ten times and tore it off. She returned the roll of tape to her purse.

Daisy laid her laptop on Annabelle's belly. She mashed a button on the side, flipped back the screen, and tapped the power button. The screen began filling with colorful text. Daisy returned to her purse. She bent over and reached inside. She took out a wad of wires. The wires were tangled and knotted around a pair of forks with long, chrome spikes and a USB connector. Daisy unraveled the wires. She slipped the USB connector into her laptop. Then, she held one of the forks in front of her face. She looked it over and tilted her head. The forks were six inches long and one sixteenth of an inch wide. There was a quarter inch of space between them. Daisy let the wires connected to the forks fall on the coffee table. She laid the forks on Annabelle's breasts. Then, she returned to her bag. She took out a long, foil tube with a black, plastic cap. It looked like a tube of toothpaste. It was labeled "Lidocaine HCL Gel IP."

Daisy sat on the edge of Annabelle's coffee table. She turned and looked Annabelle over. Her eyelids were fluttering. She was waking up. Daisy snagged a pair of forks. She laid lines of lidocaine gel along the forks and swabbed them with the tips of her fingers. She looked over her shoulder. Annabelle blinked her eyes open and moaned. She noticed her voice was muffled.

She turned her head and stared into Daisy's eyes. The outer corners of her eyebrows drooped. She began whimpering. Daisy grinned. It was that evil smirk of hers, again. It was revolting and penetrating. Annabelle's eyelids fluttered. She pinched her eyes shut and shuddered. Daisy licked her lips.

*"Ann-a-belle..."* she sang. Annabelle sobbed. She peeled her eyelids apart and looked up. Daisy showed her the fork. Annabelle looked away and tried to shriek. Nothing but a muffled moan could squeeze through her lips. Daisy's eyes became angrier. They popped open. Her pupils shrank. The corners of her lips tore across her cheeks. She turned, laid her knee on the coffee table, and bent over. She glared at the side of Annabelle's face. "Annabelle!" she squealed. Annabelle's head twisted around. Her eyelids peeled apart. Her eyebrows squashed at the outer edges. Tears dribbled out. She sucked clusters of panicked breaths through her nostrils. Daisy slipped her fingers through Annabelle's wavy, messy hair. Annabelle felt wads of latex sliding across her scalp. It snagged strands of hair along the way and dragged them along. Daisy curled her fingers into a fist and lifted Annabelle's head off the table. She pressed the tip of her nose against Annabelle's and stared into her bright, blue eyes. She began cackling.

"I'm gonna suck your brains out, Annabelle!" she shrieked. She laid the back of Annabelle's head against the pane of glass covering her coffee table. She moved her laptop. She picked it up and laid it beside Annabelle's thigh. Then, she turned, slid her knee across Annabelle's belly, and straddled her waist. She sat on Annabelle's crotch and stared at her face. Annabelle gasped desperately for breath. Her nostrils gulped as much air as they could get. Daisy tapped the bridge of Annabelle's nose. She squeezed it and pinched it. Annabelle pinched her eyes shut. Daisy grabbed the bridge of Annabelle's nose and tilted her head back. She slipped the ends of the forks into Annabelle's nostrils and eased them inside. Annabelle

responded with bursts of throaty growls. She tightened her arms and pulled at her wrists. They hardly budged. She flexed her thighs and wiggled her knees. She curled her toes and tried to squeeze her ankles together. It was no use. She breathed buckets of helpless whimpers into thick bands of sticky gauze wrapping her lips. They came out as silent groans.

Daisy continued sliding the forks into Annabelle's nostrils. They were in halfway. Annabelle squeezed her neck with her shoulders. She squashed up her face and cringed. Tears poured down her cheeks and the sides of her head. Daisy's eyebrows drooped in the middle.

"Oh..." she groaned. "It can't be *that* bad! I used an anesthetic." She shoved the forks as far as they would go. The gap between them pressed against a chunk of flesh between Annabelle's nostrils. Daisy smirked. She looked Annabelle over and nodded. She let go of the bridge of Annabelle's nose. Annabelle flattened against the top of her coffee table and shivered. She pleaded with her eyes. The tube of lidocaine and the other fork lay beside Annabelle's armpit. Daisy picked up the fork and slathered it with gel. She swabbed it with her fingers then stared into Annabelle's eyes. Annabelle stared back, helplessly. Blood began dribbling out of her nose. It leaked to the tape covering her lips. It followed the edge of the tape to the back of Annabelle's neck.

Daisy held the second fork in front of her lips. She lifted her chin, laid the points of the fork against her upper lip, and shoved them into *her* nostrils. Annabelle cringed and looked away. She watched Daisy out of the corner of her eye. Daisy rammed the fork into her brain like it was nothing. She slid it into place and looked at her laptop. She reached beside Annabelle's legs, grabbed her computer, and laid it on Annabelle's stomach. She entered a username and a password. Then, she typed "extract" and pressed the return key. She looked at Annabelle over the top of her monitor. Blood leaked from Daisy's nostrils, glazed her lips, and



dripped off her chin. Her blood began dribbling on Annabelle's soft, flowery robe. Annabelle had a sudden thought. She thought about a guy she worked with. She thought she was having feelings for him. But, she wasn't sure.

"Just ask him out!" Daisy blurted. Annabelle looked up. Daisy grinned. "Stop thinking about it, and just *do* it!" Annabelle scrunched up her face. She tilted her head back and groaned. She sounded like a person having their teeth drilled. Daisy stared at Annabelle's throat. A hideous grin twisted across her face. She began cackling. Annabelle looked at Daisy. She pleaded with her eyes. She had another sudden thought. This one wasn't her own. She didn't understand. Her mind became flooded with symbols. Annabelle was unfamiliar with them. They looked like pieces of equations. But, she wasn't sure. She'd never seen anything like them. Her head began to throb. Daisy stared at Annabelle's forehead. It crinkled into a tiny staircase of flesh. A big, fat vein pressed through Annabelle's skin. Annabelle sucked quick, furious breaths through her nostrils. She couldn't get enough air. Blood began spattering out of her nostrils. It leaked out of her ears as well.

Her brain was flooded with numbers and Greek symbols. They were tied together with multipliers, divisors, equals signs, and parentheses. Annabelle couldn't keep up. She had no idea what was going on. Her brain began to turn to mush. Her thoughts scattered and fragmented. Little, purple lights flashed in front of her eyes. Her head felt like it was being squashed in a vise. The back of her neck felt like it was folded in half. Daisy's eyes popped open. Her pupils dilated. They looked like two black dimes. Her upper lip twitched. Her teeth slid from side to side. She worked on a math proof in her head. It was something extraordinary. She didn't know exactly what it was, yet. But, she'd been thinking about it for some time. She'd spent hours writing summation series and working out differentiation on a pair of chalk boards at

home. She knew she was on to something. Now, she had another brain to think with. It was dusty and undeveloped. But, Annabelle's brain swallowed Daisy's logic like it was sipping cola through a straw.

Working out the math was effortless. Daisy made weeks worth of leaps and bounds in a matter of minutes. It was the most incredible feeling she'd ever experienced. She felt elated and euphoric. She stared into Annabelle's face. Annabelle's eyes rolled back in her head. Drool began dribbling from the bottom of the duct tape strapped to her lips. Blood and mush oozed out of her nostrils, ears, and eyes. She was a bloody, stuttering, mumbling mess. Daisy was almost finished working out her proof. She understood its implications, now. But, it needed more work. And, Annabelle was running out of brain. Daisy needed another. She needed one that was... more powerful. Annabelle's puny brain was a joke compared to her own. Daisy needed to find someone far more intelligent. She sucked up what was left of Annabelle's thoughts. She burned up every last neuron she had.

Annabelle went limp. She collapsed against the top of her coffee table and stopped moving. Wavy, messy hair covering the back of her head sank into a puddle of squishy, soupy brain matter scattered behind her scalp. Her head tilted to the side. Her eyelids fluttered closed. Daisy sat back and sighed. Annabelle's remaining thoughts were juicy and delicious. Daisy inhaled them like soft, sweet tufts of crack cocaine vapors. She pinched her eyes shut and shivered. She crossed a pair of trembling hands over her breasts and slid her fingers along her chest. Her brain felt warm and tingly. It was sharp and alive. Her consciousness felt ten miles larger. Daisy began sifting through pieces of equations she'd tied together. Everything was just where she'd left it. But, the problem wasn't solved. It wasn't even halfway coherent. Daisy needed more. She *had* to have more. She opened her eyes and stared across the room. She was

looking at a slick, olive colored wall. It was the dullest, most monotonous slab of sheetrock she'd ever laid eyes on.

## Chapter 2: "Jeff's Generator"

It was warm outside. The air was humid and still. Rays of sunshine pierced cornflower gaps between tiny, puffy, white clouds. Behind Hal and L.I.N.'s home was surrounded by a fence made of thin, black bars. This included the back of the house. Out back, there was a porch. It was similar to the one out front. A roof hovered above the porch. It leaned away from the house. It was covered with shiny, black shingles. The roof was supported by six, Roman style columns. The porch was covered with slats of pine. The fence stood two feet away.

A shiny, red door with a curvy, golden handle covered an entrance near the southeast end of the porch. There was a single, swinging gate in the fence. It stood beyond the door. A single row of sidewalk led fifty yards from the back porch. Beyond the fence, there was a field of olive colored grass. Big, fat, tall, weaving, crooked, ancient oak trees dotted the field. They were hundreds of years old. The property resided half a mile into the woods. A lot of trees were cleared away in order to build it. Nine behind the property survived. They were dark, misshapen, and stumpy. They were splattered inconsistently with bushels of wrinkly, jade colored leaves. The elderly oak trees had a lot of character.

Hal and Brandy were out back. They were tinkering with Jeff's generator. A week earlier, Jeff and Lisa left it at a power plant in Prospect. Jeff used it to build a wormhole to Proxima Centauri. Once the gateways were constructed, Jeff no longer needed the generator. So, he left it behind. That was pretty typical of Jeff Forrester. He cared about nothing. He had no feelings for anyone or anything. To Jeff, the process of assembling a bridge between two, secluded points in the universe was an arbitrary congregation of articles and equations. The process was irrelevant. The tools and people involved were irrelevant. He simply wished to complete the task. So, he did. When he finished, he took the wormhole with him and left

everything else behind. Fortunately for Lisa, Jeff decided to keep her around as well. After all, he found her amusing from time to time.

Hal stood on one side of the generator. Brandy stood on the other. Hal bent over. His body was covered with shiny, brass trim. It glowed in rays of morning sunlight. The generator rested beside the sidewalk. Hal stood on tufts of grass. There was a plastic, black disc sticking out of the ground. It looked like a sprinkler head. Hal grasped it between his index finger and thumb. He pulled it out of the ground. It wasn't a sprinkler head. The plastic cap was a decoy. It covered the end of a PVC pipe. Hal lifted three feet of PVC out of the ground and stopped. The chunk of pipe just sat there, sticking out of the ground. Brandy stared at it over the top of the generator. She narrowed her dark brown eyes.

"Hal, what *is* that?" she inquired. Brandy looked really cute as always. She wore an olive blouse with ruffly sleeves, navy bell bottom jeans, and a pair of brown boots. Chunks of long, brown hair dangled from her head. It draped her shoulders in long, winding coils. A pair of rimless spectacles lay across the end of her nose. Brandy laid the tip of her index finger against a thin, chrome rod holding the lenses of her glasses together. She slid her glasses up the bridge of her nose. The lenses came to rest half an inch from her eyeballs. Hal's head wound to the left. A pair of big, plastic webcams below his forehead focused on Brandy's face. Hal raised his fist and spread his fingers.

"Flathead," he instructed. Jeff's generator looked rather odd. It was built like a giant ray gun from a 1950s comic strip. It was big and bulky. It was the size of a motorcycle. Of course, it was shaped nothing like one. It had a thick, iron body. Two gigantic coil springs supported the front. Two shiny rims with solid rubber tires held up the back. The body was decorated with forty-eight, two inch thick, iron handles. Three feet of twelve inch iron stock was sticking out of

the front. It was wrapped with an iron helix. The stock and helix threaded into a two inch wide iron sphere covering the end. The whole thing looked freaky and intimidating. It looked like it might be used to slice planets in two or something. The body of the generator was flat on top. A row of random tools lay across the flat surface. One of the tools was a flathead screwdriver. It had a clear, plastic handle decorated with bands of red. There was a blue ring of plastic at the top of the handle. Brandy picked up the screwdriver and laid it on Hal's palm. Hal's fingers closed around the screwdriver's handle.

"Thank you," he remarked. He slipped the end of the screwdriver below the cap at the end of the PVC pipe. He popped the cap loose. Then, he handed the cap and the screwdriver to Brandy. Brandy laid the screwdriver and the cap on top of Jeff's generator. Hal slipped his fingers inside the PVC pipe. The pipe had a diameter of two inches. So, it was a bit of a squeeze. Hal tugged a cable out of the end of the pipe. The cable consisted of strands of copper wire twisted together. It was an inch in diameter. It was the thickest, fattest wire Brandy had ever seen. She stared at it down the bridge of her nose. She blinked.

"Um... Hal?" Hal began unwinding strands of copper wire and spreading them. The tiny, copper strands began to resemble a fiber optic lamp. Brandy's eyebrows fell in the middle. She stared at Hal, impatiently. "Hal!" Hal looked up. Brandy sighed. "Is that... safe?" Brandy pointed at the shiny, copper bush sticking out of the PVC pipe. "What are you doing?" Hal tried to smile. His mouth consisted of a piece of brass, shaped like a telephone receiver. It was a two inch square with five tiny holes. Smiling was... simply not possible.

"Don't worry, dear," Hal replied. "It's safe." He focused his big, plastic eyeballs on the fountain of copper wires sticking out of the PVC pipe. He continued fiddling with it. "*This* wire isn't live, yet." He motioned towards the house with his head. "There's a breaker box inside the

house that controls these." He looked up. "All the breakers are switched off." Brandy bobbed her head. The door on the back porch opened. Chuck and L.I.N. wandered out. Brandy and Hal glanced towards the house. Brandy laid the side of her hand along the tops of her glasses and squinted.

"It's about time you guys got up off your asses and helped us!" L.I.N. and Chuck headed across the yard. Chuck smiled.

"Sorry, guys. L.I.N. lost her shoes, again." Chuck and L.I.N. stopped beside the generator. They stood on the sidewalk. Brandy stared at L.I.N.'s feet. Her nails were painted neon orange.

"And... you never found them?" She looked up. L.I.N. grinned. Her cheeks felt flush. She looked away and folded her arms over her chest. Chuck slipped his hands into the pockets of his tan corduroys. He looked at Hal. He motioned towards Jeff's generator with his head.

"Figure that out, yet?" Hal tried to smile. Nothing happened.

"Getting to it." He looked down and continued unwinding wires. L.I.N. hopped off the sidewalk and stood next to Brandy. Chuck and Brandy glanced at her. L.I.N. glanced back. She pressed her lips together and puffed up her cheeks. She shrugged.

"Sidewalk's hot." Hal looked across the top of Jeff's machine. He pointed out a roll of wire.

"Brandy," he instructed. "Wire." Brandy looked where Hal was pointing. There was a gigantic roll of black wire on top of the machine. The wire was an extra large gauge. It made Brandy's head spin. She reached for the roll of wire. Chuck snatched it off the top of the machine and stood next to Hal.

"I got it," he offered. He spotted an oversized set of wire cutters and a razor knife. He

tucked the roll of wire under his arm. Then, he gathered the cutters and the knife. Hal unrolled two feet of wire and held it in front of Chuck. Chuck chopped the wire loose. He placed the tip of the razor knife one inch from the end of the wire. He slit the wire's sheathing to the end. Then, he cut the sheathing all the way around. A one inch chunk of insulation toppled off the end of the wire and rested on the grass. Chuck twisted a copper rope sticking out of the end of the wire. He handed it to Hal. Hal twisted a handful of copper wires together that were sticking out of the PVC pipe. He twisted that together with the wire frays Chuck handed him. Chuck stripped the other end of the wire and twisted it. He wrapped it around a handle on Jeff's generator. Chuck looked up.

"You gonna do all of them?" Hal tried to lick his lips. It wasn't happening. He smacked his palm with his fist. It sounded like a hammer smashing an anvil.

"Blast!" he shrieked.

L.I.N. wrinkled her eyes. "What, Hal?" She wandered around the generator and stood beside him. She laid her fingers on his slick, shiny shoulders. "What is it?" Hal smashed his fist into the body of the generator. It wobbled on its springs.

"Oh nothing, dear," he gasped. He looked himself over. "It's just this... stew-pid body!" He smashed his fists against his chest. "That's all!" He looked into L.I.N.'s glittery, green eyes. "It's driving me in-sane!" A heavy sigh came out of the speaker near the bottom of his face. He looked at Chuck. "We'll do ten," he replied. "Then, we'll see if we can get this..." He stared at Jeff's generator. "God forsaken device to work." He laid his fingers on the sphere sticking out of the end. "Wretched thing," he remarked. He looked away and shook his head. "It's absolutely barbaric."

"Yeah," Chuck replied. He patted Hal's arm. "So is Jeff Forrester." He looked Hal over



and narrowed his eyes. "Which reminds me..." Hal looked over his shoulder. He met Chuck's eyes. "You never did explain to me how you knew about Jeff." He glanced at the generator. "And, the gateways and all that." Hal tried to smirk. His speaker didn't budge. The roar of a V8 engine filled the air. The noise traveled around the back yard and bounced off decrepit, swirling branches. Brandy looked towards the house. She glanced at Chuck.

"Must be Icarus."

Chuck stared at the back porch. "Ya *think*?" He looked behind Hal's back. He stared into L.I.N.'s eyes and held out his hand. L.I.N. laid her fingers in his and wandered across the grass. She stood beside Chuck and watched the back door. Chuck slipped his arms around L.I.N.'s waist. The back door popped open. Icarus came tumbling out. He did three back handsprings, whirled around, and landed on all fours. He plopped down on the sidewalk and stared through rows of bars along the fence. He wore his eyeball jacket. The hood was drawn. A pair of wires dangled from the corners of his lips. Chuck stared at Icarus and sighed. "Man... every time *you* guys show up, something bad happens."

Icarus tilted his head. "I know what you mean." Detective Phillips wandered out. She stared at Icarus and threw her hands on her hips.

"Damn it, Icky!" she shouted. "Can't you just *walk* through the house like a normal person?!" Icarus grinned. He stood and yanked the wires out of his mouth. He tucked them inside his jacket and looked over his shoulder.

"Laura, you *know* I can't do that."

Detective Phillips wore an argyle vest over a crisp, long sleeved blouse. Her vest consisted of maroon, canary, and black diamonds. Her blouse was the same yellow as some of the diamonds on her vest. The sleeves were rolled up to her elbows. Phillips also wore peacock

corduroy slacks and cherry red boots. Icarus' jacket was a hoodie made of white wool. It was covered with cameras. They had shutters that resembled human irises. They were brown, green, blue, and hazel. They were covered with glass domes. Underneath his hoodie, Icarus wore a crisp, collared shirt. It was umber with thin, white, vertical stripes. He also wore black jeans and red, snake skin boots. His hair was shaggy and black. It stood on end. His left eye was deep sea blue and half shut. His right eye was tan and wide open. It was rather warm outside. Icarus slipped out of his coat for once and draped it over his arm. He and Phillips stepped through the fence and wandered across the yard. They stopped beside everyone else. Chuck looked Phillips over. He smiled.

"You look like you're going golfing, Laura." Phillips smacked her lips. She threw her hands out at her sides.

"Chuck! Don't say that!" L.I.N., Brandy, and Hal chuckled. Chuck pressed his lips together.

"I'm sorry. I *like* your outfit." He shrugged. "I was just kidding."

L.I.N. wrinkled her nose. "It *is* a little weird, Laura." Phillips narrowed her eyes. She pointed at L.I.N.'s slacks. They were splattered with four different colors of flowers.

"Hey, *you're* the one with the... forest growing out of your legs!" L.I.N. looked herself over. She pinched the thighs of her pants and looked up.

"Chuck bought these for me." The outer corners of her eyebrows drooped. "You don't like them?" Phillips studied L.I.N.'s trousers. She slid her lips to the side of her face and looked away.

"Okay, they're cute." She looked at L.I.N.'s feet. She narrowed her eyes. "Where's your shoes?"

L.I.N. shrugged. "I have no idea." Brandy looked around. She licked her lips.

"So... what're you guys doing here?" Phillips stared through the lenses of Brandy's glasses. She glanced around.

"I need your help with something."

Chuck nodded. "Another case?"

Phillips shrugged. "Looks like it." She scrunched up her face. "Do you mind?" L.I.N. stared into Chuck's eyes. She grinned.

"Sounds like *fun* to me!"

Phillips looked at Brandy. "Brandy?"

Brandy shrugged. "Sure. I'm game." Phillips met Chuck's eyes. She wrinkled her nose.

"Chuck?"

Chuck narrowed his eyes and tilted his head. "Just out of curiosity, when do we start getting paid for this?"

Phillips sighed. "Chuck..."

Chuck pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. "I mean, I almost died over that thing in Prospect." He looked down. L.I.N. looked into his eyes. "And, L.I.N. got all mangled again." Chuck looked up. Phillips stepped forward. She laid her palm on Chuck's shoulder and gazed into his eyes. Detective Phillips had glittery, sky blue eyes. They drilled straight through Chuck's brain.

"Chuck, please," she begged. "I really need your help." She stepped away, folded her arms over her chest, and stared at the sidewalk. "I *know* you guys can help me."

Chuck exhaled through his nostrils. "What happened *this* time? More spatial distortion? More wormholes?"

"A girl was killed," Phillips explained. "Someone splattered her brains."

Brandy scrunched up her nose. "*Oooooo...*" she groaned.

"They turned her brain into mush." Phillips licked her lips. "It got all slushy. And, then it leaked out through her eyes and her ears and her nose."

L.I.N. shook her head. "That's gross, Laura. Stop it!"

Phillips nodded. "I know." She looked at Chuck. "Please help me, Chuck. I'll owe you one."

Chuck shrugged. "Alright. Sure." His right arm was around L.I.N.'s waist. He turned L.I.N. towards him, slipped his left arm around her shoulders, and laid his cheek on top of her head. "I'll see what I can do." Hal looked around. Glints of sunlight danced across his shiny, brass body.

"Sounds delightful, Detective Phillips. Can *I* come?"

### Chapter 3: "Shelly"

Shelly Hertz was murdered by Daisy Hill. She was killed a day before Annabelle. But, Detective Phillips didn't know that. She had no idea what the hell was going on. Shelly was blonde, thin, and pale. Her hair was soft and creamy. A row of bangs dangled across her forehead. It hovered above a pair of sparkly, blue eyes. Shelly was in her early twenties. She lay on her bed in a shiny, maroon nightgown. Her brains oozed out of her eye sockets, ears, and nostrils the night before. Now, chunks of cerebral cortex and dried blood were crusted on her cheeks, the sides of her neck, and her bed sheets. Her cheeks were also painted with faded streaks of mascara. Shelly's body was wrapped in white sheets with thin, blue stripes. It was apparent she wriggled and squirmed while Daisy fed on her thoughts. Her sheets were tied in knots around her limbs, trunk, and neck. Her bed was made of thick oak. It had a fat, wooden post at each corner. Shelly's wrists and ankles were duct taped to her bed posts.

Shelly lived in a rough part of town. Her house didn't have a warm, cozy feel. Neither did her bedroom. The walls were slathered with slick, teal paint. It was faded and peeling. The walls of Shelly's bedroom looked like the walls of a prison cell. There was a single window. It was on the wall next to Shelly's right side. It was a two piece window with a steel frame. The bottom half was raised. A screen covered the opening. A row of white, square shaped bars protected the outside. The window was stained with nicotine. The corners of the glass were caked with brown mold. A thin, white rod spanned a space above the window. It was crooked. A pair of white, see through drapes dangled from the rod. They wafted in a gentle breeze.

Shelly's bedroom ceiling was white. It was dotted with popcorn paint crumbs. A withered, old ceiling fan dangled from the center of the ceiling. The blades were caked with dust bunnies. They were made of ancient, faded veneer. They sagged like wilted flower pedals. The

carpet was thin, old, and crunchy. It was kind of tan. But it was so faded, it was hard to tell. The room stank of old, stagnant cigarettes. There was a nightstand beside Shelly's bed. It was covered with empty liquor bottles, cigarette butts, and a mountain of ash. There was a closet across from the foot of the bed. A door with a mirror covered one side. The other door leaned against a wall beside the window.

Detective Phillips, Hal, and Brandy stood beside the window. Icarus stood beside Shelly's nightstand. He folded his arms over his chest and pored over the stack of empty bottles and cigarette ash. Chuck stood beside Shelly's closet. He turned around and stared at the door that was still intact. He could see his reflection. He laid his fingers on the edge of the door and peeked inside. Shelly didn't have many clothes. The ones she *did* have were cheap and slutty. Her closet was a short hallway of black and cherry halter tops, faded, cut off, jean shorts, six inch heels, leopard print leggings, and fishnet stockings. L.I.N. stood a few feet away. She watched her boyfriend, curiously. She wandered up and stood beside him. She laid her fingers on his shoulder, poked her head inside the closet, and looked around. She stared at Shelly's clothes. She scrunched up her nose.

"What was she?" L.I.N. inquired. "A hooker?" She looked at Chuck. Chuck faced her. He flattened his lips and narrowed his eyes.

"Don't be a snob." L.I.N. smiled.

The corner of Shelly's sheet was wrapped around her throat. Hal leaned across her bed. He snagged a hold of the sheet and slipped it away from Shelly's neck. Her head bobbed like a giant block of gelatin. Little chunks of brain matter dribbled off her cheeks and tumbled across her pillow. Brandy gasped. She scrunched up her face and folded her fingers across her lips.

"*Oh, Gyad!*" she grumbled.

"Now, now, dear..." Hal remarked. He swatted brains and droplets of blood away from Shelly's bottom eyelids. "There's no need in being squeamish." Hal held his left hand above Shelly's right cheek. He laid his index finger on her top eyelid. He laid his thumb on the bottom. "She doesn't mind. I can assure you." Hal peeled Shelly's eyelids apart. Hal's eyeballs were webcams. They could magnify images up to five times their original size. It was like having two built in magnifying glasses. Hal zoomed in on Shelly's pupils. They were grey and cloudy. Hal zoomed in until his vision was filled with foggy swirls. It was like staring at a grey, marble tile. "How handy," Hal mused. He tried to smile. It didn't go so well. He returned his vision to normal and stared through Shelly's window. "I wonder if I can see inside the neighbor's shower from here." He looked at Icarus. "I saw this rather lovely young lady go inside on our way in. I suppose she'd be in the bath about now."

"Hal..." Icarus remarked. "Focus."

"Oh," Hal replied. He looked at the floor and chuckled. "Right." He looked at Icarus. "This is not the time for such things." He bobbed his head. "There are ladies in the room." He looked over his shoulder. He stared into Detective Phillips' glittery, blue eyes. "My apologies, Detective Phillips."

Phillips fought back a smile. "Do you notice anything, Hal?"

Hal motioned towards Shelly's body. "Well, didn't you notice her brains?"

Phillips raised her eyebrows. "Yes, Hal. That's why we're here. Remember?"

"Oh, but they've been cooked," Hal replied. He scooped a swirl of brain matter from Shelly's upper lip. He held it in front of Phillips' eyes. "See?" Phillips scrunched up her face and backed away. "They're burnt to a crisp. They've been boiled right out of her skull."

Brandy threw her hands out at her sides. "That's disgusting, Hal!"

Hal faced her. "No. Athlete's foot is disgusting, dear." He turned and wiped Shelly's brain matter on her nightgown. "You keep scratching and scratching... And, it keeps growing and burning, and growing and burning..." He smacked his palm with his fist. It sounded like a metal bat striking a baseball. "Die, wretched spores of liquid insanity!" L.I.N. stared at Hal, sadly. She plopped her forehead in her palm and shook her head. She forgot how annoying he could be.

"Hal," Icarus remarked. "The body?"

Hal's speaker made a sound like someone clearing their throat. "Yes, Icarus," he replied. "The body." He turned and stared at Shelly's face. "Now, where was I?" He pressed the tip of his thumb against the tip of Shelly's nose. He shoved her nose back and looked inside her nostrils. "Let's have a look inside." He zoomed in and looked around. "Oh, my..." he remarked. He looked over his shoulder. "Phillips, do you have a flashlight?" Phillips slipped her fingers into the front, right pocket of her corduroys. She took out a small, black flashlight and handed it to Hal. Hal aimed the flashlight up Shelly's nostrils and pressed a tiny button on the side. He glanced at Phillips. "Come have a look, Detective Phillips." Phillips stood beside Hal, bent over, and looked inside Shelly's nostrils. There were two, tiny punctures near the top. Phillips looked into Hal's eyes.

"W-What are those?"

Hal handed Phillips her flashlight and stood up. "I haven't the slightest idea." Phillips stood up. She turned off her flashlight and returned it to her pocket. "I'll need to examine the body further. Maybe do an autopsy."

Phillips nodded. "Sure. I'll have the department move the body to the New Jack City morgue."



Hal smashed his fists together. "In that socialist shit-hole!" he shouted. Chuck looked away and chuckled. "I'll not hear of it!" Phillips' eyes popped open. She fluttered her eyelids.

"Um... Okay, then." She licked her lips. "Well, where would you like to examine the body?"

Hal tried to smile. "Why, I'll use my *own* morgue. Of course."

Brandy squinted. "You have your own morgue?"

Hal faced her. "Why, of course dear. How else could I have built an android? I had to study the human body, extensively. There's simply no other way."

"Where?" Phillips inquired. "Me and Dickarus have been inside your house."

Icarus pointed between Phillips' eyes. "Hey!"

"I've never seen a morgue, before."

Hal shrugged. "It's in the basement, of course." He tried to narrow his eyes. Nothing happened. "Where else would I keep it?"

"Very fitting," Chuck remarked.

Brandy nodded. "I had no idea."

L.I.N. laid her eyes in her palms. "So embarrassing..."

Shelly's house was covered with ugly, crooked siding. The siding was made of wood. It was warped and dull. It was dotted with chips of faded, cream colored paint. It was falling apart. Shelly's front door was open. The entrance was covered by a crummy, screen door. The door had a crummy, wooden frame. It was also faded and warped. A long, thin spring attached the top of the screen door to a frame surrounding the entrance. It slammed the door shut when someone wandered through. The door was old and bouncy. It flopped in the frame when the spring yanked it shut. Shelly's house stood three feet off the ground. Three crummy, wooden

steps led from the lawn to the front door. Shelly's lawn had seen better days. It was mostly dirt and tufts of crunchy, pale grass. An old, cruddy tree stood near the middle of the yard. It was warped and twisted. The bark was faded and grey. There wasn't a single leaf on the tree's dull, swirling branches.

The screen door swung open. Detective Phillips wandered out, stood aside, and held the door. Icarus was right behind her. He still wasn't wearing his jacket. It was draped over his arm. He curled his fingers below Phillips' and ripped the door out of her hand.

"Geh-buh!" Phillips protested. Icarus took Phillips' place holding the door. He stood in front of her and looked over his shoulder.

"Allow me, ma'am," he offered.

Phillips fought back a smile. "You're a dick."

Icarus narrowed his eyes. "I thought *you* were a dick."

"Shut-up," Phillips replied. Brandy and Hal came out next. They stood beside Shelly's creepy, stone colored tree and faced the front of Shelly's house. L.I.N. and Chuck wandered out. L.I.N. laid her left heel on the edge of Shelly's top step. She put her weight on it. To L.I.N.'s surprise, her foot tilted forward. The toe of her boat shoe flattened against the middle step. A cramp shot up her leg.

"Crap!" L.I.N. yelped. She lost control of her footing. She toppled down the steps and landed on her head. Her shoulders collided with a mountain of soft dirt. The collision caused her to launch another foot. She landed on her butt and skidded to a stop. Icarus stared at the back of L.I.N.'s head. He cackled. Phillips smacked her lips. She batted Icarus over the back of his head. L.I.N. bowed her head. She laid her fingers on the back of her scalp and sucked air through her teeth.

"I think your code needs a little work there, Hal," Icarus remarked.

Hal pointed between his eyes. "Silence, you orangutan!" Chuck hurried down the steps. He plopped down beside his girlfriend and laid his fingers on hers.

"Are you okay, sweetie?"

L.I.N. sighed, impatiently. "Yeah!" She glanced at Chuck then stared at her lap. Her cheeks felt flush. She was so embarrassed. "I'm sorry, Chuck. I don't..." She looked up. Chuck gazed into her shiny, emerald eyes and smiled.

"It's okay, honey." He laid his palm on her cheek. "Don't worry about it." Chuck glanced towards the front of Shelly's house. "Those stupid steps should get the hell out of the way." L.I.N. faked a laugh. She wrinkled her eyes and rubbed the back of her neck.

"I don't do so well with stairs." She looked up. Hal was looming over them. L.I.N. narrowed her eyes. "It's *his* fault." Chuck looked up. Hal tried to smile. Nothing happened.

"I'm sorry, dear. I guess I still haven't worked out all the kinks." Chuck nodded. He faced L.I.N.

"I don't understand. You have stairs in your house. You've never had trouble with *those*." Chuck stood and offered his hand. L.I.N. laid her fingers in his palm.

"I guess I got used to them." Chuck helped L.I.N. to her feet. L.I.N. glared at Hal. "Finally!" Brandy wandered up. She stood next to Hal and folded her arms over her chest. Icarus and Phillips stood behind L.I.N. and Chuck. L.I.N. looked around. "Who would do such a thing?"

Chuck stared into Hal's webcams. "I guess he's just a deranged, senile, old man." L.I.N. looked at Chuck, blankly. She smiled.

"No, not Hal!" she exclaimed. She shoved Chuck's shoulder. "Silly!" L.I.N. faced Hal

and Brandy. She motioned towards Shelly's house with her thumb. "I meant, who would melt someone's brains like that?"

Brandy narrowed her eyes. "Yeah, really."

L.I.N. crossed her arms and looked at the dirt. "It's... creepy." She stared at Chuck. "And, why did they do that to *her*?" She looked around. "Did you guys see all those bottles she had in her bedroom?"

Chuck stared at the ground. "Yeah. She was a party girl."

L.I.N. licked her lips. "I feel kind of sorry for her. She seems lonely. And, sad."

Hal looked at Phillips and Icarus. "Well, I have no idea what happened here. I'll need to examine the body."

Brandy pressed her lips together. "I think somebody was trying to read her thoughts." She faced Hal. "Is that... possible? Do you think?"

A pair of cars was parked across the street. One was a minivan. It had a long, sloped front end. The windshield sloped from the top of the van and became the hood. The paint was silver sandwiched between two sections of sky blue. The front bumper of the minivan faced the front bumper of a sixties model Cammy. The Cammy was dotted with faded, cherry red paint. The body was crinkly and covered with dents. The Cammy had shiny, chrome wheels and racing tires. Daisy was hiding behind the Cammy. She knelt beside the front, passenger tire. She sat on her left calf on a row of sidewalk. Her right foot was flat on the ground. Her elbow rested on her right knee. She was dressed in the same clothes she wore that morning, when she killed Annabelle. She leaned forward and peeked around the Cammy's front bumper. She studied Detective Phillips' outfit. It made her smile.

*"Is she going golfing?"* she whispered.

*"That's interesting,"* Hal replied across the street. *"That idea never occurred to me."*

Daisy pressed her lips together. *"I'll BET it didn't."* She looked around. *"Who ARE these people?"* She studied Hal's shiny, brass body. *"That guy looks weird."* She studied L.I.N.'s glowing, sapphire locks. *"And, her hair..."* She studied Brandy. She liked her outfit. It was functional but with a little style. She liked her rimless glasses. She thought they made Brandy look intelligent and sophisticated. Yet, she still looked very pretty. Daisy also liked Brandy's long, bouncy hair. It was coiled and untamed at the ends. Daisy turned her head, cupped her fingers over her mouth, and giggled. She looked up and observed.

Brandy stepped away, plopped her hands on her hips, and stared at the dirt. She licked her lips and looked up. "I have no idea how that would work." She pointed at the tip of her nose. "Maybe a pair of spikes... shoved into her frontal lobe?"

Daisy parted her lips. She exhaled quietly.

"Maybe her pituitary gland?" Brandy suggested. "I don't know."

Daisy laid her fingers on the Cammy's tire. She stared at Brandy's temple. She needed to get inside her head. She needed to see how her mind worked. It was exactly the challenge she'd been looking for. It was the key to everything.

## Chapter 4: "The Omega"

Burger Land was a wonderful, colorful, fast food restaurant. Okay, it was like *every* fast food restaurant. The floor and the bottom halves of the walls were covered with blue tiles laced with white grout. The tops of the walls and the ceiling were slathered with textured, white paint. The walls were lined with windows. A booth table sat below each window. Round tables lay in rows down the middle of the restaurant. The table tops were covered with shiny, pale veneer. Chuck and the gang sat around a round table with six chairs. The chairs were made of wood. They had rounded backrests with long, thin, bars. The seats matched the table top. The backrests and the legs were painted blue. Phillips and Icarus sat together. Chuck and L.I.N. sat across from them. Brandy sat between Icarus and L.I.N. on Icarus' right. Hal sat between Chuck and Phillips on *Chuck's* right.

In the middle of the table, there was a chrome napkin dispenser. There was a white, plastic salt shaker on one side. There was a black, plastic pepper shaker on the other. A glass jar filled with sugar stood beside that. The table was slathered with paper doilies filled with condiments. Everyone had yellow, paper cups. They were wrapped with Burger Land's colorful logo. Everyone had a burger wrapped in yellow tissue paper and fries in yellow, paper boxes. Well, everyone had something except for Hal. Hal had nothing. His head twisted from side to side. His eyeballs bobbed around and gathered images of everyone's food. He tried to slide his mouth to the side of his face. Nothing happened.

Everyone had large fries, large drinks, and double cheeseburgers except for Brandy. She had tiny, child sized portions. She dipped the tip of a French fry in a doily of ketchup and nibbled off the end. She mashed it between her front teeth and looked around. Chuck had the receipt. It was his turn to buy. He shoved a stack of buns, beef, vegetables, and sauces between

his lips and tore off a chunk. His burger's tissue wrapper lay flat on the table. He laid his sandwich on top and worked his jaw. He studied the receipt carefully. Actually, he scanned it and inhaled chunks of data. Chuck rarely read things carefully. The total seemed high. But, nothing was amiss. Chuck swallowed. He washed everything down with a swig of water from his cup. He turned the receipt over out of curiosity. There was a message on the back. It was written lightly with a pencil.

*"Isn't THAT interesting,"* Chuck thought. The letters were clear, concise, and easy to read. They looked strange, though. They slanted to the left, and they were kind of squiggly. Chuck narrowed his eyes and read to himself.

*"An opportunity for our meeting shall present itself soon. It will occur at 7:12 and thirty-two seconds by the clock across the room."* Chuck looked across the room. There was a giant clock on the wall. It was 6:58. Chuck focused on the receipt and continued reading. *"At that moment, you will be alone. Everyone will leave the table. Near the front entrance, I will exist. Leave to the outside and meet me at that location. There will be a window of time that is the length of one minute and twelve seconds."* Chuck narrowed his eyes. He stared at the table and shrugged his shoulders a little.

*"What the hell is THIS all about?"* he wondered. He looked around. No one noticed him reading the receipt. He slid his lips to the side of his face. He folded the receipt in half twice. He slid it into the front, left pocket of his tan corduroys. He slipped his cheeseburger off the table and shoved it between his lips. He looked at Brandy. Brandy looked up. Her right cheek was puffed out. She was chewing slowly. She stopped chewing and smiled. She giggled through her nostrils. Chuck smiled back. Brandy swallowed and sipped soda from her tiny cup. She licked her lips and looked at Chuck.

"Don't stare at me while I'm eating, Chuck." Chuck threw his hands out at his sides and scrunched up his face. Brandy slipped a French fry out of a tiny, paper box beside her drink. "I hate it when people do that." Chuck rolled his eyes. He looked at L.I.N. L.I.N. glared at him. Chuck was still chewing. He swallowed and smiled.

"What?" he inquired. L.I.N. didn't reply. She stuffed her double cheeseburger between her teeth, tore off a chunk, and chomped it up like a garbage disposal. She looked demented and angry. Chuck gulped down some water and looked his girlfriend over. "What's the matter, L.I.N.?" L.I.N. mashed up everything in her mouth and swallowed. She snatched up her drink, gulped down six ounces of soda, and slammed her cup on the table.

"Why the hell are you looking at *her* all the time, huh?"

Chuck raised his eyebrows. "What? What are you talking about?" L.I.N. smashed her fist against the table. She pointed between Chuck's eyes.

"Don't give me that shit. You know *exactly* what I'm talking about!" Chuck stared at L.I.N. blankly. He looked around. Detective Phillips looked up. She narrowed her eyes.

"L.I.N., are you alright?" L.I.N. glared at Detective Phillips. She shook her fists.

"What the hell do you *mean* am I alright?" she demanded. "I just caught my best friend and my boyfriend gazing into each other's eyes..." She looked at the tops of her eyes. She spread her fingers in front of her face and wobbled her hands. "Like they wanna go make sweet love to each other or something." She plopped her hands on the table and stared at Chuck. She narrowed her eyes and shook her head. "What the fuck, Chuck?" Hal stared across the table. He tried to raise his eyebrows. Then, he remembered he had none.

"Uh-oh!" he remarked. "Someone's getting a visit from her Aunt Flow for the first time." Chuck relaxed his face and bobbed his head. Icarus looked up and grinned. His thin lips curled



at the ends. Detective Phillips fought back a smile. She looked down and picked up her cheeseburger. Brandy gobbled up the last bits of a French fry. She looked at L.I.N., timidly. L.I.N. looked around.

"What?" she inquired. She threw her hands out at her sides. "What's *that* supposed to mean?" Brandy slipped her fingers around L.I.N.'s arm. L.I.N. faced her. Brandy leaned towards L.I.N. and cupped her fingers around her mouth. L.I.N. laid her ear against Brandy's fingers. Brandy whispered something. L.I.N. lifted her head and looked into Brandy's eyes. Brandy smiled a little. She tilted her head shrugged. L.I.N. looked around. Everyone was staring at her. L.I.N. pressed her lips together and stared at her cheeseburger. "Oh," she remarked. She picked up her cheeseburger and took a bite. Chuck laid his fingertips on L.I.N.'s shoulder. L.I.N. glanced at him.

"I'm sorry, honey," he told her. "I didn't mean to upset you." L.I.N. looked at Brandy. Brandy glanced at her. She took a tiny bite of her cheeseburger and mashed it between her front teeth. L.I.N. looked at Chuck. Chuck patted L.I.N.'s arm and looked away. L.I.N. stared at her cup. She wanted to tell Brandy and Chuck she was sorry. But, she was still pissed at them. She couldn't make the words come out of her mouth.

"How would that work?" Detective Phillips requisitioned. She looked at Brandy. Brandy looked across the table.

"Well... I'm sure she'll need some tampons and some medication... and a big bucket of frozen yogurt."

L.I.N. smacked her lips. "Shut-up, Brandy." She fought back a smile. Phillips scrunched up her face.

"That's not what I'm talking about!" Brandy giggled. Detective Phillips rolled her eyes.

"I'm talking about the..." She looked into Brandy's eyes and tapped the tip of her nose. "You know, with the thing?"

Brandy narrowed her eyes. "Huh?" The wrapping paper for Detective Phillips' double cheeseburger lay in front of her. She dumped a doily of ketchup near the middle. She dunked five fries in the puddle of ketchup, laid them between her teeth, and crunched them up. She looked up.

"Something about... mind reading?" She looked at Hal. "Remember?"

Hal faced Phillips. "Oh, you mean the girl." He looked at Brandy. "She means the girl."

Brandy faced Detective Phillips. "Oh, yeah." She wiggled her fingers in front of her face. "And, her brains were all oozing out everywhere..."

Icarus took a bite of his cheeseburger and looked up. "You know I'm trying to eat here, guys." L.I.N. stared at Brandy. Her eyebrows sagged in the middle.

"Yeah, really!" Brandy glanced at L.I.N. She was afraid to speak. She worried she might piss L.I.N. off again. She took a chance.

"Well, *I* think someone attached a computer to her brain." She looked at Detective Phillips. "Fried it up, like an egg." L.I.N. rolled her eyes and shook her head. She sank her teeth into her cheeseburger, ripped off another chunk, and chomped it up. Detective Phillips nodded.

"And, you think that person attached something to *their* brain and read her thoughts?" Brandy nodded. Phillips narrowed her eyes. "But, why?"

Brandy sipped her soda. "So, they could use Shelly's brain as their own." She set down her drink. "It would be like having two brains at the same time."

"Really?" Phillips inquired.

Brandy shrugged. "Sure. Except that the person who did this wasn't used to thinking with Shelly's brain. So, they destroyed it in the process." Phillips looked at Hal. Hal shrugged. It sounded like a drum roll.

"Don't look at *me*. I don't know *where* she gets these ludicrous suppositions."

Brandy's eyebrows pointed down the bridge of her nose. "Hey!" Chuck snickered. "A while ago, you said it was interesting. Remember?"

Hal folded his arms across his chest. "I don't recall saying that at all." Brandy gasped. Her eyes popped open. She pointed across the table.

"You're lying." She looked at Detective Phillips. "He's lying!" Hal tried to smile. Nothing happened. He looked at Phillips.

"I've never told a lie in my life." Brandy pointed at him and gasped. Chuck sipped his drink and set it down. He looked at L.I.N. L.I.N. stared at her lap, chewing. She looked miserable. Chuck fought back a smile. He laid his palm on her shoulder.

"You look very pretty, today." L.I.N.'s eyebrows lowered in the middle. She plopped her hands on her hips and glared at Chuck.

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" she asked. "As opposed to the times when I *don't* look good enough for you?" Chuck scrunched up his face. He dropped his hand in his lap and tilted his head.

"I'm sorry," he replied. He looked away. "You're right. You don't look pretty at all, today." He took a bite of his burger and looked around. L.I.N. hopped up and scurried across the restaurant. She ripped open the door to the girls' restroom and hurried inside. Brandy pressed her lips together. She looked at Chuck and sighed.

"I'll go talk to her," she remarked. She stood up, scooted her chair towards the table, and

joined L.I.N. in the restroom. Chuck glanced at Detective Phillips. Phillips was scowling. Chuck pressed his lips together and nodded.

"Something on your mind, dear?"

Phillips folded her arms across her chest. "Chuck, that was so rude."

Chuck narrowed his eyes and smiled. "Yes, I agree," he replied. "I shouldn't tell my girlfriend how beautiful she is." He looked at the table. He picked up a pair of French fries, dunked them in ketchup, and tossed them between his teeth. He raised his eyebrows. "I should tell her she's an ugly, old hag." He looked up. "That makes more sense." Phillips' eyebrows drooped in the middle. She scooted her chair away from the table, hopped up, and joined L.I.N. and Brandy in the girls' room. Icarus looked up. He shrugged.

"I gotta take a leak." He stood and scooted his chair towards the table. "That's all I know." He wandered across the restaurant and entered the boys' restroom. Chuck smirked. He looked at Hal. Hal was staring at the table. He looked like he was lost in thought.

"Oh, dear..." he remarked. He scrambled over the edge of his chair and clunked across the restaurant. He was headed towards the front counter. Chuck watched him scamper. He looked around. There weren't very many people in the restaurant. But, Chuck was betting none of them ever saw a shiny, brass robot trampling across Burger Land before. That was a safe assumption. Chuck looked away and cupped his fingers around his left eye.

"*My God...*" he whispered. Hal stumbled behind the front counter. There were two girls working the registers. One was a brunette with dark eyes. One was a blonde with glittery, blue eyes. They wore Burger Land uniforms. They consisted of yellow aprons and hats with vertical, orange stripes, orange t-shirts, orange shorts, yellow socks, and saddle shoes. They turned their heads and watched as Hal passed. Hal stopped beside a tall, chrome colored stove. There was a

tiny panel on his left thigh. He flipped it open and yanked out an AC plug. His arm was all wiggly. He shoved the plug into an outlet beside the stove and sighed. He stood and looked around. The girls running the register faced him. They folded their arms over their chests and stared. Hal tried to smile. But alas, he had no mouth. He looked from one girl to the other.

"You... You girls don't mind if I just borrow this outlet for a few minutes. Do you?" He looked around. Everyone in the restaurant was staring at him. "My... My battery was going dead, you see." The blonde girl smiled a little. Hal looked into her eyes. He looked away, folded his arms over his chest, and tapped his foot. It sounded like a rubber ball bouncing off a plate of sheet metal. Chuck pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head. He glanced at the clock across the room. It was 7:12.

An image of his receipt flashed through his mind. It said Chuck would be left alone at exactly 7:12 and thirty-two seconds. It said there would be a window of one minute, twelve seconds. Chuck glanced at the clock's second hand. It was just past the number five. Chuck looked towards the front counter. People were gathering around Hal. They weren't angry. They were just checking him out. They were curious. It was a perfect distraction. Chuck didn't hesitate. He crept towards the front of the restaurant and slipped through a pair of glass doors. Daisy Hill was sitting at a booth table near the front of the restaurant. She held a newspaper in front of her face. She lowered it and peeked over the top as Chuck passed.

It was late evening. The sky was indigo along the top and orange along the horizon. A handful of stars were showing. Burger Land was covered with crimson and brown bricks. The bricks were long and rocky. There was a row of sidewalk three feet from the entrance. There were entry ramps in the sidewalk near the edges of the building. There were parking spaces along the sides. A curtain spanned the roof. It was decorated with yellow, orange, and blue

stripes. "Burger Land" was written across the stripes in thick, white letters. A glittery, black road lay beyond the sidewalk. A double, yellow line lay down the middle. Chuck wandered to the edge of the sidewalk and stopped. The note he received on the back of his receipt was odd enough. But next, things got... a little stranger.

An ancient automobile peeled around the edge of a building down the street. It was a 1930s model, Roy's Roller, Spirit. Chuck had rarely seen anything like it. It had a two tone paint job. It was black on the top and bottom and cream down the middle. It had spoked wheels. The spokes were cream colored to match the secondary paint. The tires had thick white walls. A long, thin side step spanned spaces below the doors. It was shiny and chrome. The wheels had chrome, spherical hubcaps. A matching spare tire hovered above the driver's side fender. The radiator was tall and narrow. It was also chrome. There were two round headlights sticking out of the front bumper. They looked like the eyes of a grasshopper. The doors had tiny, thin handles. To open the door, they had to be rotated. The Spirit had a flat windshield and four doors. It had a tiny, rectangular back window. The front half of the top was removable. The wheel wells were separate from the body of the car. They surrounded each tire. The car's top spanned the vehicle from the windshield to the back hatch.

For some reason, the vehicle was driving in reverse. It peeled around a corner and skidded all the way to Burger Land in that manner. It slid to a stop beside the sidewalk. The windows were black. It was impossible to see through them. The passenger window rolled down. A row of fingers rested on the edge of the glass. They belonged to the owner's right hand. The hand was slick, crinkly, and white as a ghost. The fingernail on the ring finger was long and pointed. It was shiny and green. The driver's face appeared next to his hand. It was also white and crinkly. His eyes were solid blue. They had no whites or pupils. His nose was

tiny and bony. There were two, tiny holes near the bottom. The driver's lips were small and thin. A brown, suede cowboy hat rested on top of his head. Curly, crimson hair dangled from the rim. The driver had no facial hair. His ears were a pair of holes in the sides of his head. They had some squiggly parts like human ears. The driver looked into Chuck's eyes and smiled. Chuck stared in a daze. He didn't know what to think.

"Hello, Chuck," the driver remarked. "I'm the Omega."

Chuck tilted his head. "Who are you?"

"The time for this, we do not have," Omega replied. "You must listen, only. Patience shall bear all explanations." Chuck was a bit confused by Omega's answer. He raised his eyebrows and drew a sharp breath. "It's apparent you have not been to your computer lab in several days and nights." Chuck stared. He slowly nodded. "There is a reason for this. The reason is not obvious to you. And, it can never be." Chuck narrowed his eyes and shook his head. Omega blinked. He tilted his head. "My words won't always seem clear to you. But, this cannot be altered. Our perception of historical fragments is in strict opposition."

Chuck licked his lips. "Jeff Forrester brought you here. Didn't he?"

Omega pinched his eyes shut. "Time cannot stop for us during this moment. Inconsequential, that is not." He opened his eyes. Chuck showed Omega his palm.

"I'm... sorry. I'm listening."

"It is imperative that you go to your computer lab at Herring Elementary at once. You must bring L.I.N. and Brandy." He narrowed his shiny, blue eyes. "But, Detective Phillips, Icarus, and Hal cannot go. Other plans..." Omega pinched his eyes shut and lowered his head. He tapped his forehead with the tips of his fingers.

"They have... other plans?" Chuck suggested. Omega looked up and smiled.

"That is the Boolean value, one." Chuck forced a smile. He swallowed.

"Why should I do *anything* you say? I don't even know you."

Omega frowned. "You *must* do as I say." Omega faced forward and laid his hands on his steering wheel. "Your planet will be destroyed, if the converse is true." Omega's window rolled up. His car peeled away in reverse. It skidded around a corner and disappeared. Chuck watched Omega's "grasshopper lights" until they vanished.

"Huh," he remarked. He looked over his shoulder. He had a peculiar suspicion that someone was watching him. He spotted a short, young lady standing behind him. She was very pretty. But, she looked kind of nerdy. Also, she had a hard, penetrating stare. It was rather intimidating. The girl stood five foot, flat. She had blonde, shoulder length hair. A row of bangs dangled above her eyes. Her skin was pale and silky. Her eyes were turquoise. They glowed in late evening dimness. A pair of circular lenses lay in front of her eyes. Thick plastic frames surrounded them. They resembled leopard print.

The girl's lips were shiny and crimson. She wore a white sweater, a scarlet skirt with white diamonds, ivory stockings, and shiny, red Mary Janes. A red, vinyl purse dangled from her right shoulder. A crimson scarf dangled from her neck. She stared into Chuck's shiny, tan eyes and smiled. Her grin was condescending and insincere. The young lady turned and wandered down the street. Chuck watched her until she rounded a corner. There was something about her. It made the hair on the back of Chuck's neck stand on end.



## Chapter 5: "A Message"

Hal's morgue was dark and decrepit. A pair of heavy, steel doors was sticking out of the grass near the west side of the house. They had thick, steel handles. Hal kept them locked with a padlock and a chain. A row of creaky, wooden stairs led from the doors to a slick, concrete floor. The walls were covered with cinder blocks. A concrete ceiling hovered above those. A slick, porcelain table stood in the middle of the room. It was supported by two porcelain slabs. There was a shiny, steel drain in the middle of the table. A pipe descended from the bottom of the drain and disappeared into the floor. There was a chrome faucet at the west end of the table with hot and cold knobs. The knobs were rounded, chrome plus signs. There was an "H" on top of the hot knob and a "C" on the cold. The table top was surrounded by a two inch, porcelain fence.

A rolling, steel cart rested near the faucet. Rows of autopsy tools were scattered along the top. There was a small, chrome flashlight, two extra long scalpels, two pairs of scissors, a peculiar pair of scissors known as an "enterotome," a bone saw, forceps, rib cutters, a skull chisel, a sailmaker's needle, a hammer with a hooked handle, and two bread knives. A trapezoid shaped lamp with two, long florescent lights hovered above the table. It dangled from a pair of old, rusty chains. Shelly's body lay on the table. It was completely naked. Hal took the liberty of scrubbing blood, mascara, and brain matter from her face, hair, and neck. Her wrists and ankles were still sticky from bands of duct tape.

Hal stood beside Shelly's head. He was scoring her skull with an electric saw. It was plugged into an outlet on the floor below the table. The saw had a tiny rotary blade. It was similar to a die grinder. Hal finished sawing Shelly's skull. He laid the saw on the steel cart and picked up the skull chisel. He looked towards the other end of the table. Detective Phillips and

Icarus stood, watching. They wore white, surgical masks. So did Hal. His mask lay in front of his speaker mouth. He wanted to make sure he didn't get anything in the holes. It might short circuit Hal's electronics. He wasn't sure. He, Phillips, and Icarus also wore white surgical gloves.

Hal laid the pointed end of the chisel against the incision he made in Shelly's skull. He picked up the hammer and tapped the blunt end. The top of Shelly's calvarium popped loose. Hal placed the chisel against the notch he made across Shelly's forehead and tapped it. The top of her skull flipped back and lay near the top of the table. It wobbled like a coin and wriggled to a stop. Icarus wore his eyeball jacket. It was pretty chilly in Hal's morgue. Icarus flipped up his hood, reached inside his collar, and tugged out a pair of wires. The wires were fitted with alligator clips. Icarus slipped the wires under his surgical mask and clipped them to the sides of his tongue. He tapped power buttons inside the cuffs of his sleeves. Cameras dotting his jacket fired up and focused. Icarus crossed his arms over his chest and watched carefully. Phillips glanced at him. She smiled, faced forward, and shook her head.

"You're such a weirdo," she remarked.

"I don't wanna miss anything," Icarus replied. Hal laid the hammer and chisel on his cart. He picked up the flashlight and flipped it on. He shined it across the lining of Shelly's brain, a handful of membranes known as the meninges. Hal held the flashlight in his left hand. He laid the fingers of his right hand against Shelly's meninges and peeled them away. Her brains were like mush. They oozed out and pooled around Shelly's scalp. Phillips scrunched up her face. She looked away and pinched the bridge of her nose.

"Yuck!" Icarus wandered towards the other end of the table. He held out his hand.

"Here, Hal. Let me see." Hal handed Icarus his flashlight. Icarus shined it inside

Shelly's skull. He bent over and looked inside with his eyes. Then, he bowed his head. He looked inside Shelly's skull with cameras along the top of his scalp. Hal stared at Shelly's brains. They were now a chunky, soupy, white puddle at the east end of the autopsy table. Hal looked at Phillips. He tried to smile. Nothing happened.

"I just got a hankering for some tapioca pudding," he remarked. "That sounds exquisite!"

"Gross, Hal!" Phillips replied.

Icarus looked over his shoulder. "You can't eat pudding, Hal. Remember?"

Hal looked at the floor. "Oh, yeah..." He smacked his palm with his fist. It sounded like a golf club smacking a car door. "Damn this body."

Chuck, L.I.N., and Brandy weren't at the house. They were headed for Herring Elementary. Brandy offered to drive them. Her little car was a piece of shit. It was a 1972 Hanna Civil, two door. Brandy's car was white. But, it had a red, front, left fender. The paint was chipped and scratched. The body was rusted. It had a flat, pointy front end, round headlights, and tiny, little tires. It had a back hatch instead of a trunk. The engine smelled like coolant when it was running. The interior was tiny and cramped. The seats, doors, and dash were covered with red vinyl. It was faded and decrepit. The seat covers were ripped to shreds. Yellow foam poked out of the cracks. The floor was covered with red carpet. It was painted with old, crunchy cola stains.

Chuck rode in the front seat. L.I.N. was stuffed in the back. Brandy drove. Chuck looked around. He spotted an old, cruddy tape deck next to Brandy's steering wheel. He reached across the car and tapped the power button. The cabin filled with slow, cheesy, alternative music. It was so loud, it rattled the windows. L.I.N. pinched her eyes shut, bowed her head, and plugged her ears.

"Gyah!" she shrieked. Chuck scrunched up his face. He looked at Brandy and shook his head. Brandy's eyes popped open. She reached around her steering wheel and tapped the power button on her stereo. She pointed between Chuck's eyes.

"No!" she shouted. She pointed at her tape deck and waved her finger. "We don't touch the radio." Chuck stared at the side of Brandy's head. He pouted and puffed out his bottom lip. Brandy glanced at him. She grinned and shook her head. "Shut-up!"

Chuck laid his fingers on Brandy's arm. "Brandy, let me buy you a new stereo. Okay?"

Brandy raised her eyebrows. "Leave it... alone!" L.I.N. laid her chin on the back of Brandy's seat. She stared at her friend's radio.

"What happened to it?" Brandy glanced in her rearview mirror. She caught a glimpse of L.I.N.'s shiny, emerald eyes and faced forward.

"My ex-boyfriend did something to it."

Chuck squinted. "But, what?"

Brandy showed Chuck her palm. "I don't know." She flipped a chunk of hair away from her face. "I got in here one day... and it was like that."

"Oh, man," Chuck replied. He plopped down in his seat and folded his arms over his chest. "Please tell me you dumped him." Brandy stared into Chuck's eyes. What he said caught her off guard. She pulled her eyes away and forced them towards the road. She licked her lips.

"Um, no..." She glanced at Chuck. "No. He dumped *me*." Chuck looked up. He parted his lips.

"Oh..." He gasped. "Oh, I'm sorry, Brandy." He forced a smile. "I'm sorry." He pressed his lips together and faced forward. "I mean... I was just kidding around."

Brandy squeezed out a laugh. "Oh, right. I know." She licked her lips. "Um, it's okay."

L.I.N. narrowed her eyes. She glanced at Brandy in the rearview mirror. She was facing forward, watching the road. L.I.N.'s eyes slid to the right. L.I.N. stared at the back of her boyfriend's head. Her eyebrows fell in the middle. She collapsed in her seat, hugged her belly, and stared at her lap. She felt terrible. She felt sick and bloated. And to top it off, her boyfriend and her best friend were flirting right in front of her. At least, she was pretty sure they were flirting.

*"I should've sat in the front seat,"* L.I.N. mumbled under her breath. Chuck offered her the front seat. L.I.N. rolled her eyes, threw the front, passenger seat out of the way, and plopped down in the back. She didn't need anyone doing her any favors. L.I.N. closed her eyes and shook her head. *"Why did I do that?"* she asked herself. *"Why didn't I just sit in the front seat?"* She rested her elbows on her thighs and laid her chin in her palms. She stared at Brandy's carpet. It was filthy. Brandy glanced at L.I.N. in her rearview mirror. She looked pitiful. Brandy exhaled through her nostrils and smiled. She reached across the front seat and poked Chuck's thigh. Chuck looked up. Brandy glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. She clenched her teeth and whispered to him.

*"Chuck, sit in the back!"* she instructed. Chuck glanced over his shoulder. L.I.N. lifted her feet. She plopped them on the seat and hugged her shins. She looked like she was crying. Chuck glanced at Brandy.

*"She's being... such a bitch, today!"* he fired back. *"I don't wanna make it any worse."* Brandy pressed her lips together and scowled. She pointed over her shoulder with her thumb.

*"Chuck, get your ass back there and sit with her!"* she rasped. She glanced in the rearview mirror. *"Look at her! She looks terrible!"* Chuck looked over his shoulder. L.I.N. turned her head and stared out her window. Chuck faced Brandy. He rolled his eyes and

unbuckled his seatbelt. He patted Brandy's shoulder. Then, he slipped over the back of his seat and plopped down next to his girlfriend. It was so... cramped in the back seat. It was like sitting inside a cupboard. L.I.N. looked up. She sighed. She dropped her feet to the floor and scooted over a little to make room. She didn't want to get in Chuck's way or anything. Chuck squinted. He laid his fingers on his girlfriend's cheek. Then, he leaned forward and kissed her temple. L.I.N. cringed. Then, she relaxed. She turned her head and looked into Chuck's eyes. Chuck smiled. He patted L.I.N.'s shoulder.

"Are you okay, sweetheart?" L.I.N. exhaled a shaky sigh. She wrapped her arms around her boyfriend and laid her head on his chest.

*"I'm sorry..."* she wailed. She buried her eyes in Chuck's shirt and sobbed. Chuck threw his hands out at his sides. He had no idea what L.I.N. was talking about. He shrugged and slipped his arms around her shoulders.

"It's okay, honey." He laid his cheek on the back of her head. "Don't worry about it. Alright?"

L.I.N. turned her head and inhaled through her lips. *"Okay!"* she sobbed. She reached up and swatted tears off her cheeks.

The server room Chuck set up at Herring Elementary was cold, dim, and stuffy. It was in a basement below the janitor's closet. The walls were pasted with crimson bricks. The floor was covered with slick, white tiles. They were splattered with black and grey spots. There were foldout tables everywhere. There were ten in all. One was near the entrance. Three lay along the other three walls. There were three desktop computers below each foldout table. They were old, useless dinosaurs that Chuck repurposed as web servers. Each desktop had its own monitor, keyboard, and mouse. The peripherals were ancient as well. The monitors were bulky, cathode

ray tube monitors. Each monitor hogged four square feet of space. There were four chalk boards on wheels. They were scattered in front of the servers on the wall to the right of the entrance. That was the eastern wall. They were slathered with Chuck's chalky chicken scratch. That was typical.

Oddly, there were only three chairs in the room. There were thirty desktop computers. But, there was hardly anywhere to sit. One chair stood behind a teacher's desk across from the entrance. It was a student's chair. It had a small, cushy seat. A similar backrest hovered above that. Both components were covered with ratty, black fabric. A frosty, chrome rod connected the two. The chair stood on a plastic base with five plastic wheels. The other two chairs were steel, foldout chairs. One was tan. It was shiny and new. Chuck swiped it from the teacher's lounge a couple weeks prior. The other was blue. Its paint was chipped and peeling. The blue chair stood in front of the row of chalk boards. The seat faced the opposite direction. Daisy stood on the seat. She was short. So, she stood on the chair to help her reach Chuck's chalk boards. She was trying to understand what was written on them. Daisy had some knowledge of computer programming. But, she didn't understand exactly what she was looking at. There were bits of higher level Calculus here and there, though. She understood *that* okay.

Daisy's spectacles rested at the tip of her nose. She laid her index finger against a plastic bridge connecting her spectacles' lenses. She was wearing a pair of cornflower blue, latex gloves. Daisy shoved her glasses up the bridge of her nose and stared through the lenses. Chuck had some pretty complicated equations written down. They made Daisy's head spin. She'd never seen anything like them. They kept track of permutations and rates of change. Daisy was familiar with such things. Only, Chuck's math referred to multiple locations on multiple planes. Sets of variables jumped from one set of equations to another. It was strange. Daisy didn't fully

understand.

*"Wormholes?"* she whispered. She heard noises coming from the hallway. Her head twisted to the left. She peeked over her shoulder. She narrowed her eyes.

Herring Elementary's hallway was long and wide. The walls were covered with cinderblocks. The east wall was painted peacock. The west wall was painted teal. The top of the west wall was lined with long windows. Four foot by four foot tiles lay across the floor. They were white with spots of red, grey, and brown. Chuck and Brandy came down the hall first. L.I.N. dragged her feet behind them. She walked with her arms folded over her chest, staring at the floor. Silky, sapphire strands dangled from the sides of her face. They swished back and forth with each step. Chuck looked over his shoulder. He noticed his girlfriend was lagging. He stopped and waited for her. L.I.N. looked up. She rolled her eyes and sighed. Chuck pressed his lips together. L.I.N. stood beside him and stopped. She glared into his eyes.

"You don't have to wait for me!" she shouted. "Just go."

Chuck smiled. "But you're so cute, though." L.I.N. fought off a laugh. She turned her head and snorted. Chuck held out his hand. "Come on. We'll walk together." L.I.N. stared at Chuck's hand. She licked her lips and looked up. Chuck grabbed her hand. "Come on." He tugged L.I.N. towards the janitor's closet. "Let's get this over with." L.I.N. exhaled through her nostrils. She trotted along behind him. She stared at the back of Chuck's head.

"Why are we doing this, anyway?" Chuck gritted his teeth. He hoped no one would ask him that. He didn't want to explain that he was checking his servers because some freaky looking alien from Proxima Centauri instructed him to. He figured he should keep that a secret. He glanced over his shoulder.

"I like to check on my servers at least once a week," Chuck explained. He faced forward.



"You never know what might happen."

"How long has it been since you checked them?" Brandy inquired.

Chuck raised his eyebrows. "A lot longer than that," he replied. They stopped beside a shiny, wooden door along the east wall of the hallway. There was a tall, skinny pane of glass on the left side. Beside that, there was a brass knob with a lock. Chuck shoved a key into the keyhole, twisted the knob, and eased the door out of the way. They entered the janitor's closet. There was an identical door adjacent to the first. It was on the southern wall of the janitor's closet. Chuck used a separate key for that door and eased it aside. A row of concrete steps led from there to the floor of Chuck's server room. There was a light switch beside the entrance. It had two switches. Chuck flipped them on and descended the stairs. He dragged L.I.N. behind him. Brandy followed her. Chuck stopped at the bottom of the stairs and looked around. L.I.N. stood beside him. She stared at his temple.

"What?" she inquired.

Chuck narrowed his eyes. "Hmm..." he mumbled. He looked around. "Nothing." He wandered in front of a table near the entrance and stopped. He laid his fingers beside a keyboard on the table. He glanced at three monitors along the top of the table. He tapped power buttons on the monitors and spacebars on the keyboards. All three monitors had blank screens. Text appeared when Chuck tapped the spacebars. It read "username: ." Chuck entered "admin" and a password on all three servers. Then, he typed "list" and pressed enter. He spotted a text file on the middle server. It was in his user directory. It was called "The\_Omega." Chuck narrowed his eyes. Brandy and L.I.N. crowded around the monitor. They stared at the text file. It seemed... odd. Brandy felt the strangest sense of déjà vu. She felt like she'd experienced something similar. But, she couldn't recall when.

"W-What is that?" Brandy inquired. There was a closet along the same wall as the entrance. It was on the opposite end. The door opened half an inch. One of Daisy's piercing, turquoise irises glittered through the crack. Enough of her crimson lips were visible to reveal a hideous grin. The door inched shut. Chuck stared at the computer screen. He narrowed his eyes. He exhaled through his nose and pressed his lips together. Brandy looked him over. "Chuck, what's wrong?" Chuck's irises slid to the edges of his eyes. He glanced at Brandy.

"Um..." He looked the other direction. He glanced at L.I.N. "I'm not sure." He looked over his shoulder. "Something..." He spotted the blue, steel foldout chair. It was sitting in front of the chalk boards. Chuck was stooped over. He stood and turned around. He stared at the chair and folded his arms over his chest. Brandy and L.I.N. turned around as well. They looked where Chuck was looking. The closet door swung open. It didn't make a sound. Daisy slipped out and crept across the floor. She had three syringes in her hand. Brandy looked at Chuck. She threw her hands out at her sides.

"Chuck, what *is* it?!"

Chuck bobbed his head. "That chair," he replied. Daisy crouched behind the server table beside the entrance. She popped up and stared at Chuck's butt. Chuck shook his head. "I didn't leave it over *there*." He pointed towards the teacher's desk. "I left it beside the..." Daisy plunged a syringe into Chuck's right butt cheek. Chuck pressed his lips together. He looked up and stared into space. Brandy and L.I.N. looked him over. Chuck's eyes rolled back; his legs got all wobbly; and he collapsed on his face. Brandy spotted the syringe sticking out of his backside. Then, she felt a sharp pain in her own. L.I.N. noticed Brandy becoming a tad tipsy. She looked up. Her little buddy plopped down next to Chuck. She didn't collapse like Chuck did. She spread her fingers in front of her lips and yawned. Then, she curled up next to Chuck and laid

her head on his shoulder. L.I.N. noticed the syringes. Her shiny, emerald eyes popped open. She hopped away and swirled around. Daisy was leaning over the table. She held the third syringe right in front of L.I.N.'s face. She stared into L.I.N.'s eyes and snarled.

"Oh, NO you DON'T!" she shrieked. She hopped between a pair of monitors and stood on the table. "Get back here! I'll *kill* you! I'll *kill* you!" L.I.N. heard hummingbirds in her ears. Her legs turned into noodles. She fell on her butt and scooted away. She peeled her lips apart and tried to scream. Nothing but a helpless squeal came out. Daisy dropped to the floor. She grabbed a hold of L.I.N.'s wrists, flipped her over, and slipped the needle into her left butt cheek.

Brandy woke up first. Her eyelids fluttered. Then, they opened a crack. Brandy stared at the ceiling. It was white. It was dotted with circular vents. Brandy closed her eyes and yawned. She smacked her lips and turned her head. She spotted the table beside the entrance to the server room. She squinted. She made out three monitors along the top. But, they looked blurry. Brandy squashed her eyelids together and blinked a couple of times. She tried to sit up. But, she couldn't move. She gasped. Her dark, brown eyes popped open. She lifted her head and looked down. Everything looked blurry. But, she could tell she was tied up. She noticed shiny, silver bands strapped across her body. Her butt cheek was killing her. It felt like there was a nail stuck in it. She bobbed her head around and blinked. But, she couldn't see what was going on. She was confused.

She spotted her glasses. They hovered above her eyes. Brandy spotted a pair of blurry fingers wrapped around the ear pieces. The fingers were wrapped in a pair of cornflower blue, latex gloves. Brandy heard a voice. It was a young lady's voice. It was scornful and condescending. It sounded like nails on a chalkboard.

"Looking... for these?" the voice asked. Brandy's glasses slipped over the sides of her

face. Brandy shut her eyes and shrugged up her shoulders. She tilted her head back and peeled her eyelids apart. She stared into Daisy's fierce, freakish face. Her lips were shiny and red. Her eyes were glowing and blue. She was grinning so hard, her teeth showed. Her front teeth slid from side to side. Her eyebrows were pointed and angry. Her eyes were wide and wiry. Brandy shook all over. She gasped for breath.

"Who... Who the hell are *you*?" she gasped. She swallowed and exhaled a shaky sigh. Daisy smacked Brandy across the face. Brandy's head twisted to the side. Her cheek lit up like fire.

"Watch your mouth, you little slut!" Daisy shrieked. Her purse lay beside her feet. She bent over, reached inside, and took out a scalpel. She grabbed a fistful of Brandy's curly, twisting hair and laid the blade of the scalpel against her cheek. "Or, I'll peel you like a potato!" Brandy pinched her eyes shut. She gritted her teeth and gasped for air.

"Chuck!" she shouted. "L.I.N.! Help me!" Chuck was taped to one of the server tables. Daisy took all the monitors, keyboards, and mice off the top and duct taped him to the top. Chuck's eyes blinked open, and he started to stir. He exhaled a painful sigh and lifted his head. He spotted Brandy. She was taped to the teacher's desk across the room. Brandy looked towards the entrance. She stared into Chuck's eyes. She breathed a sigh of relief. She fought back a smile. "*Chuck...*" she squeaked. Chuck looked beside Brandy's head. He spotted Daisy. She twisted her head around and glared at Chuck's face. She looked demonic and terrifying. Chuck was not amused. His eyebrows fell in the middle. His eyelids drooped. His upper lip quivered.

"Oh, it's *you*!" he shouted. "*You're* the one!" Daisy grinned. Her teeth glowed like pearls.

"Yes!" she shrieked. "It's *me*!" She laid the tip of the scalpel against Brandy's throat.

"Now, keep your mouth shut. Or, I'll slice her throat!" Chuck blinked. He tilted his head.

"Now you listen to me, you fuckin' cunt! If you so much as *touch* her with that thing, I'll rip your head off, shove it up your ass, and chunk you in a dumpster, bitch!" Daisy gasped. The scalpel dropped from her fingertips. It clattered on the tiles and rested next to her feet. She pointed between Chuck's eyes.

"You!" She gritted her teeth. "You, you, you, you, you..."

Chuck interjected. "Shut-up, you stuttering, whining dipshit! You're not going to kill her. You *need* her. You need her brain." Daisy crinkled her eyes. The left side of her upper lip twitched. She looked like Icarus when he was thinking too hard. She bent over and snatched her scalpel off the floor. She pointed it at Chuck. Her lips twisted into a hideous grin.

"You're right," she snarled. "Enough of this. Let's get this show on the road." Daisy bent over and reached into her hand bag. She pulled out a laptop, flipped it open, and tapped the power button. She laid the laptop on Brandy's belly. Brandy exhaled a short cry. She stared at the laptop's screen. It began filling with colorful text. Daisy took out two pairs of spiked forks. They were wrapped with wires. She laid one pair between Brandy's breasts. The neck of Brandy's olive blouse was cut low. So, the tips of the forks lay against her flesh. They were cold and gooey. Brandy figured they were slathered with Lidocaine. She gasped. She tilted her head back and stared into Daisy's hideous, penetrating eyes.

"*No, no, no, no, no!*" she gasped. "Y-You can't be serious. No!" Daisy grinned. She unrolled the other set of forks. There was a USB connector at the end of the wires. She reached across Brandy's chest and plugged it into her laptop. Then, Daisy laid the forks against her lips. "What are you doing?!" Brandy cried. Daisy began cackling. She slid the forks into her nostrils and shoved them into her brain. "Ah!" Brandy shouted. She looked across the room. "Chuck!

Don't let her do this to me!" Blood began dribbling from Daisy's nostrils. It leaked off her chin and dotted Brandy's forehead. It felt warm and syrupy. "Gah!" Brandy screeched. "Stop it!" L.I.N. came to. She was taped to the chair with wheels. It was beside the table next to the entrance. Her head was tilted back. Her wrists were taped behind the backrest. Rolls of tape were strapped across her chest, arms, and stomach. Her ankles were taped to a post supporting the seat. L.I.N. lifted her head and blinked. She swallowed and looked around.

"W-What's going on?"

"Don't do this," Chuck pleaded. Daisy cackled. She leaned over Brandy, picked up the other fork, and unraveled it. "Oh, come on!" Chuck shouted. "Do it to me, instead!" Daisy looked up. So did Brandy.

"Shut-up, Chuck!" Brandy shouted. She fought to catch her breath. "Don't say that!" She tilted her head back and stared at Daisy's chin. "Don't listen to him. Don't do that to him!"

"Brandy!" Chuck screamed. "You're gonna be eating through a bag for the rest of your life, unable to control your own bowel movements." Chuck sighed. "And, that's if you're lucky!"

Daisy narrowed her eyes. "She's mine, Chuck." She slipped the ends of the forks inside Brandy's nostrils. Brandy's eyelids peeled back.

"Aaaaaaaah!" she wailed. "No! No! No!" Daisy giggled like a little school girl. She slid the forks up Brandy's nasal passages and shoved them into her brain. Brandy hugged her neck with her shoulders. She curled her fingers until her bones cracked. She pounded the back of her skull against the desk and gasped for breath.

"Oh, crap!" L.I.N. shouted. She looked to the west. "Chuck, we have to do something!"

Chuck's head twisted to the side. "Use your lighter!" L.I.N. faced forward. She tried to

ignore Brandy's cries. She began wriggling her fingers. But, they were all taped up. She couldn't get them loose. She looked at Chuck and shook her head.

"I can't get it open!" she yelled. Chuck stared at Brandy. He widened his eyes shook his head.

"She's gonna die." He began wiggling like a worm. He was cocooned with strands of duct tape. He could barely move. "God damn it! Gotta... get... off... this... stupid... table!" Daisy plugged Brandy's USB cable into her laptop. She laid her fingers on her laptop's keyboard and entered a username and password. Then, she typed "extract."

"Guys!" Brandy squealed. "*Please... help me!*" L.I.N. tugged at her arms. They didn't budge. She exhaled an impatient sigh.

"Don't worry, Brandy! We're coming." Daisy tapped the return key on her laptop. She was overwhelmed with emotion. She felt like she'd been punched in the chest. Her eyes popped open. Her pupils dilated. Her lips flew apart. She sucked in air. It felt like she was inhaling glass. The scalpel dropped from her fingers again. Brandy stopped breathing so hard. Her eyelids fluttered. She lifted her head and looked around. Her thoughts flooded with math. She hadn't done any *real* math in some time. The only math she'd done recently was running a register at the pharmacy where she used to work.

"Gah!" Daisy shouted. "What pharmacy?" She bowed her head and tapped her temple. "What are you talking about? Stop that!" Brandy lifted her head. She looked Daisy over.

"What?"

Daisy dug her nails into the edge of Chuck's desk. "Ah!" she shrieked. "Of *course* you understand! It's your mind!" She tapped the space between her eyes. "How can you be trying to understand your own mind?!" Brandy's eyebrows squashed at the outer edges. She felt tears

bubbling up.

"Daisy, I'm sorry. I don't understand! What's wrong?"

Daisy dropped to her knees. "Yaaaaaaaah!" She curled her fingers through her soft, blonde hair and made a fist. "Stop it! What are you doing, for God's sake?!" Blood began gushing out of Daisy's nostrils. It pooled on the floor and soaked the knees of her ivory stockings. Chuck and L.I.N. looked at each other. They raised their eyebrows and shrugged. Brandy thought about math again. Her eyelids began fluttering. She achieved a level of focus higher than she'd ever attained. It was like the entire room was filled with her thoughts. Nothing else mattered. She focused on math. Bits of physics equations began pouring into her brain. It was beyond her comprehension. Brandy had never seen anything like it. But, she was able to focus well enough to understand it. It just... made sense to her. At first, she didn't understand the math. And then, she figured it out and moved on. She figured it was coming from Daisy's brain. Daisy peeled her eyes. She laid her palm in her blood and pressed her fingertips against the floor. She pulled out clumps of her hair and gritted her teeth.

"Aaaaaaaah!" she shrieked. Goo began gushing out of her eye sockets. Blood began leaking from her ears. Brandy's head twisted to the right. She looked over the edge of the desk and stared at the back of Daisy's head. She felt terrible. She was killing the poor girl. Her eyes welled up with tears.

"Oh, God!" Brandy cried. "I'm so sorry, Daisy. What should I do?!"

"Gyah!" Daisy shouted. She pounded her blood with her fist. It splattered her fluffy, white sweater. The more Daisy cried, the worse Brandy felt. She looked across the room. She remembered Chuck and L.I.N. were there. She'd forgotten all about them. She stared into Chuck's eyes. Chuck stared back. He pressed his lips together and swallowed. Brandy exhaled



a shaky sigh. She felt terrible. She'd just massacred this poor girl in front of her two best friends. She felt embarrassed. She especially felt that way in front of... Chuck. Daisy plopped her palms on the floor and lifted her head. Her pupils shrank. She shook all over. Her head twisted around. She stared into Brandy's murky, brown eyes. Daisy's face was twisted and confused. Her lips wiggled apart.

"You..." she gasped. Brandy tilted her head. Daisy swallowed. "You love him." Brandy winced. She stared at Chuck out of the corner of her eye. Chuck squinted. His lips parted. Brandy felt ashamed. She tore her eyes away from Chuck and stared at the floor. Daisy went stiff. She sat on her knees in a pool of gooey, crimson soup. L.I.N. stared into her wild, crazy eyes. Daisy's eyes rolled back in her head. Her eyelids fluttered closed. She toppled to the side and collapsed on her right arm. Brandy exhaled a shaky breath. She looked Daisy over. She was still breathing. She looked at L.I.N.

"I've gotta unhook her." She stared at the back of Daisy's head. "She's gonna die, if I don't unhook her."

L.I.N. began wriggling. "Hang on..." She bowed her head and grunted. "I think my fingers are coming loose." She tugged her right fingers as hard as she could. They finally found their way through the duct tape. L.I.N. smiled a little and sighed. "Got it." She looked at Chuck. "I think I can use my lock picks."

Chuck exhaled a satisfied breath. "Not soon enough." The tip of L.I.N.'s right, index finger folded back. A set of lock picks extended from the end. L.I.N. sawed her wrists loose and freed her arms. She sat back and sighed. She grabbed the end of the server table beside the entrance and rolled towards the west wall. Chuck was taped to one of the tables on *that* side of the room. L.I.N. began sawing at tape across his chest.

"L.I.N.!" Brandy shouted. "Unplug this thing!"

L.I.N. looked up. "I'm not *touching* that stuff!" she shouted. "I'm sorry, Brandy. But, that's too much for me!" L.I.N. cut enough duct tape for Chuck to sit up. He popped up like a clown bop bag. He dug his fingers into strands of duct tape wrapping his legs. He ripped the tape off his legs, hopped up, and dashed across the room. L.I.N. watched him with a heavy heart. She heard what Daisy said. Brandy was in love with her boyfriend. And now, he was running across the room to save her. L.I.N. smirked and blew a breath through her lips.

"Whatever," she thought. "*Brandy's the one with the fork stuffed up her nose.*" She smiled a little. "*She needs help more than I do.*" L.I.N. stared helplessly at her seat. Her ankles were still taped underneath. She looked up and sighed.

Chuck stopped beside the teacher's desk on the other side of the room. He looked into Brandy's eyes. She looked pitiful. She was soaked with sweat. A pair of chrome forks was sticking out of her nostrils. Blood dribbled out of her nose, down her chin, and across her chest. It stained her blouse. Droplets of Daisy's blood dotted her forehead. Chuck pressed his lips together. He laid his palm on Brandy's shoulder. Brandy tilted her head back. She exhaled a heavy breath. Chuck looked away. He rotated Daisy's laptop and looked it over. He held the "Ctrl" key and pressed the "C" key. Daisy's script stopped running. Brandy could tell immediately, too. It felt like a fog rolled in... inside her head. She cringed. She closed her eyes and wrinkled her forehead.

"Gyad..." she protested. "Aw, man. I feel like crap." Chuck unplugged both forks. Then, he used the "down" command to turn off Daisy's laptop. He flipped it closed and set it on the nearest server table. Brandy blew a breath through her lips. She looked up. Chuck stood over her. He looked into her eyes and smiled. "*Chuck...*" Brandy groaned.

"I know," Chuck replied. He cradled the back of Brandy's skull in his left hand. He curled the fingers of his right hand around the prongs sticking out of her nostrils. He hesitated. "You think I should just..."

*"Pull them out!"* Brandy whined. "Please!" Chuck slid his lips to the side of his face. He pinched the forks between his thumb and forefinger and inched them towards Brandy's chin. Brandy scrunched up her face.

*"Ow! Ow! Ow!"* she squeaked.

*"Sh..."* Chuck whispered. "Try to relax." Brandy sobbed. Chuck eased the forks to the end of Brandy's nostrils. Blood began oozing out. It dribbled down Brandy's chin and soaked her shirt. Brandy tilted her head back and sighed.

"Aw, God," she protested. Chuck held the fork in front of his eyes. He tilted it and looked it over. He looked at the floor. Daisy was still breathing. But, she was out cold. Chuck looked around. There was so much brain matter, he figured Daisy's thinking days were over. In fact, he figured her days of speaking, driving, and going to the potty on her own were over as well. He lifted the fork above his shoulder. He chucked it at Daisy's limp, lifeless carcass. It bounced off the back of her skull and hit the floor. It clattered like a silver dollar. Chuck spotted Daisy's red, vinyl hand bag beside her head. He yanked it off the floor and looked inside. He figured Daisy had something for sopping up a nosebleed after sucking out someone's brain. He found a stack of silky handkerchiefs. He grabbed a handful and laid them against Brandy's nostrils. He held them in place and set Daisy's bag on the floor. He slid his fingers through Brandy's bouncy, swirling hair.

*"Okay..."* he purred. "Is that better?" Brandy closed her eyes and nodded her head. Chuck held the handkerchiefs with his left hand. He picked up Daisy's scalpel and used it to cut

Brandy loose. Brandy lifted her arms and wriggled her legs.

"Thanks, Chuck." Chuck grabbed a hold of Brandy's hand. He laid her fingers on the handkerchief and stepped away. He sighed and turned around. L.I.N. was still sitting in the student's chair. She stared at her lap, playing with her lock picks. Chuck tilted his head. He gasped.

"Oh. I'm sorry, L.I.N.! You're still taped to that thing, aren't you?" L.I.N. looked up. She showed Chuck her palm.

"No. It's okay, Chuck," she replied. "I'm fine. Don't worry about it." Chuck hurried across the room. He knelt beside the chair, cut his girlfriend's ankles loose, and scooped her in his arms. L.I.N. filled the room with giggles. "I'm free!" she shouted. "Thank God!" Chuck set L.I.N. on the table where *he* was taped. He laid his fingers on the side of her neck and looked into her eyes.

"Are you okay?" L.I.N. smiled and nodded. Chuck smiled back. He laid his lips on L.I.N.'s and started sucking. Brandy sniffled. She swatted at her nose with Daisy's handkerchiefs and sat up. She looked across the room. She noticed L.I.N. and Chuck making out. She narrowed her eyes. She noticed that L.I.N. was barefoot again. She looked around. She spotted L.I.N.'s shoes near the entrance. Brandy smiled a little. She slithered to her feet and stumbled across the room. She scooped L.I.N.'s shoes off the floor. Then, she wandered around the server table by the entrance and stood beside her friends. Chuck and L.I.N. stopped kissing and looked up. Brandy smiled. She offered L.I.N. her red, boat shoes.

"*You lost...*" Brandy rasped. She turned her head and cleared her throat. She looked up. "You lost your shoes again."

L.I.N. narrowed her eyes. "Oh..." She held out her hands. Brandy laid L.I.N.'s shoes on

her palms. "How'd *that* happen?" L.I.N. slipped her shoes on her feet and looked up. She stared into her buddy's dark, mysterious eyes. Brandy stared back. She wiped blood from her lips.

L.I.N. sighed. "So... How long have you been in love with my boyfriend?"

Chuck forced a smile. "Oh, L.I.N..." He looked away and rubbed the back of his neck. "Brandy isn't in love with me." He looked into Brandy's eyes. He squinted. "Are you?"

Brandy sighed. "Well, I mean..." She looked at L.I.N. "You guys don't..." She looked at Chuck. Chuck raised his eyebrows. Brandy folded her fingers and licked her lips. She raised her hands beside her hips. She wandered towards Chuck and threw her arms around his waist. "Of course I love you, Chuck," she replied. She laid her cheek against his chest. Chuck relaxed his face and bobbed his head. He understood. He wrapped his arms around Brandy's shoulders and squeezed. Brandy pinched her eyes shut and exhaled a shaky sigh. She and Chuck let go of each other. Brandy turned and faced L.I.N. She smiled and opened her arms. "And I love you too, L.I.N." She leaned forward and threw her arms around *L.I.N.'s* shoulders. L.I.N. looked up. She had no idea what the hell was going on. Chuck looked into his girlfriend's eyes and smiled. L.I.N. exhaled a quiet chuckle. She laid her palms on her buddy's back and closed her eyes. Brandy let go of L.I.N., turned, and sat beside her.

"You guys are my friends," she explained. "I love both of you." She looked into Chuck's eyes. "But, that girl..." She pointed across the room. "What's her name, again?"

Chuck smirked. "You kept calling her 'Daisy'."

Brandy bobbed her head. "Right. Daisy." She looked at L.I.N. "I think Daisy misunderstood. I'm not in *love* with Chuck." She narrowed her eyes. "He's your boyfriend."

L.I.N. nodded and smiled. "I get it."

Brandy looked at Chuck. "That girl is a psychotic narcissist. I don't think she

understands other people's emotions at all." The outer edges of Brandy's eyebrows sagged. "I think that's why..." Brandy scrunched up her face. *"I think that's why I destroyed her."* Brandy looked away and laid her fingers over her eyes.

"Oh..." L.I.N. groaned. She turned and wrapped her arms around her buddy's shoulders. Brandy turned her head and rested it on L.I.N.'s chest. Chuck flattened his lips and exhaled through his nostrils. He laid his fingers on Brandy's shoulder.

"It's okay, Brandy," he told her. "You didn't do anything wrong." Brandy sobbed. Chuck slid his lips to the side of his face. He looked over his shoulder. He noticed text on the computer monitors near the entrance. He remembered he needed to check a text file on the server in the middle. He made an "o" with his lips. He returned his attention to Brandy and L.I.N. "Excuse me, girls," he remarked. "I've gotta check something out, real quick." He snagged the chair L.I.N. was taped to, rolled it across the floor, and placed it in front of the middle computer monitor on the table near the entrance. He sat down and typed "ted The\_Omega." The screen filled with white text on a black background. Omega left Chuck a message, alright. And, it was very intriguing. It read,

"Hello, Chuck. Being in contact with your consciousness is a wonderful pleasure for myself. Intriguing, this indeed is. For Brandy altering the timeline of Daisy, I am most grateful as well. In case you have not decrypted such things, notice - you would not be reading this message if it was not for her. Never forget this fact. It is of the utmost importance. By the way, has Hal reported as to how he knew who Jeff Forrester was or how his machine worked? Ha, ha. Of course, he has not. I am aware of this. Soon, we will speak. And, some quandaries shall become less ambiguous. On the other hand, some quandaries shall become more mysterious.

"I am glad you enjoyed my 'message.' Be most cautious. And, love much for your latest

acquaintances. Care for you, they will as well.

-The Omega"