

## "The Subsets"

By Michael Atkins

## Chapter 1: "You Make Me Sick"

L.I.N. and Hal's living room... Or rather, Chuck and L.I.N.'s living room... The downstairs area of that house that Hal built in the middle of the woods was checkered with white and black tiles. The entire floor downstairs was covered with them. That included the kitchen, the living room, and an area behind a long, wooden staircase. In the living area, there was a soft, black, leather couch. It lay along the northern wall of the downstairs area. It was beside the front door. A matching love seat lay adjacent to the couch. It was on the west side of the living room. There was a long window above the couch. It was composed of four, glass squares lying in a row. The squares were connected with a copper grid. The window pushed out to open. A large area of trees were cleared away in order to build the house. So, the sky was clearly visible through the window. It was filled with indigo. It was showered with tiny dots of white and teal.

A round rug lay between the couch and the love seat. It was decorated with swirls of rainbow colored fractals. An oak coffee table rested on top. It was four feet by four feet. Brandy lay on the couch. A silky, crimson pillow lay below her right cheek. A squishy, colorful quilt lay across her body. Brandy's eyes were closed. She breathed like a little mouse. It was hard to tell she was even there. The room was pretty dark. Every light in the house was off. Brandy's eyelids began to flutter. Her forehead wrinkled. She exhaled an angry sigh. She curled her legs and hugged her shins. She swallowed and opened her eyes. They were used to the dark. Brandy could make out dim blotches of blurry light cast by the moon. The light lay across hazy edges of furniture. The furniture appeared hazy because Brandy was nearsighted. And, she didn't have her glasses on.

Brandy licked her lips and sat up. The quilt tumbled and piled around her waist. Brandy's hair draped to her shoulders. It was dark brown. It was straight and slick at the top. It

separated into bouncy coils halfway down. It drove her nuts. Brandy's eyes were murky and brown. She wore a small, black t-shirt decorated with colorful boxes. The boxes were arranged like a chart. They were scribed in black like the periodic table of elements. Brandy also wore a pair of red, flannel shorts. She looked around and sighed. There was a tiny, oak table beside the west arm of the couch and the north arm of the love seat. A sky blue lamp rested on top. The lamp was made of porcelain. It had a cream colored shade. Brandy lay across the arm of the couch. She grabbed a tiny, plastic knob on the lamp and twisted it. It filled the northern half of the living room with fuzzy, orange light.

Brandy's glasses and her cell phone lay beside the lamp. Her glasses had thin, rectangular lenses with no rims. They were held together by a thin, chrome rod. Two chrome ear pieces were folded underneath. The ends were draped with red, plastic sleeves. Brandy's cell phone had a tiny touch screen and white, plastic trim. The screen hid a keyboard with tiny, rubber keys. A USB cable was sticking out of the side of the screen. It connected Brandy's phone to an outlet behind the couch. Brandy slipped her fingers around the lenses of her glasses and flipped them open. She slipped them over the tops of her ears and the bridge of her nose. She laid her palms on her knees and stared into space. Her mind was filled with numbers and Greek symbols. They reminded her of physics. Brandy hadn't studied physics in a long time. She took a little college before becoming a pharmacist. She remembered taking a single physics course one semester. But, that was a long time ago.

Brandy was confused. She felt overwhelmed. She pinched her eyes shut and stared at the backs of her eyelids. Her eyes filled with numbers and symbols. Brandy thought about them carefully. She was staring at chains of equations and functions. She could tell they were tied together somehow. But, she had no idea what to do with them. She didn't even know where

they came from or why they were stuck in her head. Brandy opened her eyes and shook her head. Her pupils shrank. Brandy stared through the lenses of her glasses and narrowed her eyes. She needed paper. She reached over the arm of the couch and grabbed a knob below the table with the lamp. She opened a drawer. There was a spiral notebook and a couple of pencils inside. Brandy grabbed the notebook and looked it over. It had a shiny, green cover and a curly, steel spine. Brandy opened the cover and flipped through the pages. The entire notebook was blank.

Brandy flipped the cover over, grabbed a pencil and closed the drawer. She laid the notebook on the coffee table and looked the pencil over. It was hexagonal. It had a shiny, golden body and a soft, pink eraser. The eraser was surrounded by a shiny, chrome cylinder. Brandy tapped the tip of the pencil. It was sharp and pointed. Brandy folded her legs like a pretzel. She sat up and slid rolls of squishy, bouncy hair behind her ears. She rolled her eyes and exhaled an impatient breath.

*"Stupid hair..."* she whispered. She laid the tip of the pencil against the top, left corner of the notebook's first page. Her fingers were trembling. The tip of the pencil bounced against the stack of paper like a rubber ball. Brandy lifted her hands and looked them over. They jiggled like towers of gelatin dessert. Brandy swallowed and sighed. Her thoughts filled with strings of digits and symbols. It was strenuous and irritating. It made Brandy's head throb. Her hand shot towards the coffee table. Brandy gritted her teeth and watched. She knew what to write. But, she had no idea where it was coming from. The pages of the notebook were organized with stacks of teal lines. Thoughts poured through Brandy's mind so quickly, she couldn't keep her writing inside the lines.

She filled a large, white space at the top of the page with a series of sets. She separated each set with curly braces. She separated numbers between the braces with commas. Then,

Brandy began scribbling strings of Greek symbols, mathematical operators, and digits below that. She wrote on top of the blue lines and across them. Nothing made it between the lines. Brandy scrunched up her face and mashed her teeth together. Her brain felt like it was going to explode. She needed to get everything written down before she forgot it. She began turning the notebook and writing towards the bottom of the page. Her writing curled along the page in spirals. It looked frightening and hideous. The characters she scribbled began varying in size and shape. They were barely legible. But, Brandy couldn't stop.

Before long, she filled the first page. Brandy didn't let that slow her down. She flipped the page over and began scribbling on the other side. She couldn't express her thoughts clearly enough with the language of mathematics. It seemed inefficient and primitive. Brandy began digging into the page with the tip of her pencil. She flipped the notebook over and laid the page against the back of the front cover so she wouldn't scar L.I.N. and Hal's coffee table. Well, now it was L.I.N. and Chuck's coffee table. Or, maybe it was just Hal's coffee table. Whatever. Brandy buried the end of her pencil in the page and scribbled functions belonging to multiple variables. She knew she was writing calculus. But, she had no idea what it meant. She scribbled and scribbled and scribbled. She pressed the pencil so hard, the tip gave way. A chunk of pointed graphite at the end of the pencil folded back. A wooden stump behind the point smashed into the page. Brandy's writing halted with a heavy, repressive thump.

Brandy stared at the pencil in disbelief. She felt like she'd awoken from a dream. She studied her writing. It was a swirling, jumbled mess. It made no sense. Brandy heard a series of steady thumps. It sounded like someone tapping their finger against the page she was writing on. She looked down. The page was dotted with blood. Brandy gasped. She laid her pencil beside the notebook and touched her lips. They were warm and damp. Brandy studied the tips of her

fingers. They were shaking like leaves. And, they were stained with blood. Brandy held her hand below her chin. Blood dribbled from her chin and pooled on her palm. Brandy reached across the arm of the sofa. There was a box of tissues beside her phone. The box was violet with pictures of little, white flowers. Brandy snagged a handful of soft, squishy tissues and wadded them up. She mashed them against her nostrils and lips. She sighed and shook her head. She rested the back of her skull against the back of the sofa and closed her eyes.

L.I.N. felt sick. She woke up in her bed on her stomach. She wore a white tank top and a pair of black, flannel pants. Her pants were dotted with white numbers. They were digits of pi. Her right cheek lay flat against her mattress. Her feet were propped on a pair of pillows. L.I.N. lifted her head. Her hair dragged the bottom of her tie dye blanket. It was thrown over her head. L.I.N. heard static electricity crackling through her hair. She dragged her arms across a cool, black sheet covering her mattress. She laid her forearms below her chest, flattened them against her mattress, and used them to hold herself up. She tilted her head back and exhaled through her lips. She peeled her eyelids apart and looked around. She was surrounded by violet, magenta, and white swirls. They glowed in morning sunlight.

L.I.N. peeled her blanket off her head. She stared at her window. It had a copper skeleton with four squares of glass. The upper, left square was red. The upper, right square was blue. The lower, left was yellow. And, the lower, right was green. The window painted L.I.N.'s bedroom with a rainbow of dim light. L.I.N. closed her eyes and inhaled through her nostrils. She was laying the wrong way around. She looked over her shoulder. Her pillows were stacked below her feet. Her black pillow was on the bottom. A brown pillow with white polka dots lay on top. L.I.N. didn't care. She felt nauseated. Her stomach felt like it was filled with battery acid. L.I.N. searched her bed. She was all alone. She had no idea where Chuck had gotten off

to.

She threw her covers out of the way and rolled onto the floor. Squishy, tan carpet dug into her knees. L.I.N. crossed her ankles and sat on her calves. She pinched her eyes shut and exhaled a shaky breath. She felt terrible. She dragged herself to her feet and staggered towards the hallway. Her legs felt like noodles. She plopped her feet on cold, slick veneer covering the hallway floor. It made her shiver. She hugged her stomach and looked to the right. She was upstairs. A row of narrow, wooden posts dotted the edge of the hallway. A slat of wood rested along the tops of the posts. In the middle of the row of posts, there was an opening for the stairs. There was a wooden door surrounded by a wooden frame to L.I.N.'s right. It led to a bathroom. L.I.N. felt like crying. She felt dreadful.

She dragged herself across the hallway, stumbled into the bathroom, and closed the door. L.I.N. flipped a light switch beside the door. The bathroom floor was covered with the same veneer as the hallway. The walls were cream colored. There was a porcelain sink directly in front of the door. It was surrounded by a wooden countertop that matched the floor. The sink had a tall, curvy, golden faucet. There were hot and cold knobs. They were shaped like plus signs. There was a giant storage space below the sink. It was covered by two cream colored doors with golden handles. A large, oval shaped mirror hovered above the sink. It was also bordered by shiny, wooden veneer.

L.I.N. looked to her left. A porcelain, claw foot bath tub lined the opposite wall. It was surrounded by a slick, shiny curtain. The curtain was slathered with triangular, kaleidoscopic rainbows. Between the bath tub and the sink, there was a potty. It had a wooden seat and a wooden tank cover. There was a rug in front of the toilet. It was made of black, red, tan, and blue squares. A white, Greek letter was written on each square. L.I.N. looked beside the sink

faucet. There was a glass beside the knob on her right. L.I.N. wondered if putting something in her stomach would make her feel better. She snatched the glass off the counter and stared at it. It jiggled in her trembling, sweaty fingers. L.I.N. tried to lick her lips. Her tongue was dry and sticky. L.I.N. dangled the glass below the long, thin faucet. She turned the knob on the right. It was stamped with the letter "C."

L.I.N. filled the glass halfway and put it to her lips. She tilted her head back and gulped as much water as she could. Her stomach protested. It screamed in horror. L.I.N. yanked the glass from her lips. She bent over and rested her arms on the sink. She stared at a golden screen covering the drain and gasped for breath. She heard hummingbirds in her ears. The water in her stomach began churning. L.I.N. gritted her teeth and pinched her eyes shut. The glass dropped from her fingers and wobbled around the sink. L.I.N. exhaled a shaky breath through her lips. She laid her palm on her stomach. The water needed a place to go. It was the sink or the toilet. L.I.N. opted for the dignified approach. She stumbled across the bathroom and fell to her knees. She knelt on the rug in front of the toilet. She flipped the toilet seat and the lid out of the way. She slid her fingers through knotted, swirling strands of sapphire dangling from her head. She clenched her fists and wadded her hair behind her head.

L.I.N. gagged. The water she gulped down came up in one, effortless wretch. It gushed from her lips and showered water inside the toilet bowl. L.I.N. tilted her head back and uncoiled her fingers. Her hair was disheveled and clumpy. It dropped at the sides of her face and battered her neck. L.I.N. pinched her eyes shut, curled her fingers in front of her lips, and started coughing. Her throat felt like it was filled with shards of broken glass. L.I.N. bent over and cleared her airway. Then, she laid her fingers on her thighs and sighed. Her hair dangled in her face. Tears dribbled from her eyes. They dotted sigma and theta symbols on the rug. L.I.N.



took a pair of deep breaths. She wiped her eyes and slipped her hair behind her ears. She licked her lips. Her tongue felt better. It was engorged with saliva again. L.I.N. sat on her heels and closed her eyes. She felt like going back to sleep.

L.I.N. emerged from the bathroom moments later. The toilet was flushing. L.I.N. looked downstairs. The area downstairs glowed in dim, morning sunlight. L.I.N.'s buddy, Brandy was asleep on the couch. L.I.N. smiled. She forgot that Brandy was staying with them. She lost her job a couple of months prior. It happened when her friend, Joan and her supervisor, Ronnie were killed in the Blue Wall pharmacy. Afterwards, no one wanted to hire Brandy because of the way her coworkers died. They were ripped apart by a giant, gorilla sized, drug crazed psycho named "Lee Sanders." Logically, Brandy knew there was no reason other pharmacies shouldn't hire her. *She* didn't do anything wrong. That didn't matter, though. For some illogical reason, no one wanted to touch Brandy with a ten foot pole. She couldn't get a job anywhere. And, it was killing her. She wasn't able to pay her rent. So now, she'd been kicked out of her apartment.

It was humiliating and frustrating. It made L.I.N. sad. She felt like running downstairs and wrapping her arms around her little buddy's shoulders. L.I.N. wandered towards the opening in the upstairs banister. She crept down the stairs and looked around. She wondered what happened to Chuck. It wasn't like him to run off first thing in the morning. L.I.N. stopped halfway down the stairs. She looked at the tops of her eyes and smiled.

*"Oh, wait..."* she whispered. *"Yes, it is."* She slipped across the living area and crept across the rug. She stopped beside the sofa and folded her arms over her chest. Brandy's face was buried in a silky, crimson pillow. A quilt Hal bought long ago for his daughter, Mallory was draped across Brandy's body. L.I.N. smiled. Brandy looked so comfortable and peaceful. She'd been a complete wreck since she was kicked out of her apartment. L.I.N. hated to disturb her.

She checked a clock near the lower, right corner of her vision. A row of white digits read "7:13 AM." L.I.N. exhaled a silent breath. She knelt beside her friend, laid her fingers on her shoulder, and kissed the back of her head. L.I.N. looked over her shoulder. There were three wads of bloody tissues on the edge of the coffee table. L.I.N. narrowed her eyes. Brandy turned her head and opened her eyes. She was staring at a fountain of glowing, blue hair. She smiled and exhaled through her nostrils.

*"L.I.N..."* she groaned. *"What are you doing?"* L.I.N. faced forward. She licked her lips.

"Did you have a nosebleed?" Brandy glanced towards the coffee table. She spotted the bloody tissues. They looked blurry because she didn't have her glasses on. Brandy meant to get rid of her used tissues before anyone noticed. Apparently, she forgot. She'd had experiences similar to the one the night before during the past few weeks. She'd had them ever since Daisy Hill rammed a giant fork into her brain and tried to read her thoughts. She figured the two events were related. But, she didn't want to worry her friends until she was sure what was going on. So, she kept it a secret. She looked into L.I.N.'s glowing, green eyes. She smiled and shrugged.

"Go figure."

L.I.N. raised her eyebrows. "Were you picking it?"

Brandy gasped. "No!"

L.I.N. grinned. "You were! Weren't you?"

Brandy looked away and fought back a smile. "Shut-up, L.I.N."

L.I.N. pointed between Brandy's dark brown eyes. "You were picking it!" She cupped her fingers over her lips. "You little nose picker!"

Brandy stared into L.I.N.'s eyes. "L.I.N.!"

L.I.N. smacked her thigh. "I'm telling Chuck!"

Brandy giggled. "I don't give a shit!" She buried her face in her pillow. "Bite me!"

Brandy breathed a sigh of relief. She felt like she dodged a bullet. L.I.N. looked around.

"Where *is* Chuck, anyway?" She stared at the back of Brandy's head. "Have you seen him?" Brandy looked up. She shook her head. Opera music began playing. It came from a shiny, oak door across the room. It led to Hal's laboratory. Brandy and L.I.N. followed the music through Hal's server room. Then, they wandered through his chemistry lab. There was a door at the other end of the chemistry lab. It led to the garage. L.I.N. entered the garage, followed by Brandy. Brandy eased the door shut. The girls plugged their ears and looked around. The walls of the garage were trimmed with oak paneling. The floor was made of shiny concrete. It was dotted with black speckles. There were two roll up doors across the room. Each had three windows arranged in a row.

Hal's maroon compact was parked in front of the roll up door across the room. Brandy's little, piece of shit car was parked in front of the door closest to the girls. It was a Hanna Civil, two door. It was white. But, the front, left fender was red. The driver's side door was open. Chuck's legs were sticking out. He was wearing a pair of faded jeans with holes in the knees. A pair of sloppy, black sneakers poked out of the bottoms. Chuck lay across Brandy's front seats. He wore a grey shirt with black stripes. Sprouts of shaggy, jet black hair wrapped the sides of his face. He stared at a CD player in the middle of Brandy's dash. He just installed it. There was a knob near the driver's side of the CD player. Chuck's thumb and forefinger were wrapped around the knob. He listened carefully. He turned the knob to the right. The audio faded to the right side of the car. Chuck pressed a button beside the knob. There was a screen across the middle of the CD player. A row of glowing, turquoise letters printed across the screen. They read "Fade: 0."

Chuck turned the knob to the left. The message changed to "Fade: F15." The audio faded towards the front of Brandy's car. Now, the front, right speaker was the only one playing. Chuck nodded. He moved the audio to the rear, right speaker. The audio could still be heard. Chuck shrugged. He looked below the driver's side door. Somebody's foot appeared. The person's nails were painted violet. Chuck sat up. He spotted Brandy through the driver's side window. She had her fingers in her ears. She scrunched up her face and shrugged her shoulders. Chuck gasped. He tapped the button beside the knob twice. The screen read "Vol: 64." Chuck twisted the knob to the left. He stopped when the screen read "Vol: 13." He looked through the windshield. He spotted L.I.N. standing beside the door to Hal's chemistry lab. She took her fingers out of her ears and folded her arms across her chest. Chuck faced Brandy.

"I'm sorry, girls. Did I wake you up?"

Brandy shook her head. "No." She peeked around the edge of her door. "What are doing?" Chuck searched the floor of Brandy's car. He spotted her old tape deck. It was lying on the passenger's side of the floor. It was beside a giant hump in Brandy's red, cola stained carpet. The face of the tape deck was black with black buttons and knobs. The sides were steel. Chuck wrapped his fingers around the side of the tape deck and showed it to Brandy. Brandy stared through her window. She smiled. "You... put in a CD player?"

"Yeah," Chuck replied.

Brandy dropped her fists at her sides. "Chuck! I can't afford a new CD player! I can't even pay my rent!"

Chuck smiled and narrowed his eyes. "Don't worry about it," he replied. "*I* bought it."

Brandy pointed between Chuck's shiny, tan eyes. "*You* can't afford a new CD player, either!"

Chuck threw his hands out at his sides. "What do you mean? I work for the school system. Remember?" Brandy looked away. She rolled her eyes.

"Yeah," she mumbled. *"That's kind of what I meant."* L.I.N. wandered towards Brandy's car. She folded her arms on the hood and stared through the windshield.

"How come *Brandy* gets a CD player, huh?" She stood up and narrowed her eyes. "What do *I* get?"

Chuck smiled. "You *have* a CD player. Remember?" A shiny, black barrette lay across the top of L.I.N.'s head. It disappeared behind her ears. Actually, it wasn't a barrette. That was just a clever disguise. In actuality, it was the tray of a CD ROM. The tray lifted off the top of L.I.N.'s head. It slid out six inches and stood straight up. L.I.N. looked at Brandy. Brandy stared back. She squinted.

"Oh, yeah," L.I.N. replied. She laid her finger along the edge of her CD tray. "I always forget about that thing." She shoved the tray inside her head. "No one really uses CDs anymore. This one's mainly for installing operating systems." She faced Chuck. Brandy looked into Chuck's eyes. A smile slid up her cheeks.

"Thanks, Chuck. I appreciate it." Chuck shrugged. He grabbed up a pile of wire ends, splicers, and tools. He sat up. He laid his finger on the button beside the knob on Brandy's CD player. He pressed it until the screen read "Bal: R15." He turned the knob to the left. The screen changed to "Bal: 0." Chuck returned the fade setting to normal as well. Then, he pressed the knob. He held it down until the music stopped playing.

"It's the least I could do," Chuck replied. Brandy's keys were dangling from her ignition. Chuck twisted them and took them out of the steering column. He hopped out of Brandy's car and closed the door. He dangled Brandy's keys in front of her eyes. "You know, since you'll

probably be living in this thing pretty soon." Brandy smacked her lips. She took her keys and looked at the floor.

"*Chuck...*" she groaned. Chuck smiled. He stepped forward and wrapped his arms around Brandy's shoulders.

"I'm just kidding, honey. It's gonna be okay." L.I.N. smiled. She wandered across the garage and stood behind Brandy. "Don't worry," Chuck continued. L.I.N. laid against Brandy's back. She slipped her arms around Brandy *and* Chuck. Brandy tilted her head back and giggled.

"L.I.N.! You guys are squooshing me!" Chuck snickered. He peeled L.I.N.'s arms off his waist and laid them around Brandy's. Chuck stepped away and stared into Brandy's eyes. The lenses of her glasses looked dirty. Brandy stared back and fought back a smile. Chuck slipped Brandy's glasses off her face. He held them in front of his eyes and looked them over. He laid Brandy's left lens on the bottom of his shirt. He wrapped his shirt around the lens with his free hand and swabbed it. Brandy looked over her shoulder. L.I.N. was squeezing her waist like a vise. Brandy sighed. "You make me sick." Chuck swabbed Brandy's other lens. He held her glasses in front of his eyes and stared through the lenses. He nodded. He returned Brandy's glasses to her face and patted her shoulder. Brandy smiled. "Thanks, Chuck."

"Sure, Brandy," Chuck replied. He walked beside Brandy, turned, and smacked L.I.N.'s ass. L.I.N.'s arms went slack. Brandy hopped away and turned around. L.I.N. dropped her fists at her sides. She turned her head and glared into her boyfriend's eyes.

"Chuck!" she shouted. Chuck chuckled. L.I.N. fought back a laugh. She glanced at Brandy. Brandy's cheeks felt flush. She tore a grin from her face and looked at the floor. L.I.N. pointed between Chuck's eyes. "*I told you not to do that in front of company!*" she whispered. Chuck smiled. He laid his palm on L.I.N.'s shoulder. Brandy looked up.

"Can we... make some breakfast or something?" She laid her fingers on her belly. "I'm starving." L.I.N. looked up. She licked her lips and stared at the floor. She still felt like crap. Chuck nodded.

"Sure. Let's go see what we can scrounge up." Chuck, L.I.N., and Brandy returned to the living room. A clip from some crummy alternative band was coming from the couch. Brandy looked around.

"That's my phone." She wandered across the living room.

Chuck smirked. "No, shit?" he inquired. Brandy glanced over her shoulder. She glared at Chuck. She faced the table between the sofa and the love seat. She picked up her phone and studied the screen. She faced L.I.N. and Chuck.

"It's Detective Phillips," she remarked.

Chuck clapped his hands together and grinned. "Oh, boy!" he replied, sarcastically. "And, *I* didn't think I was going to have anything to do today."

## Chapter 2: "A Tangent Timeline. A Tangent. A."

Detective Phillips stumbled upon something rather intriguing. That's what she told Brandy, anyway. Chuck wasn't so sure. Hal was mildly amused. L.I.N. didn't care. She loved giving Detective Phillips a hand. Brandy drove Hal, L.I.N., and Chuck down a lonely, two lane highway. It was out in the country. They went in Brandy's cruddy, little Civil. Chuck sat in the front seat. He was checking out Brandy's new CD player. He was fiddling with the satellite radio. He tuned it to a station that played nothing but sappy, senseless, alternative music. Chuck looked up and smiled.

"Oh, cool," he remarked. "I found *you* a station, Brandy."

Brandy gasped. "That's The Bird Brains!" she exclaimed. She reached around her steering wheel and twisted the volume knob to the right. "I haven't heard them in years." L.I.N. sat behind Brandy. Hal sat behind Chuck. Hal bobbed his head, slowly. He was nodding it to the music. L.I.N. scrunched up her face. She folded her arms on the backs of Brandy and Chuck's seats. She leaned forward.

"This music sucks, Brandy! Turn it off!"

Brandy's eyes popped open. "Hey!" She stared at L.I.N. in her rear view mirror and smiled. "I'm gonna punch you in the face!" Chuck changed the station. Brandy's speakers responded with languid pumps from a bass guitar. Dueling bass drums thumped in tandem with the chords.

"Ooooo..." Chuck groaned. "X-Team." He looked over his shoulder. "You listen to old, rock music. Right, Hal?"

"Yes, Chuck." He tried to smile. Nothing happened. "Do you think you can find The June Bugs on there? That would be delightful."



Chuck changed stations. "I'll see what I can come up with."

The lonely road Brandy traveled was surrounded by miles of burgundy, wooden fence. The fence consisted of short, fat posts every thirty feet. They had pointed tops. Two rows of thin, wooden shafts were tied along the backs of the posts. They were tied with Xs of thick, furry rope. Beyond the fence, there were thick blades of emerald colored grass. The grass extended fifteen feet behind the fence. The land after the grass was blanketed with miles of tall, golden stalks. They were stalks of wheat. Some of them were over six feet tall. A light breeze wafted across the tops of the fields. Wobbly stalks of wheat swirled lazily, like tissues in a blender. Some of the stalks were squashed by tractor tires. They were mashed in long, wide rows called "tramlines." Apparently, the tractors used in the wheat fields had gigantic, industrial grade tires. The tramlines were wide enough to drive a car through.

Brandy pulled off the highway. She stopped beside a steel post sticking out of the grass. There was a tiny sign near the top. It was green with a white border. Three white numbers coated the sign from top to bottom. They read "598." Brandy looked at Chuck.

"This is it."

Chuck pointed through the windshield. "There's an opening in the fence."

Brandy nodded. "You think I should just drive through right there?" The car was parked on a lot of dirt. Chuck pointed out a pair of tire tracks in the dirt. They left a trail from the edge of the highway. The trail passed through the hole in the fence. The tire tracks wandered into one of the tramlines and disappeared.

"I think that's what Icky did," Chuck explained. "Just follow those tire tracks."

"Okay," Brandy conceded. She drove through the break in the fence. She entered the tramline with Icarus' tire tracks. Brandy looked at Chuck. She narrowed her eyes. "What

happened to your lip?" she inquired.

Chuck stared back. "Huh?" Brandy faced forward. She tapped the right corner of her bottom lip with her index finger.

"It's swollen right there." Chuck touched the right side of his lip. He discovered a big, fat bump near the right edge. It was the size of a dime.

"Huh," Chuck remarked. He pinched the little bump. It felt like he was squashing his lip with a pair of channel locks. Chuck sucked air through his teeth. He wrinkled his nose. He tapped the tiny mountain on his lip and looked at Brandy. "I don't know *what* that is." He squinted. "Maybe a pimple?"

Brandy checked her rear view mirror. "On your lip?"

Chuck slid his mouth to the side of his face. "Hmm... I don't know." L.I.N. leaned across Hal's lap. She laid her chin on the back of Chuck's seat.

"You have a pimple on your lip?" she inquired. Hal tried to raise his eyebrows. Then he remembered... he didn't have any.

"I had a pimple on my ass one time," Hal remarked. L.I.N. smacked her lips. She glared at Hal over her shoulder.

"Hal!" she shouted. "That's disgusting!"

Hal tilted his head. "It was in the crack." He looked at his lap and shook his head. "It hurt like Hell every time I had a bowel movement." L.I.N. reached across Chuck's shoulder. She poked her boyfriend's lip with the tip of her index finger.

"I doesn't feel like a zit," she remarked. "It feels like you got punched."

Chuck mashed an area below his lip with the first two fingers of his right hand. "No. I would've remembered getting punched."

Brandy pointed through her windshield. "There they are." Chuck, L.I.N., and Hal looked where Brandy was pointing. There was a small clearing in the field. It was large enough for a handful of cars to park. Icarus' car was parked near the middle. He and Detective Phillips were sitting on the hood. Icarus' car was an eighties model. The body was flat with straight edges. It was a four-door. Parts of it were covered with faded, grey paint. But, it was covered with chips and scratches. The driver's side door was smashed. Squiggly scrapes traveled from the dent in the door to the driver's side tail light. The radiator was facing Brandy's car. Icarus sat on the passenger's side of the hood. Detective Phillips sat to his left. They were holding hands. They looked up and waved.

Brandy parked her Civil beside Icarus' car. Icarus and Phillips hopped off Icarus' hood. Brandy and Chuck got out. They turned and tilted the backs of their seats. Hal and L.I.N. stepped out. Phillips stopped near Brandy's car. Chuck looked her over. There was a cigarette dangling from her lips. The stench of cigarette smoke hit Chuck like a kick in the chest. Phillips' lips were glittery and dark. They looked like rubies. Her eyes were poppy and blue. A fountain of cream colored hair gushed from her scalp. It poured over her ears, cheeks, and neck. It pooled above her shoulders. Detective Phillips wore a tan blazer, a crimson blouse, indigo jeans, and pointed, black boots.

Icarus' face was thin and bony. It was littered with scars. His left eye was navy blue and half closed. His right eye was honey colored. It was peeled like a banana. He wore a white, wool jacket dotted with cameras. The cameras were covered with transparent domes. The cameras' shutters were an array of browns, blues, greens, and hazels. They looked like eyes. Icarus wore a red, button up shirt and black jeans. His shoes looked like they were from the twenties. They had slick, white insteps, shiny, black tips, and black heels. Brandy wore a

turtleneck. It was white, wrapped with teal, turquoise, and cornflower bands. She wore brown khakis and teal tennis shoes with white laces. Bouncy coils of chocolate colored hair dangled around her shoulders. The lenses of her glasses dangled from the tip of her nose. Brandy pinched a chrome rod holding them together and slid her glasses up the bridge of her nose.

L.I.N. wore a mahogany sweater. It was showered with vertical creases. She also wore amber jeans and sky blue canvas shoes with white tips. She stood beside Chuck and slipped her fingers between his. Chuck wore the same clothes he wore earlier. The only difference was he threw a red, plaid jacket on top of his grey and black shirt. Phillips snagged the cigarette hanging from her lips. She inhaled through her teeth and exhaled through her nostrils.

"Thanks for joining us, guys," Phillips remarked. She smiled. Chuck frowned.

"What the hell do you want, Laura?"

Phillips scoffed. "My, my..." She laid the end of her cigarette against her lips. She kissed it and yanked it from her face. She puffed out three smoke rings. Then, she exhaled through the middles of the rings. They disintegrated. "Someone's in a foul mood, today."

Chuck swatted smoky air in front of his face. "That's what happens," he replied. He plopped his hands on his hips and leaned forward. "When people are... overworked and underpaid." Phillips smacked her lips. She raised her cigarette and held it between her thumb and middle finger.

"Chuck, you are an unappreciative *ass!*" She tapped the body of her cigarette with her pointer finger. A quarter inch cylinder of ash flopped off the end. It toppled through the air bounced off Chuck's chest. Chuck looked at his shirt. He dusted his chest with the tips of his fingers.

"Favorite shirt, by the way."

Phillips smirked and shook her head. "Chuck, you couldn't be pissed off even if you wanted to be." Chuck rolled his eyes. He looked away and fought back a smile. Phillips gripped her stogie with her thumb, forefinger, and middle finger. She laid the end of the filter against the corner of her mouth. The tip of the cigarette was dull and grey. It began glowing. Phillips tugged the cigarette away from her face and parted her lips. A white puff appeared in front of her mouth. Then, it vanished. "I'll make you a deal," Phillips offered. She turned her head and exhaled. A faint, white cylinder spewed from her lips and dissipated. Phillips looked into Chuck's eyes. "Help me out with this one last thing, real quick." She licked her shiny, crimson lips. "And then, I'll talk to my captain. I'll see if I can get you guys on the payroll." She laid her cigarette between her lips, folded her arms over her chest, and grinned. "How does *that* sound?"

Chuck smiled back. "Hazy." He waved his hand in front of his face.

Phillips eyes popped open. "I will! I promise!" She made a pair of scissors with her first and second fingers. She grabbed her cigarette and yanked it away. She parted her lips and inhaled through her nose. Tufts of smoke wafted from her lips and shot up her nostrils. "Just help me out with this one thing, first. Okay?"

Chuck looked away and rubbed the back of his neck. "What thing is that?" He looked into Phillips' warm, blue eyes and smiled. Phillips dropped her cigarette on the ground. She squashed it with the tip of her boot. She turned around and looked at Chuck over her shoulder.

"This." She stepped to her right and vanished. Chuck's eyes popped open.

"What..." He looked at L.I.N. L.I.N. turned her head and looked into Chuck's eyes. She raised her eyebrows.

"Where did she go?" Brandy stared at an empty spot of squashed wheat stalks. It was the

spot where Phillips was standing. Brandy looked up. Icarus stared back. His long, thin lips curled at the ends. Hal stood beside Brandy. Glints of morning sunlight sprinkled his shiny, brass body. He tilted his head.

"How divine," he mused. Phillips reappeared. Her boot poked out of an empty space in the air and plopped on the ground. Her knee bent. Then, her arm and her head popped out. Phillips tugged the rest of her body out of the special space and faced Icarus. She looked over her shoulder.

"What do you think about *that*, Chuck?" She swirled around and faced the others.  
"Huh?"

Chuck folded his arms over his chest. "That's fuckin' nuts! Are you kidding me, or what?"

Icarus took a breath. "It gets weirder."

Chuck threw his arms out at his sides. "How?" Icarus blew a breath through his lips. He pointed at the spot beside Phillips.

"Step inside. *You'll* see what I mean." Chuck pressed his lips together. He wandered towards Phillips. His fingers and L.I.N.'s were still tied together. L.I.N. gasped.

"Chuck, no!" Her heels began dragging through a layer of dirt. It lay below strands of wheat littering the ground. Chuck stopped and looked over his shoulder. L.I.N.'s big, green eyes popped open. She took a breath and shook her head. "I'm scared."

Chuck grinned. "Oh come on, L.I.N. I wanna see what's inside." He tugged at L.I.N.'s fingers. L.I.N. tugged back. She gripped Chuck's fingers with both of her hands and pulled them towards her chest.

"No-o-o-o-o-wah!" Her head shook like a leaf. Her eyebrows squashed at the outer

edges. "Don't go in there! Please!"

Chuck stared into L.I.N.'s eyes and smiled. "We'll go through together. Okay?" He patted her shoulder. "Come on. I don't think it's going to be *that* bad."

"Mmmm..." L.I.N. grumbled. "I don't think so. I don't like this." Chuck led L.I.N. to the spot next to Phillips. He motioned towards the space with his hand. It was the hand L.I.N. was holding.

"Here. You go first." L.I.N.'s lips quivered. She turned her head and stared. She didn't see anything. There was only air. And, that was everywhere. She looked at Phillips.

"What do I do?"

Phillips bobbed her head. "Just take a step to your right." L.I.N. looked into Chuck's shiny, brown eyes. She licked her lips.

"I'm sorry." She chuckled, nervously. "I-I have kind of a hard time with new things, sometimes. *You* know."

"Oh!" Hal spat. He cupped his fingers in front of his lips and chuckled. He stared at the ground and raised his hand. "That's all my fault, dear. Sorry." L.I.N. looked Chuck over. She pressed her lips together.

"I-I don't know what to do." Chuck smiled. He bent over, grabbed L.I.N.'s ankle, and lifted her foot off the ground. L.I.N. gasped. "Chuck!" Her opposite knee buckled. L.I.N. raised her arm and straightened it in case she fell. She gritted her teeth. "I'm screwing this up."

Chuck licked his lips. "Just take a step to your right."

L.I.N. shook her head. "Nuh-uh. Don't. Don't do it." Chuck narrowed his eyes. He grabbed L.I.N.'s shoulder with his free hand and shoved her through. L.I.N. shrieked.

She landed in another wheat field. She stood on the balls of her feet. She bent her knees

and curled her arms in front of her chest. She looked around. She was all alone. "Chuck?" she inquired. She looked behind her. "Chuck?" The wheat field looked similar to the one L.I.N. was in before. The stalks were over six feet tall. L.I.N. was standing in a clearing in the stalks. However, Icarus and Brandy's cars were gone. And, the sky was filled with dark, murky clouds. In the other wheat field, the sky was glowing and blue. L.I.N. began panting like a dog. She faced forward. She bowed her head and laid her fingers over her eyes.

*"Chuck..."* she chanted. *"Chuck, Chuck, Chuck, Chuck, Chuck..."* Chuck appeared beside her. L.I.N. looked up. She exhaled a shaky sigh. "Oh! There you are!" She wrapped her arms around her boyfriend's waist. She squeezed him like a vise. Chuck smiled and exhaled through his nostrils. He slipped his arms around L.I.N.'s shoulders and kissed the top of her head.

"It's okay, L.I.N." he assured her. "I'm right here." Detective Phillips stepped through. She bumped into Chuck. She jabbed Chuck's hip with the tips of her fingers. Her breasts squashed against Chuck's left arm. Her nose mashed against his shoulder. Her knees and shins dug into Chuck's ribs. Chuck squirmed and hopped aside. "Gyah!" he shrieked. "Hey!"

"Chuck!" Phillips fired back. "Get the hell out of the way!" Chuck took L.I.N.'s hand. He led her a few feet from the doorway. Phillips stepped aside and folded her arms over her chest.

Brandy, Icarus, and Hal stood in the original wheat field. It was sunny and cheery. Faint chirps from birds dotted tops of wheat stalks. Brandy stared at dirt below piles of folded, mangled reeds. The dirt was glowing and squishy. It looked orange in the light of day. Brandy was looking near the spot where Detective Phillips stepped through. She looked up. Icarus stared back. He smiled.

"Go ahead, Brandy. Don't be scared." Brandy stood next to Hal. She turned her head.



Hal stared through the lenses of Brandy's glasses. He tried to blink. Nothing happened.

"What's the matter, Brandy?" Brandy licked her lips. She faced Icarus.

"Where?" She lifted her arms and spread her fingers. She swirled her arms through the air. "Where's that special spot, Icky?" Icarus smiled. His smile was hideous and intimidating. He cupped the hood of his jacket around his head. He snagged a pair of tiny alligator clips. They were tucked inside his hood. They were attached to a pair of wires. Icarus parted his lips and stuck out his tongue. He attached the alligator clips to the sides of his tongue. Then, he tapped the cuffs of his sleeves with the tips of his fingers. A pair of power buttons was sewn into the wrists of his jacket. Cameras covering his jacket powered on. They sucked in data from surrounding imagery. A pair of human eyes would take days to perceive the amount of data Icarus' cameras gathered in seconds. Icarus pointed at a spot on the ground. It was eleven inches in front of the toes of Brandy's teal, tennis shoes.

"There," Icarus remarked. "In front of you." He narrowed his brown eye, the one on the right side of his face. His left eye was *always* narrow. "And, don't call me 'Icky'. You *know* I hate that." Brandy giggled. She cupped her fingers over her lips and stared at the ground. She slipped bouncy coils of hair behind her ears and looked around. She looked up and squinted.

"Where? I don't see it."

Icarus bobbed his head. "It's right there. Just step forward." Brandy pressed her lips together. She lifted her right foot. She planted it on a mountain of dull, crunchy stalks of wheat. Then, she lifted her left foot.

The dirt faded. It looked orange one moment. When Brandy picked up her left foot, the dirt was the color of umber. Brandy gasped. She laid her left foot beside her right foot. Stacks of dead wheat grass crunched below the soles of her tennis shoes. Brandy looked up. Chuck and

L.I.N. were standing two yards away. They looked into Brandy's eyes and smiled. Brandy looked to her left. Phillips was standing beside her. She smiled. She motioned towards L.I.N. and Chuck with her head.

"Move," she instructed. "So Icky and Hal can get through." Brandy nodded. She stepped aside and stood next to Chuck. She stared at the spot where she stepped through and folded her arms over her chest. Hal's left foot appeared. It was shaped like a boot. The front half was separate from the back half. The halves were connected with a hinge near the tops. The sole of Hal's foot was covered with a thin sheet of golden rubber. There was a brass colored ball near the top, rear half of Hal's foot. It was sticking out of a shiny, brass cup. The cup was attached to the bottom of Hal's calf. The rest of Hal's leg slid through the doorway. Then, his left arm, most of his upper body, and his face appeared. Web cameras sticking out of his face slid from side to side.

"Huh," Hal remarked. He stepped through the gateway and hurried out of the way. Icarus tumbled through the gateway. He was tucked into a ball. He did two backwards flips, landed on all fours, and bobbed his head around like a lizard. Phillips smiled.

"Do you see anything?" Icarus licked his long, thin lips. He hopped to his feet and looked over his shoulder.

"No," he replied. He yanked the alligator clips from the sides of his tongue. He tucked them inside his jacket and lowered the hood. "Something looks strange, though."

Phillips narrowed her eyes. "What?"

Icarus shrugged. "I don't know." L.I.N. stared at the ground. There was a rock beside her foot. It was the size of a shot glass. It was jagged and white. It looked like a puffy, cumulus cloud. It made L.I.N. smile. It started moving on its own. L.I.N. gasped. Her eyes popped

open. The rock slid across the dirt. It left a perfectly straight groove in its wake. It moved about the speed of a toy car. L.I.N. turned her head as it drifted away. She lost track of it after it moved ten yards. Chuck looked to his right. He stared at the back of his girlfriend's head. He puffed up his cheeks.

"Uh... L.I.N.?"

L.I.N. looked up. "That rock." She looked to her right and pointed. "Did you see that rock?"

Chuck peered over the top of his girlfriend's head. "What rock?"

Brandy's eyes popped open. "Whoa." She pointed in front of her. "Look at *that*." Chuck and L.I.N. faced forward. Phillips looked over her shoulder. Icarus looked to his left. Hal looked to his right. There was a row of wheat stalks that were taller than the others. They were beyond a row directly behind Phillips. They were moving like the rock L.I.N. spotted. They trotted along like a row of railroad cars being pulled by a train. A bolt of pink electricity wiggled across the sky. The air filled with rolls of crackles. L.I.N. was still holding Chuck's hand. She let go, bowed her head, and stuffed her fingers in her ears. Hal watched the wheat stalks, curiously.

"This is bizarre," he remarked. He looked at Detective Phillips. "Laura, you seem to have discovered some sort of unstable, parallel universe."

Icarus pretended to clear his throat. "Ahem..." Hal glanced at Icarus. "*I* found it," Icarus corrected.

"Oh..." Hal blew through a chuckle. "My apologies, Dr. Ulrich. How presumptuous of me."

Brandy crossed her arms. "I don't like this place. It's creepy." She looked around.

"And, what happened to my car?"

Chuck looked to his left. "You wanna go back and get it?"

"It won't work," Phillips explained. "Me and Dickarus already tried that."

"Hey!" Icarus shouted.

Chuck narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean? What happened when you tried?"

Phillips shrugged. "I don't know. It didn't work when we were in the car." Phillips raised her arm and flattened her hand. Her palm faced the ground. "It just kinda..." Phillips slid her fingers through the air in front of her chest. "Drove through." Phillips dropped her arm at her side. "It's like the little doorway wasn't even there." Hal tapped his chin with his pointer finger. It sounded like a hammer tapping a nail.

"The door isn't wide enough for a car." He stared at the ground. "So, it just kind of... bent out of the way."

Brandy slid her lips to the side of her face. "Well, that sucks. I want my car back." Chuck smiled. He patted Brandy's shoulder.

"It'll be okay, Brandy. It's not going anywhere."

L.I.N. stared at the ground. "Yeah." She raised her eyebrows. "It's not like anyone's going to steal it."

Brandy grinned. "Shut-up." She looked at Detective Phillips. "How long do you think it'll have to *stay* out there?"

Phillips shrugged. "I don't know, Brandy. Maybe a few hours?"

"Hmm..." Hal mused. "Maybe not." Everyone faced Hal. Hal looked up. "Well, we don't know how time *works* here." He looked around. "It could be that a few hours in here are like a few seconds out there." He pointed towards the gateway. Chuck folded his arms over his

chest.

"Yeah. Or, it could be that a few seconds in *here* are like a few *days* out *there*." He shrugged. "Also, we don't know what this place is or where it came from." He squinted. "What if the whole thing just starts falling apart?" Chuck looked up. A row of wheat grass began moving towards him. His eyes popped open. "Um..." He shoved L.I.N. aside. The row of wheat grass began swirling between him and his girlfriend. Chuck stared between stalks of wheat as they passed. He could see L.I.N. on the other side. She stared back. She blinked. The last stalks of wheat whizzed by. They disappeared into rows of wheat stalks on the other side of the clearing. L.I.N. turned her head and watched. Chuck pressed his lips together. "Hmph." He looked at Hal. "Maybe it already *is*."

Hal threw his hands out at his sides. "That could be, Chuck. I'm not sure." Icarus looked over his shoulder. He was staring down a tramline. It looked like the tramline he and Brandy drove across to get to the original clearing.

"Let's head back to the highway," he suggested. "I wanna see what's over there."

Detective Phillips rubbed the back of her neck. "I don't know, Icky." She looked towards the tramline. "Hal and Chuck are asking some pretty scary questions. I'm not sure how safe this is." Icarus narrowed his eyes and lifted his eyebrows. He threw his hood over his head, hooked up his jacket, and tapped the cuffs of his sleeves. He looked around.

"You guys coming? Or, are you gonna keep acting like a bunch of pussies?" Brandy gasped. L.I.N. peeled her eyes and folded her fingers over her mouth. Phillips scrunched up her face.

"Ic-ar-us!"

Icarus threw his arms out at his sides. "Hey, I'm sorry. But either shit, or get off the pot."

He began backing away. "You know what I'm saying?"

Chuck grinned. "Amen, brother." He headed towards the tramline. He stood beside Icarus and faced the others. "Let's move, people." He looked at Hal and L.I.N. "And, robots." L.I.N. looked around. She grinned.

"Oh, what the hell." She curled her arm through Brandy's. Then, she dragged Brandy towards the tramline. "Why not?"

Brandy's eyes popped open. "Um... L.I.N.?" Hal stomped towards the others. He tried to smile. It didn't work out. Chuck, L.I.N., Brandy, and Hal wandered past Icarus and headed towards the highway. Phillips folded her arms over her chest. She glared into Icarus' eyes. Icarus stared back. He smirked. Phillips shook her head. She fought back a smile. She headed towards her boyfriend.

"I'm gonna show *you* a pussy, here in a minute."

Icarus tilted his head. "It's too late. You already showed me that. Remember?" Phillips jabbed her elbow into Icarus' ribs as she passed. Icarus' face lit up. "Oh, no! Uh-uh!" Icarus stood behind Phillips. He slipped his right arm across her throat and his left arm across the top of her head. "Where do you think *you're* going?" Phillips tensed up. She widened her eyes and gritted her teeth.

"Icarus! I have a gun, you know!"

Icarus cackled. "Oh, I think we both remember what happened the *last* time you pulled a gun on me."

Black swirled across the sky. Bolts of hot, white electricity swirled across the black. Rumbles like crashes from tumbling boulders echoed across the field. Chuck led the way. L.I.N. trampled behind him. Her arm was curled through Brandy's. She dragged Brandy beside

her. Brandy looked around, nervously. She had a bad feeling. Hal followed Brandy. Phillips and Icarus followed *him*. Waves of thick, grey mist blanketed the air around them. They couldn't see past one hundred feet in front of their eyes. All they saw was heavy fog. L.I.N. looked at the dirt. She stopped. Brandy's elbow snagged L.I.N.'s. She stumbled and nearly fell to the ground. She scrunched up her face and glanced over her shoulder.

"L.I.N.! What the hell?" L.I.N. stared at stalks of wheat littering the path. She blinked. Brandy looked down. A row of wheat stalks was mashed along the tramline. It trotted along the path. It wandered beside L.I.N.'s right foot and headed down the tramline. L.I.N. looked over her shoulder and stared at the ground. Brandy looked between L.I.N.'s legs. The stalks curled out of rows of grass standing beside them. They marched around a corner like a line of ants and moseyed down the tramline. Hal stopped beside L.I.N.'s left foot. He stared at the ground beside her right foot.

"Oh, dear," he mused. "I certainly hope that's not dangerous." L.I.N. stared at the tip of her right shoe. It was covered with a shiny, white cap. L.I.N. slipped her foot away from wandering rows of wheat stalks. She plopped her right foot in front of her left and looked over her shoulder. Phillips and Icarus stopped behind her. They stared at mashed wheat stalks strolling out of the field. L.I.N. faced forward. Chuck was leaving everyone in his dust. L.I.N. looked beside her boyfriend's feet. His right foot was four inches from the row of roaming stalks. L.I.N.'s eyes popped open. She gasped.

"Chuck!" she called. Chuck stopped and looked over his shoulder. L.I.N. gritted her teeth. She raised her fist and extended her pointer finger. She waved her finger to her left. Chuck looked beside his right foot. He pressed his lips together.

"Hmm..." he moaned. There was a fat, white rock in front of his feet. Chuck bent over

and snagged it off the ground. He laid the rock on the row of marching wheat stalks. The rock began sliding down the tramline. It left drag marks along a layer of dirt beneath the wheat stalks. Chuck looked behind him and smiled. "I don't think it's going to hurt us, guys." L.I.N. caught up and stood beside Chuck. She stared down the trail and watched the rock. It traveled into the fog and turned grey. It disappeared a hundred feet down the tramline. Brandy stood behind L.I.N. She peeked over her shoulder.

"That's really weird." She glanced at Chuck's lip. She crinkled her eyes. "And, your lip is getting bigger." Chuck tapped the bump on his lip. Now, it was the size of a nickel. Chuck squinted.

"Huh."

The gang reached the end of the tramline. A row of short, fat posts appeared near the edge of the path. They were barely visible through the fog. They looked black and fuzzy. Their tops were pointed. Chuck was out front. The closer he got to the posts, the browner they appeared. When he was a few feet away, they were glowing and burgundy. Chuck could also make out two rows of thin, wooden shafts tied along the backs of the posts. There was an opening in the fence beyond the end of the tramline. There was a steel post beside the opening in the fence. There was a tiny sign near the top. Chuck was looking at it from the back. So, it was the color of steel. Chuck reached the fence. He folded his arms on top and stared. He was looking across a narrow, two lane street.

It wasn't the lonely highway Brandy and Icarus traveled. It was a tiny, downtown road filled with cars. Chuck narrowed his eyes. He was standing between two intersections. He looked to his left. There was a traffic light half a block away. It was on the opposite side of the street. It was on the corner closest to Chuck. It was an old fashioned traffic light. It had four



sets of lights, stacked vertically. Each set of lights was turned ninety degrees from the one before it. The bulbs threaded into a box on top of a post. The post was seven feet tall. The box and the light post were painted yellow. Chuck studied the intersection. The intersecting road led across the street and disappeared into the wheat field. Oddly, there was a set of traffic lights facing the wheat field. They cycled through as though they were expecting traffic to come barreling out of reeds of wheat. No traffic ever came from that direction, though. Chuck checked the top of the light post. A pair of green signs was sticking out of the top. They were stacked in opposite directions. Chuck read the sign facing him. It read "3rd Street."

"Hmm..." he moaned. He thought the street looked familiar. Now, he knew why. Chuck studied the lane on the opposite side of the road. A line of cars was stopped behind the traffic light. A row of white rectangles was painted across the pavement beside the light. The first car in line was a yellow taxi. The front tires of the taxi were resting on top of the rectangles. An SUV was parked behind the taxi. A Station Cruiser was parked behind that. Chuck's eyes followed the line to the other end of the block. The cars were backed up to the next intersection. There was another light post at *that* intersection. It was similar to the one on Chuck's left. Chuck nodded.

He looked in front of him. On the other side of the road, there was a giant, empty parking lot. A red brick building stood beyond that. It looked hazy. But, Chuck spotted it through the fog. The building was two stories. The bricks were cracked, crooked, and fading. There were eight tall, skinny windows along the front of the building. They were trimmed with wood, painted white. The wood made plus signs across the glass. The paint was old and faded. Streaks of bare wood showed in places. The wood was warped and rotten. Near the bottom of the building, there was a pair of thick, oak doors. They were painted to match the windows. A

roof hovered above the doors. The side facing Chuck was painted white. The roof peaked above a space between the doors. Four long, concrete steps led from the parking lot to the doors. There were three steel rails. There was one down each side of the steps and one down the middle.

L.I.N. stopped on Chuck's right. She folded her arms beside his and stared across the street. Brandy stopped on Chuck's left. She folded her arms on the fence and laid her chin on top. She looked across the road and exhaled through her nose.

"This isn't right," she remarked. "Where *are* we?"

Chuck licked his lips. "We're downtown." Brandy squinted. She faced Chuck.

"What?" she inquired. "We're back in New Jack City?"

Chuck pointed across the street. "That's the library right there in front of you." Brandy faced forward. She gasped.

"Oh, my God. You're right!" She looked at Chuck's temple. "How did *that* happen?"

Chuck narrowed his eyes. "I'm not sure." He bent over the top of the fence and looked at the ground. There was a row of sidewalk on the other side of the fence. Chuck stared at it and shook his head. He looked up and pointed to his left. "You see that?" he inquired. L.I.N. and Brandy looked to their left. They stared at the traffic light Chuck spotted when he arrived. Brandy nodded. "Now, look *here*," Chuck remarked. He pointed at the side of the intersection next to the fence. The sidewalk stopped and curved towards the fence at the intersection. There was pavement where the sidewalk stopped. A new row of sidewalk curved out of the fence on the other side of the pavement. Brandy narrowed her eyes. "It's a road that goes nowhere," Chuck pointed out.

Brandy looked into Chuck's shiny, tan eyes. "But, what happened to it?"

Chuck shook his head. "I don't know." He motioned towards his chest. "There's supposed to be an office building right here. Twenty-five stories." He licked his lips. "It belongs to the New Jack City bank." Brandy looked over her shoulder. She smiled and faced Chuck.

"Yep. That's right." Hal stopped behind Brandy. Icarus and Detective Phillips stopped behind Chuck. Phillips folded her arms over her chest.

"Huh," she remarked. "We're downtown." Phillips stared across 3rd Street. The first thing she noticed were tall, skinny poles dotting the sidewalk. The poles were black. Frames made of trapezoids dotted the tops of the poles. The short sides of the trapezoids formed squares along the bottoms of the frames. The long sides formed squares near the tops. The tops were covered with short, pyramid caps. Hooks were sticking out of the tops of the pyramids. The frames were surrounded by sheets of glass. Each pane of glass glowed orange near the bottom and yellow near the top. The light posts appeared to be moving. Phillips studied the sidewalk. Like most sidewalks, the sidewalk along the opposite side of the street was made of flat blocks of concrete. The blocks were surrounded by a curb. The curb consisted of a border of s-shaped chunks of cement. The blocks of concrete inside the curb were sliding along the side of the street. Phillips lips parted. She inhaled a sharp breath.

The concrete blocks wandered to the end of the sidewalk. The curb stayed put. When the flat blocks of cement reached the edge of the curb, they shrank and disappeared. They squashed into the curb until they vanished. The light poles went with them. Phillips flapped her eyelids and wobbled her eyeballs. She looked towards the other end of the sidewalk. The blocks *appeared* at that end of the curb. Every fifth block of concrete had a light pole in the middle. The light poles erupted from the edge of the sidewalk. They rose like shiny, black fountains.

Phillips scrunched up her nose.

"This place is making me dizzy." Chuck nodded. He pointed towards the library.

"Look at the bricks." Everyone focused on the wall of the library. The bricks were sliding around. L.I.N. focused on one. It popped out of the side of the building and floated towards her. It wandered ten feet from the wall of the building and stopped. Then, it receded. It returned to its rightful place and froze. Three bricks beside that one wandered out, next. They floated six and a half feet from the wall and stopped. The first brick and the last brick changed places. Then, the bricks returned to the wall. L.I.N. looked at the side of Chuck's head.

"I don't like this, Chuck. I think we should turn back." One of the cars waiting in line began sliding. The tires squalled on pavement underneath. The car smashed into the car in front of it. Brandy crinkled her eyes.

"Aw, bummer." Hal stood beside L.I.N. He folded his arms on the fence.

"I don't think we should turn back," he replied. "I think we should take a trip to the library." He looked at Chuck and smiled. At least, he tried to. "There are a few books on quantum mechanics I think we should look at. I think they'll give insight as to how we arrived here."

Chuck motioned towards the other side of the street. "Yeah, but don't you see that sidewalk over there?" He planted his palms on the fence. "I mean, how are we supposed to..."

Chuck inhaled words from a textbook. "*Chapter twenty-six discusses elements from both ends of the tangent universes.*" Chuck's eyes popped open. He was holding a book in front of his face. It was thick and heavy. It had a thick, cardboard cover with a shiny, slick surface. The textbook dropped from his fingers. It collapsed on an ancient, oak table. Chuck was sitting on a creaky, hardwood chair. He planted his feet on a floor below the chair. The floor was covered

with jagged, flat rocks. Chuck scooted his chair back and looked around. The table was covered with books. They were scattered everywhere. Some were open. Some were closed.

Chuck was surrounded by his friends. Brandy sat across from him. She sat in a similar chair. A big, fat textbook lay in front of her. It was open halfway. Brandy's fingers lay on the pages. Brandy's eyes faced the book. She scooped up bits of information from text on the pages and looked up. She stared into Chuck's eyes and blinked. Her glasses dangled from the end of her nose. Brandy laid the tip of her index finger against a rod connecting the lenses of her glasses. She slid her spectacles up the bridge of her nose.

"Where am I?" she inquired. "What happened?" Chuck pressed his lips together. He looked to his left. L.I.N. sat next to him. A book lay in front of her. Her face was buried in the pages. Glops of silky, cornflower strands were sticking out of L.I.N.'s scalp. They were spread across the table like a fan. Hal sat beside L.I.N. He was flipping through a scientific journal. He laid the magazine in his lap and looked around.

"Oh, my," he remarked. He glanced beside him. He noticed L.I.N.'s hair sprawled along the table. He shook his head. "Oh, dear." Icarus sat across from Hal. His hood was drawn. His eyeball jacket was clipped to his tongue. A book lay in front of him on the table. He held two books behind his head. He was reading them with cameras on the back of his hood. He stopped reading and looked up.

"Hal?" he requisitioned. He glanced at Chuck. "Chuck?" Chuck stared back. He tilted his head. Icarus laid the books in his hands beside the one in front of him. "What the hell are tachyons, and why am I reading three books about them?" Chuck parted his lips. He narrowed his eyes.

"You can *do* that?" Brandy looked away. She and her friends were surrounded by old,

oak tables and chairs. The floor was covered with rocks. A grid of red carpet lay across those. The floor behind Chuck was covered with rows of bookshelves. They were fifteen rows tall. Brandy figured she and her friends were inside the library. She studied the floor. A row of rocks was sliding across the floor. Brandy watched it, nervously. She slid her lips to the side of her face. She looked into Chuck's eyes.

"Where's Laura?" She looked at Icarus. She studied an empty seat next to him. Detective Phillips wandered around the end of a bookshelf. Nine textbooks lay in her arms. They were stacked against her chest. Her chin rested on top. She faced the others and stopped.

"Uh... guys?" she inquired. "What the hell is going on?"

Chuck faced her. "Some kind of... time warp." He faced forward. "Apparently."

Brandy squinted. "But, I don't have any memory of it."

Chuck shook his head. "Yeah, me neither." He looked at the table. "I don't know why I'm reading this book." L.I.N. stirred. She lifted her head, pinched her eyes shut, and yawned. She curled her fingers in front her eyeballs and laid them on top. She squashed her eyelids around and sniffled. She laid her fingers on the table and looked around. She smacked her lips and faced Chuck.

"Man," she remarked. "I guess I fell asleep." She narrowed her eyes. "How did we get inside the library?" There was an antique, oak desk near the entrance. There was a bulky, CRT monitor on top. The top of the desk was surrounded by a border carved into the wood. It looked like a rectangle of rope. The entrance was covered by a pair of oak doors. They were white on the outside. They were shiny, bare wood on the inside. They opened. Ten ghosts walked in. Well, they looked like ghosts. Chuck got the impression they were people with white sheets draped over their heads. Each sheet had two, tiny holes near the top. They were eye holes.

Chuck studied the ends of the sheets. They were dragging the ground. They were ripped, dingy, and torn. Chuck furrowed his brow. Brandy looked over her shoulder. Icarus didn't need to. The ghost people stopped and stared. The doors closed behind them. Chuck folded his fingers on the book in front of him. He looked around.

"Who are you people?" The ghost people's lips began moving. Chuck could see them wobbling through the sheets over their heads.

"Who are you people?" they repeated. "Who are you? Who are? Who?"

L.I.N.'s eyes popped open. "Chuck, what's going on?"

"Chuck, what's going on?" the ghosts repeated. "Chuck, what's going? Chuck, what's? Chuck?" Icarus was still facing the bookshelves. Cameras along the back of his jacket were watching the ghost people. He looked at Detective Phillips.

"Someone care to explain this?"

"Someone care to explain this?" the ghost people repeated. "Someone care to explain? Someone care to? Someone care? Someone?" Brandy looked around. She glanced at all ten, ghastly, sheet covered faces. She began shaking.

"Okay, these guys are *really* freaking me out."

"Okay," the ghosts repeated. "These guys are *really* freaking me out. Okay, these guys are *really* freaking me. Okay, these guys are *really* freaking. Okay, these guys are *really*. Okay, these guys are. Okay, these guys. Okay, these. Okay." Phillips flattened her eyebrows. She hurled her arms towards the tables. The textbooks draped over her arms toppled to the floor. They slapped the rocky floor like fish out of water. Detective Phillips reached inside her tan blazer. She ripped out a 9MM pistol and aimed it at the ceiling.

"Hey!" she shouted. "Repeat this, mother fuckers!" She began firing her pistol. "Get the

hell out of here, or I'm gonna blow your fuckin' heads off!" The ghost people began babbling gibberish. They swirled around and swarmed through the front doors. Phillips waited until the last ghost left the library. She watched the doors close behind him... or her. Phillips lowered her pistol and looked towards her friends. Chuck, Brandy, and Icarus had their heads bowed and their fingers stuffed in their ears. Hal had his palms laid over a pair of microphones on the sides of his head. His fingers were curled around the back of his skull. Phillips looked between Hal and Chuck. The chair between them was empty. Phillips furrowed her brow.

"Where's L.I.N.?" she inquired. Hal and Chuck lowered their hands. They stared at the seat between them. Brandy and Icarus lowered their hands. Brandy leaned across the table and searched the floor. Icarus stared straight ahead. He blinked.

"Huh," he remarked. "I don't *see* her, anymore." Chuck laid his arm on L.I.N.'s seat. He bent over and looked below the table. He spotted wandering, jagged rocks and an intersection of red carpet. He saw the bottoms of Brandy's brown khakis. A pair of teal tennis shoes with fat, white laces was poking out of the cuffs of her britches. The bottoms of Icarus' black jeans and his saddle shoes were showing. And, Chuck noticed a jungle of jagged, ancient chair legs and table legs. But, L.I.N. was nowhere to be found. Chuck lifted his head and looked around.

"Uh-oh," he remarked.



### Chapter 3: "Historical Singularity and Futuristic Multiplicity"

L.I.N. was shaking like a leaf. She sat on thick, rubbery soles covering the bottoms of her blue, canvas shoes. Her knees dug into a slab of jagged, icy concrete. L.I.N.'s arms were folded over her face. Hunks of navy locks dangled from the sides of her head and wrapped her arms. L.I.N. had no idea where she was or how she got there. She didn't want to find out, either. She was too frightened. All she knew was she was somewhere cold and creepy. And, it had a cold, hard floor.

"Mallory..." a man remarked. L.I.N. whimpered. She tightened her arms around her face. She pinched her eyes shut and pondered what she heard.

*"Mallory?"* she thought. *"Why would anyone say HER name?"* Hal's daughter was named Mallory. She died when she was twenty-four. She was killed by a drunk driver. L.I.N.'s curiosity got the better of her. She stopped shaking. She inhaled through her nose. She exhaled through her lips. Her arms slipped off her face. Her fingers folded in front of her lips. Her eyelids peeled apart. Her emerald irises floated to the tops of her eye sockets. She stared into a pair of murky eyes. They were blue, like the sky. They were glittery and enchanting. They had no whites or pupils. L.I.N. dropped her palms on her thighs and took a breath. She knew what she was looking at what not a human. But, she *could* tell he was a male.

His shoulders were wide and stocky. His face was as white as a ghost. His skin was dry and crinkly. His nose was small and bony. His lips were small and thin. L.I.N. narrowed her eyes. She glanced at the sides of the creature's head. She could barely see his ears. There were shallow indentations beside his cheeks. They traced the classic cauliflower shape of a human ear. There were tiny holes near the bottoms. But, that was it. A crispy, suede cowboy hat was plopped on top of the creature's head. It was dark brown. Crimson curls traced the rim of the

hat. The creature had no facial hair. L.I.N. studied his clothes. He wore a crisp, button up shirt with long sleeves. It was solid black. It was tucked into a pair of indigo jeans. A brown, leather belt was wrapped around the top of the jeans. A shiny, gold belt buckle held it in place. It was engraved with the Greek letter, omega.

A pair of tan, cowboy boots poked out of the cuffs of the creature's jeans. The tips were pointed and curly. They looked like something an elf would wear. L.I.N. fought back a smile. She curled her fingers over her lips and looked up. The creature's fingers were dangling from the top of his jeans. His thumbs were tucked into the rims of his pockets. Four fingers hung from each pocket. They were crunchy and pale, like the creature's face. Except for his ring fingers, each finger had a glassy, transparent nail near the tip. They were trimmed and neat. The nails on the creature's ring fingers were pointed. They were painted green. L.I.N. found that *very* odd. She looked into the creature's eyes. The creature stared back. His tiny, thin lips curled at the ends.

"L.I.N..." he remarked. L.I.N. lowered her fingers and licked her lips. She tilted her head. "You become more enchanting whenever my eyes fall upon you." The creature tugged his right thumb out of his pocket. He held his hand in front of L.I.N.'s eyes and showed her his palm. L.I.N. stared at it. It was wrinkly and squishy. L.I.N. didn't know what to do. She figured the creature was trying to greet her. L.I.N. slipped her left hand off her thigh and spread her fingers. She lifted her palm half a foot. But, she hesitated. She plopped her palm on her thigh. She looked into the creature's glassy, blue eyes.

"Who are you?" she inquired. The creature pressed his lips together. He retracted his hand and laid it on his belly.

"I'm the Omega," he replied. L.I.N. exhaled, slowly. She stared into the creature's face

and shook her head.

"I don't know what that means." The tops of Omega's eye sockets sagged towards the outer edges. He looked sad and confused.

"You have no need to be frightened of me." He blinked. "I mean you no harm. I'm attempting to help you." He licked his lips. His tongue was blood red. He looked away. "But, my intellect is much larger than your own." He looked into L.I.N.'s eyes. "Do you understand?" L.I.N. wrinkled her eyes. She shook her head, slowly.

"Not really." She looked around. She and Omega were in a tiny room. It was 8 feet by 8 feet by 8 feet. It was surrounded by dull, grey cinder blocks. They lay across the walls and the ceiling. L.I.N. could tell she and Omega were still in the alternate universe. Some of the cinderblocks appeared to wander towards her. They floated forward a few paces. Then, they receded. The floor was made of ice cold concrete. It was bumpy and uncomfortable. L.I.N.'s knees felt like they were lying on broken glass. L.I.N. looked into Omega's eyes. "Where are we?" She swallowed. "What is this place?"

Omega exhaled through his tiny nostrils. "This is a tangent timeline," he explained. "I designed it."

"How?" L.I.N. asked. Omega closed his eyes. He folded his arms over his chest, bowed his head, and shook it.

"The time for this, we do not have." He looked up. "This process, I could explain for you. But, I am here for different matters." He unfolded his arms. He offered L.I.N. his hand. "You must follow with me." L.I.N. stared at Omega's pale, wrinkly palm. She looked up.

"I'm scared." She shook her head. "I don't know what to do." Omega saddened his eyes again. He stared into L.I.N.'s eyes and blinked.

"Please... do not be frightened." He motioned towards his chest with his free hand. "I mean no harm for you. I promise." L.I.N. stared back. She looked uncertain. Omega raised his palms at his sides. "You must travel with me. There is no other way for me to show you."

L.I.N. nodded. "Travel where?" Omega dropped his hands at his sides. He exhaled through his nose.

"Into the future," he replied. He turned his head without looking away. "But, the future is non-singular." L.I.N. sighed, impatiently. She dropped her lips in her palm and stared at the concrete. She looked up.

"That doesn't make any sense." She laid her fingers on her thigh. "I don't understand." Omega folded his fingers in front of his chin. He laid his lips on top and thought a moment.

"There are many possible futures," he explained. He dropped his hands and looked into L.I.N.'s eyes. "Most are eradicated due to singularity." He narrowed his eyes. "From the past." He lifted the tops of his eye sockets. "Do you understand, now?"

L.I.N. slowly shook her head. "Not... at all." Omega looked away. He slid his lips to the side of his face.

"I despise your language." He faced L.I.N. "It is barbaric and difficult to speak."

L.I.N. nodded. "I know. I'm sorry."

Omega smiled a little. "This is not of your doing." He clapped his hands together. "I wish to show you a future that once was." He turned his head without looking away. "It has since been destroyed." L.I.N. raised her eyebrows. She bobbed her head and took a breath. Omega smiled. "Now, your appearance displays understanding." He narrowed his eyes. "I don't get why this is." He offered his hand. "What I've said recently does not differ from what I spoke before." L.I.N. curled her fingers in front of her lips. She shrugged.

"It does to *me*." She laid her fingers on Omega's palm. Omega dragged L.I.N. to her feet. The walls and the ceiling turned into a sea of sapphire and puffy, white clouds. L.I.N. gasped. She loosened her fingers. Omega squeezed them like a vise.

"Do not let go of my hand," he warned. "I will lose sensation with your entity." L.I.N.'s eyes popped open. Her heart jumped into her throat. She grabbed a hold of Omega's hand and stood beside him. She slipped her fingers through his and held on tight. She looked down. She and Omega were still standing on the concrete floor. But, they were surrounded by imagery. The concrete was like a magic carpet. It dropped through a canopy of jade green leaves. It rested beside a curvy, concrete path. L.I.N. looked around. She and Omega were surrounded by shade. It was speckled with scorching dots of sunlight. A gentle breeze swirled across L.I.N.'s face. Strands of soft, sapphire hair dribbled across the edges of her lips and the tip of her nose. L.I.N. laid the fingers of her free hand on her cheek. She slid her hair behind her ear and looked to her right.

The ground was littered with jagged, steep hills. It was surrounded by ancient, swirling branches of oak. The ground was patchy. It was covered with amber dirt. The dirt was spotted with tufts of thick, olive colored grass blades. There was an aluminum bench beside the concrete path. A young lady was sitting on the bench. Her hair was chocolate brown. It was cut even with her shoulders. It was the most beautiful head of hair L.I.N. had ever seen. It was the way she wished *her* hair looked. But, *her* stupid hair always came in blue. The lady's soft, auburn hair swirled lazily in whispers of wind. She wore a short sleeved shirt. It was white with tiny bands of maroon and violet. She wore indigo jeans with bell bottoms and a pair of sandals. Her sandals had slim, white straps and thin, tan soles. The straps swirled around her feet.

The young lady was reading a book. L.I.N. peeked over her shoulder. The book the lady

was reading was a bulky text book. It had a thick, heavy cover. L.I.N. and Omega were watching the young lady from behind. It was hard to see her face. She turned her head to the left. A warm smile slid up her cheeks. L.I.N. looked to her left. She wasn't sure what to expect. She most certainly didn't expect her boyfriend to come walking by. Chuck Parker wandered around a gathering of oak trees. A tiny burst of wind swam through shaggy, black hair dangling from his head. Chuck wore a red t-shirt with thin, black stripes and a pair of jeans. His sloppy, black sneakers were strapped around his feet.

A little girl wandered along beside him. She was holding Chuck's hand. She looked like she was five or six. A mop of coffee colored hair surrounded her face. It was length of her chin. She looked towards Omega and L.I.N. Her eyes were the size of half dollars. They were green and glittery, like emeralds. They reminded L.I.N. of her *own* eyes. The little girl wore a long, flowing dress. It was cornflower blue. It drooped to her knees. It dangled from her shoulders by a pair of straps. The straps were fastened with big, blue buttons. The little girl wore a white shirt underneath with short, puffy sleeves. A pair of long, white socks wrapped her legs. A pair of black Mary Janes was strapped around her feet.

She looked around a bit. Then, she stared at the path. Two of her little steps were equal to one of Chuck's. But, she kept up with him just fine. She looked like she had a lot on her mind. She appeared thoughtful and intelligent. The young lady sitting on the bench closed her book. She laid it on the bench and stood up. She turned and looked at the little girl. She lifted her hand and fluttered her fingers.

"Hi, Emily!" she shouted. The little girl looked up. She gritted her teeth, parted her lips, and smiled. She raised her little hand, spread her fingers, and waved back.

"Hi, Mom," she replied. She lowered her hand and stared at the ground. She looked like

she was lost in thought. L.I.N. figured she was thinking something over very carefully. L.I.N. looked at the young lady beside the bench. Her face was pretty and pale. She had big, green eyes just like the little girl. A row of bangs lay across her forehead. A shiny, black barrette rested above her bangs. L.I.N. felt hair on the back of her neck standing on end. She looked at Omega. Omega was facing forward. He turned his head and looked into L.I.N.'s eyes.

"Who is that?" L.I.N. asked.

Omega tilted his head. "You *know* who it is." L.I.N. stared into Omega's eyes. It was like staring at a pair of blue lemon wedges. L.I.N. faced forward. Chuck and Emily neared the aluminum bench. Emily let go of Chuck's hand. Chuck looked into the young lady's eyes and smiled.

"Hi, Mallory." He stood in front of her. He laid his fingers on her cheek. Mallory chuckled.

"Hi, Chuck." Chuck kissed Mallory's lips. Mallory wrapped her arms around Chuck's waist. Emily stopped beside Mallory. She wrapped her arms around Mallory's knees. Chuck and Mallory stopped kissing. Mallory tilted her head back and snickered. She looked down and patted Emily's head. "What are you doing, Emily?"

Emily looked up. "Walking." L.I.N. smiled a little. She pressed her lips together. She looked at Omega.

"What is this?" she inquired. "Why are you showing this to me?" Omega looked at L.I.N. He smiled.

"Because, it is essential to your wisdom."

"L.I.N.?" Brandy called. She was trapped in a labyrinth of slick, wooden bookshelves. She peeked around a corner. "L-I-I-I-N?" she sang. She looked beside her. She was staring at

the end of a shelf. It was labeled. There were two pieces of white paper taped along the edge. They were plastered with large, black letters. The page on the left read, "114.13 - 114.577." The page on the right read, "114.580 - 115.24." Icarus stood in the middle of an aisle. He was surrounded by encyclopedias. His hood was drawn. His jacket was connected to his tongue. He bent over, laid his palms on the floor, and sprang into the air. He flipped backwards and laid his fingers on the fourth shelf from the bottom. He shoved himself further up the shelves. He caught the ninth shelf with the tips of his saddle shoes. He laid his back against shelves above that, bent his knees, and flipped to the top. He landed on top of the book case on all fours.

"I'm telling you, guys!" he exclaimed. "She's not here!" Icarus stood and spread his arms. His entire jacket was covered with cameras. This included the sleeves. The more data Icarus took in, the better. Detective Phillips was seven rows down. She walked to the end of a book shelf and looked around.

"How can you be so sure?!" she called.

Icarus dropped his arms. "Because I can't see her!" Chuck walked in front of the shelf Icarus climbed. He stopped near the middle and looked up.

"Do you see a librarian anywhere?" Icarus looked down. He shook his head.

"No." Chuck faced forward. He tapped his chin with his index finger. He looked up.

"I don't suppose you see any portals into other universes."

Icarus shook his head. "No, Chuck. There's nothing." Chuck looked in front of him. He was staring at a row of encyclopedias. They marched across a shelf like boxcars. It was dizzying. Chuck looked up.

"When was the last time you saw her?"

"Right before the Ku Klux Klan came marching in."



Chuck faced forward. "Right..." he groaned. He cupped his chin between his thumb and forefinger. "She asked me what was going on." Chuck narrowed his eyes. He looked up. "You were looking right at her!"

Icarus folded his arms over his chest. "Yeah. So?"

Chuck plopped his palms on his hips. "So... you were looking right at her." Chuck turned his head without looking away. "And then, she was gone?"

Icarus shrugged. "I was distracted." Hal was two rows away. His webcams were buried in a calculus text book. He looked up.

"He was staring at Detective Phillips," he remarked.

Icarus flattened his eyebrows. "Shut-up, Hal."

Hal looked up. "He was wondering if her breasts were all squashed behind those heavy books she was carrying." Detective Phillips scrunched up her face. She threw her arms out at her sides.

"Hal!" Icarus looked at the tops of his eyes. He flattened his lips and shook his head.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Hal!"

Hal returned his eyes to the text book. "Of course you do, Dr. Ulrich." Hal flipped to the next page. "Everyone here was wondering the same thing." Phillips fought back a grin. Her tan blazer was open. She grabbed the sides of her jacket and wrapped it around her chest.

"Hal, stop talking about my boobs!"

Hal looked up. "Laura, you *do* have some huge knockers!" Phillips dropped the edges of her blazer. She dropped her eyes in her palms and shook her head. Hal returned his eyes to his book. "I'm sure they were all squashed up and aching from those hard cover text books!" Hal looked over a set of differential equations. "Don't deny it! You should be proud of those

puppies!" Detective Phillips looked over her shoulder. She spotted Icarus above a row of book shelves. Icarus stared into Phillips' eyes. He lowered his eyebrows near the outer edges of his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Laura. Just ignore him." Chuck bowed his head. He cupped his fingers over his lips and snickered. Brandy looked at her chest. She worried people thought her breasts were too small. She folded her arms over her chest and glanced around. Icarus opened his mouth and reached inside. He yanked the alligator clips off his tongue, tucked them inside his jacket, and lowered his hood. He tapped the cuffs of his sleeves and threw his arms out at his sides.

"Well? Where should we look next, guys?" He looked around. "Should we check the second story of the library? Should we go outside and look around?" He looked at Chuck. "Should we go and check out the..."

Icarus, Phillips, Hal, Brandy, and Chuck found themselves walking down a long, wide hallway. They were surrounded by people. Four rows of six tables were arranged in a grid. The table tops were checkered with tiny, black and white tiles. The tables had square frames and wooden legs. Each table had four wooden chairs. The backs and the legs of the chairs were painted black. The seats were white. Chuck, Brandy, Hal, Phillips, and Icarus froze. Chuck looked at the floor. It was covered with brown tiles splattered with black spots. Each tile was four feet by four feet. Brandy looked to her left. She spotted one of her favorite places to eat. It was called "Pizza Face." It was located in the New Jack Village food court.

Pizza Face had a shiny, stainless steel counter out front. A logo was arranged along the side of the counter facing Brandy. It looked like a face made out of a slice of pizza. The pizza slice stood vertically. The crust looked like the slice's wavy, brown hair. A pair of olives was its eyes. Its mouth was a violet, onion semicircle. It looked like a tiny smile. Those features lay on

a yellow, triangular blob. The blob was dotted with pepperoni. A banner of yellow letters dotted with red circles spanned crimson bricks above the counter. The letters spelled "Pizza Face." The Scoop Stoop stood next to that. The Scoop Stoop's logo hovered above the front of the store. It looked like a wooden bench. Three scoops of ice cream lay across the bench's seat. One scoop was chocolate. One was vanilla. And, one was orange sherbet. Curvy, bold letters spelled "Scoop Stoop" above that. The letters for "Scoop" were cream colored. The letters for "Stoop" were brown.

Detective Phillips looked to her right. She was looking at a roller skating area. It was rather large. It was surrounded by vertical slats of waxy pine. They were waist high. The floor of the skating area was buffed and shiny. It was made of wood. And of course, it was swarming with kids. They skated in a giant circle, laughing and screaming. There were a few adults mixed in as well. Chuck stared into faces of people walking by. Some stared back and smiled. Others looked away, shyly. Chuck slid his lips to the side of his face. He looked at Icarus. He was standing to Chuck's right. Phillips and Hal stood between him and Chuck.

"Oh... the mall," Chuck remarked. He looked around. "What a wonderful place to look." He laid the tips of his fingers on his chest. *"I was going to suggest that."* He looked to his left. Brandy stared back. She squinted.

"Can we get something to eat, real fast?" She laid her palm on her belly. "I'm star-ving."

Chuck nodded. "You got any money?" Brandy stared into Chuck's eyes. She slowly shook her head. Chuck flattened his eyelids. He patted Brandy's shoulder and wandered towards Pizza Face. Brandy and Phillips followed. Brandy caught up with Chuck. She turned her head and stared. Chuck smiled. "What are you doing, Brandy?"

Brandy narrowed her eyes. "It's your lip." Brandy pointed at her bottom lip. "It's split."

Chuck raised his eyebrows. He tapped his lip with his index finger.

"It's splitting, now?"

Brandy nodded. "Yeah. It looks *really* bad." Chuck pressed his lips together.

Hal looked towards the end of the hallway. Icarus stood beside him. He drew his hood, clipped his jacket to his tongue, and tapped the cuffs of his sleeves. He bobbed his head.

"What is it, Hal?" he inquired. Hal shook his head. He began wandering through swarms of people. They studied his shiny, brass body as he passed. Icarus trotted beside him. He caught a few stares as well. Icarus spotted rows of tiles sliding across the floor. He and Hal hopped over them along the way. They wandered around the edge of the roller skating rink. They stopped near the middle of the adjacent hallway. There was a store called "Stupid Stuff." It had an entrance that was seven feet by three feet. There was a four foot by five foot window beside that. The store's logo spanned a space above the window. The "S"s were chrome with gear teeth. The "t"s were made of Swiss cheese. The "u"s were amber colored coils. The "p" was made of concrete. The "i" was a dart. It had a shiny, metal tip and red, white, and blue fins. The "d" looked like a fluorescent light tube. It was bent into the shape of a lowercase "d." And, the "f"s were made of electrical wire. The first "f" was red. The second was blue.

There was a white counter beyond the window. There were two items arranged on top. One was a Newton's cradle. The other was a Galileo thermometer. The frame of the Newton's cradle was made of shiny, brass round stock. The Newton's cradle had giant, two inch, steel balls. They dangled from the frame by thick strands of steel wire. The body of the Galileo thermometer was a glass tube. It was three foot tall and four inches wide. The tube was pointed at the top. It was filled with clear liquid. Four glass spheres floated in the liquid. Three were sitting on the bottom. Each sphere had a copper colored tag. Each sphere contained a different

colored liquid. The liquid in the sphere on top was orange. The second contained red. The third was blue. The fourth was green. The fifth was yellow. The sixth was violet. The sphere at the bottom contained turquoise liquid.

Hal stood in front of the window. He bent over and laid his palms on his thighs. Icarus stood beside him and did the same. They watched the Newton's cradle. The steel balls stood perfectly still. But all of a sudden, for no apparent reason, they began wobbling. Before long, they were battering each other, randomly. Such behavior stood in strict opposition of every law of physics. Hal and Icarus looked at each other.

"This place is horribly unstable," Hal remarked. "It's falling apart at the seams."

Icarus pressed his thin lips together. "We have to find L.I.N. and get out of here."

Hal nodded. "And, soon."

#### Chapter 4: "Effect and Cause"

Omega and L.I.N. were back in the wheat field. They stood in the clearing where L.I.N. and her friends crossed over. A thick, grey haze surrounded them. The sky was painted with dark, cumulus swarms. Bursts of wind toppled across the field. Wobbling, blonde stalks scorched the edges of L.I.N. and Omega's peripheral vision. They looked like swirling, golden flames. Dirt and squashed stalks of wheat lay across the clearing. L.I.N. looked around. She and Omega were surrounded by ghost people. They were similar to the people L.I.N., Brandy, Chuck, Hal, Icarus, and Detective Phillips encountered while they were in the library. They stood perfectly still. Their arms drooped at their sides. White sheets hung from the tops of their heads. Two holes were cut in each sheet for the wearer's eyes.

L.I.N. and Omega stood near the center of the gap in the wheat field. The ghost people filled the remainder of the gap. They stood, facing L.I.N. and Omega. They were all staring at them. It made tiny hairs on the back of L.I.N.'s neck stand on end. L.I.N. looked to her left. She stared between groups of ghosts. She looked down a tramline. The tramline was also filled with ghost people. There were ghosts as far as L.I.N.'s eyes could see. L.I.N. looked to her right. The other side of the tramline was filled with ghosts as well. L.I.N. swallowed, nervously. Omega felt L.I.N.'s fingers going slack. He gritted his teeth. He squashed L.I.N.'s little hand like a vise. L.I.N. inhaled a sharp breath. Her knees buckled. Her knuckles cracked. L.I.N. squealed. She turned her head and stared into Omega's shiny, blue eyes. Omega stared back. He shook his head.

"No, L.I.N.," he warned. "Do not let go of my hand."

"No, L.I.N.," the ghost people repeated. "Do not let go of my hand. No, L.I.N. Do not let go of my. No, L.I.N. Do not let go of. No, L.I.N. Do not let go. No, L.I.N. Do not let. No,

L.I.N. Do not. No, L.I.N. Do. No, L.I.N. No." L.I.N. exhaled a shaky sigh. She stood and licked her lips.

"You have to take me back to Chuck," she insisted. "Please. He's probably worried sick about me."

"There is one more thing you must first see," Omega replied. The ghost people repeated his sentence.

"There is one more thing you must first see. There is one more thing you must first. There is one more thing you must. There is one more thing you. There is one more thing. There is one more. There is one. There is. There." L.I.N.'s eyes slid from one side of her face to the other. She searched the crowd of ghosts. She shook her head.

"Who *are* these people?" She looked up. Omega was staring straight ahead.

"The Subsets," he explained. He looked into L.I.N.'s eyes. "That's how they are called where *I* come from." He blinked. "Dee-Dee, Ex-Ex." L.I.N. crinkled her eyes. Omega faced forward. He stared into fifty pairs of eyes. "They exist where none can." He licked his lips. "They are. And, they are not." He looked into L.I.N.'s eyes. "Do you understand?"

L.I.N. pouted. "*No...*" she groaned. Her eyelids fluttered. She laid her fingers on her cheek. She slid the tips of her fingers across her bottom eyelids. She swatted fat, steamy tears off her face and looked up. "Please. You have to take me back."

Omega smiled. "Do not be frightened. You *will* understand." He faced forward. "Except, too soon come my words." He faced L.I.N. Then, he looked down. He stared at a pair of white, rubber caps covering the tips of L.I.N.'s shoes. His eyes climbed rows of fat, white laces. They swirled across blue canvas draping L.I.N.'s insteps. Omega's eyeballs crawled across denim, amber crinkles wrapping L.I.N.'s legs. His eyes ascended soft, mahogany strips of

cotton dangling from L.I.N.'s shoulders. He looked into L.I.N.'s glittery, emerald eyes. "This morning..." he inquired. "Had you taken ill?" L.I.N. narrowed her eyes. She nodded, slowly. Omega smiled. "Why must that be the case?" L.I.N. stared into Omega's eyes. She blinked.

Brandy, Detective Phillips, and Chuck were sitting at one of the tables in the food court. Chuck sat on Brandy's right. Brandy sat on Phillips' right. Three medium sized, paper cups were grouped near the center of the table. The bodies of the cups were white. Pizza Face's logo was stamped on the sides. The cups had transparent lids. White straws were sticking out of the middles of the lids. The straws were bent near their tips. Chuck was down to one third of a slice of pizza. He folded the crust in half when he started eating it. The ends of the crust dangled from his fingertips. When Chuck ordered pizza, he liked to feel like he was getting his money's worth. So, he always ordered supreme. The top of his pizza slice was painted with bright red marinara sauce. The sauce was dotted with chunks of mozzarella, pepperoni, sausage nuggets, hamburger meat, Canadian bacon, onions, bell peppers, mushrooms, and olives.

Detective Phillips had a tiny piece of crust between her thumb and index finger. That was all that remained of her slice. She stuffed the piece of crust between her teeth and crunched it up. Brandy nibbled on the tip of her pizza slice. She'd barely made a dent in hers. Pizza Face was known for having the biggest, most scrumptious slices of pizza in town. Brandy held her slice of pizza with both hands. She held the crust near the ends. It was the width of her shoulders. The rest of the slice was twice the height of her head. Brandy's slice was covered with pepperonis. Brandy looked it over and chewed, slowly. She swallowed. She put the end of the slice of pizza to her lips. The tip folded over. It tumbled away from her mouth and rolled down the bottom of the crust. Brandy snickered. She sank her teeth into the cheese and tore off a chunk.



Chuck looked up and smiled. He noticed a shiny spot on the tip of Brandy's nose. He figured it was cheese grease. There was a chrome box near the middle of the table. It was filled with thin, white napkins. Chuck snagged one and wadded it between his fingers. He brushed the tip of Brandy's nose with the napkin. Brandy looked into his eyes and chuckled. Chuck showed Brandy his pizza slice. It was folded in half. Chuck held it by the ends of the crust. The crust dangled from his thumb and index finger.

"You're supposed to hold it like *this*, goof ball." Brandy mashed cheese between her teeth. She folded her pizza's crust in half. She grabbed a hold of the crust with both hands and dangled the end of the slice in front of her lips. She swallowed what she was chewing. Then, she parted her lips and inched them towards the tip of the pizza slice. The end of the slice folded over. It rolled away from Brandy's face and dangled from the crust. Brandy smacked her lips. She looked at Chuck. Chuck tilted his head. He laid his fingertips against the bottom of Brandy's slice near the tip. He raised the end of the slice and held it in front of Brandy's lips. Brandy smiled. She nibbled off the end of the slice. Chuck sighed. He smiled and shook his head. "Brandy, put your other hand *here*." He wobbled the end of Brandy's pizza. Brandy stared at Chuck's fingers. She let go of the crust with her left hand. She replaced Chuck's fingers with her own. She looked into Chuck's shiny, tan eyes and gasped.

"Oh! I get it." Detective Phillips yanked the lid off of her soda. She put the paper cup to her lips and tilted it. She set the cup down and looked up.

"We need to find L.I.N.," she remarked.

Chuck raised his eyebrows. "We need to get out of here. To Hell with L.I.N."

Brandy gasped. "Chuck!" Chuck stared at checkered tiles decorating the table. One row of tiles was wandering across the top.

"Kidding," he replied. He raised the remainder of his pizza slice. He parted his lips. The swollen crack in his lip ripped apart. Chuck lowered his pizza slice and wrinkled his nose.

"Ah!" he shouted. He pressed the tips of his fingers against his lip. Blood dribbled down his knuckles. It wandered to the edge of his hand and dripped onto the table. Phillips stared at the table. She crinkled her eyes and looked up.

"Chuck, what is *up* with that thing?" she inquired.

"Are you okay?" Brandy asked. She reached across the table. She laid her fingers on Chuck's chin. Chuck searched his lips with his tongue. A warm, salty blanket smothered his taste buds.

"Yeah," Chuck replied. He snagged a handful of napkins. "I'm fine." Chuck had water in his cup. He ripped off a clear plastic lid covering the top and laid it on the table. He dunked the tips of the napkins in his drink. Then, he wadded the napkins against the corner of his lip. "I don't know *what's* happened to this damn thing." He looked into Detective Phillips' icy, blue eyes. "You think my lip is just chapped or something?" Phillips pressed her lips together. She reached across the table. She grabbed a hold of Chuck's fingers and slipped them away from his face. She stared at Chuck's lip.

"Hmph," she mused. "It looks like you got punched."

Chuck shook his head. "No..." He returned the wad of napkins to his lip. "I would've remembered getting punched." There was a paper plate in front of Chuck. He laid the remainder of his pizza slice on top. Hal and Icarus wandered up. They stood beside Detective Phillips and folded their arms over their chests. Phillips, Brandy, and Chuck looked up. Icarus lowered his hood. He yanked the alligator clips off his tongue and tucked them inside his jacket. He looked at Chuck and narrowed his right eye.

"Man, Chuck," he remarked. "Did Brandy feed you a knuckle sandwich?" Chuck stared at the table. He raised his eyebrows.

"She's still breathing, isn't she?"

Hal looked around. "I'm not sure where L.I.N.'s gotten off to." He looked at Chuck. He shrugged. "Maybe she disappeared." He looked at Brandy. "Like *we* keep doing." He held up his index finger. "Except when *she* disappeared, she reappeared somewhere else."

Detective Phillips nodded. "Okay. So, how do we find her?" Hal tapped his chin. It sounded like a metal bat smashing a car door.

"Well now, that's a good question." He looked around. "It could be that we never hear from her again."

Chuck rolled his eyes. "Well, that's reassuring." Hal tried to press his lips together. The speaker near the bottom of his chin didn't move. Hal threw his arms out at his sides.

"Or... It could be that..."

Chuck stood to Hal's left. He looked down. The floor was covered with black and white tiles. He looked beside him. A black, leather love seat stood next to him. A long, black couch stood adjacent to that. A rug decorated with spiraling rainbows lay between the two pieces of furniture. A large, oak coffee table lay on top. Chuck parted his lips. He felt his bottom lip ripping. He laid the tips of his fingers against his bottom lip. Blood poured down his knuckles. It gushed down his arm and splattered the floor. Chuck sucked air through his teeth.

"Gyah!" he shouted. Detective Phillips stood behind Chuck. Icarus stood to her right. Brandy stood beside *him*. Her eyes popped open.

"Hey!" she yelled. "We're back at L.I.N. and Hal's!"

"Chuck!" L.I.N. shrieked. Everyone looked to their right. Their eyes followed a long,

wooden staircase. It led from the living room to L.I.N. and Hal's bedrooms. The bottom steps were wider than the top steps. The stairs were surrounded by long, wooden rails. They curved near the bottom and wandered away from the stairs. Everything looked the way it usually did. Except, the stairs were wandering from the living room to L.I.N.'s bedroom. They looked like an escalator. They were moving really fast, too. They were flying to the top of the staircase. It was nauseating. L.I.N. stood at the top of the stairs. She looked at her friends, helplessly. She pouted and looked around.

"Oh," Hal remarked. He looked at Chuck. "Yes, I suppose *that* could work as well." Chuck pinched his lip. He stared at the floor. Blood was pooled around his feet. His lip was throbbing.

"God dab it!" he snarled. He looked towards the kitchen. A long bar separated the kitchen from the living area. The base was covered with shiny veneer. The top was made of black marble. The bar was surrounded by ten stools. Each stool had four tall, chrome legs. Each stool had a different colored seat. Omega stood beside the bar. He stared into Chuck's eyes. He grabbed the tip of his cowboy hat and smiled. Chuck stared back. He searched the floor around Omega's feet. Omega was standing in a puddle of orange juice. Tiny fragments of glass were scattered around the juice. They began tumbling towards the center of the puddle. The puddle receded. Tiny droplets of orange juice began jumping off the tiles. They hopped towards the center of the puddle.

The shards of glass began sticking together. The orange juice began pooling inside the glass. The glass shards integrated. They became a drinking glass. The glass began somersaulting. It toppled away from the floor and wandered towards Omega's face. Omega held out his hand. Droplets of orange juice hopped off of tiles and flew into the glass. The glass did a

final back flip. It landed in Omega's palm. Omega tightened his fingers around the glass. Chuck stared in awe.

"*Wow...*" he whispered. Omega put the glass to his lips. Orange juice dribbled from his lips. It climbed the inner surface of the glass and joined the orange juice inside. Omega lifted the rim of the glass off his lips. He sighed with satisfaction. Brandy wandered forward. She laid her fingers on Chuck's back and peeked around his shoulder.

"What the hell is going on?" she demanded.

Chuck shook his head. "I'm not sure." Omega set the glass of orange juice on the bar. He tapped his lips with his index finger.

"Better, is your lip," he remarked. Chuck tapped his lip. It still hurt. But, the swelling had gone down. And, it wasn't bleeding as badly. Chuck lowered his hand.

"Let my girlfriend go," he demanded.

Omega tilted his head. "You must save her, Chuck." Chuck snapped his fingers. He pointed between Omega's eyes.

"Watch this guy!" he ordered. "Don't let him get away."

Omega shook his head. "No, Chuck. Your friends must go, now." Chuck felt Brandy's fingers leave his back. He looked over his shoulder. Hal, Brandy, Phillips, and Icarus were gone. Chuck faced forward.

"What..." He licked his blood soaked lips. "Where did they go?"

"They're gone," Omega replied. Chuck flew across the living room. A row of tiles was wandering across the floor. It separated Chuck and Omega. Chuck hurdled over the row of rolling tiles and stood in front of Omega. He glared into his shiny, blue eyes.

"I'll kill you!" he shouted. "I'll kill you!" Chuck's feet slipped off the floor. He fell

backwards and landed on his back. Tiles dug into his spine. Chuck scrunched up his face. He rubbed his spine and groaned. Then, he was sucked off the floor. He turned as he rose and landed on his feet. He stared into Omega's eyes. "What..." Omega raised his fist. He raised it above his head. Chuck stared at the back of Omega's fist. His lip began throbbing. It pulsated with the rhythm of his heart. Omega's fist plummeted. On the way past Chuck's face, Chuck's head dropped. His lip connected with Omega's knuckles. Omega's fist turned and rested at his side. His fingers uncurled. Chuck stood in front of Omega, bent over. He stood up and shook his head. He tapped his lip. The cut and the little bump were gone. And, his lip didn't hurt anymore. Omega forced a smile.

"I'm sorry for battering you, Chuck," he explained. "But, it was the only way for me to win your attention.

Chuck narrowed his eyes. "Where are my friends?"

"They're safe," Omega assured him.

Chuck tilted his head. "What is it with you?"

Omega blinked. "To what are you referring, Chuck?" Chuck stared into Omega's eyes. He folded his arms over his chest.

"It's like... you can travel through time."

"We're both moving through time," Omega replied. "I simply moved in reverse for a moment. That is all." Chuck pinched his eyes shut. He pressed his lips together and opened them.

"Take me to them," he demanded.

Omega smiled. "You mean your friends? Not to worry, Chuck. Soon, you'll be together again." Chuck took a breath. He and Omega looked towards the top of the stairs. The walls at

the ends of the upstairs hallway began wandering towards each other. L.I.N. looked both directions.

"Oh, crap!" she shouted. She hopped up and turned around. She tugged on a knob hanging from her bedroom door. The knob spun like a top. It wouldn't catch. L.I.N. whimpered. She began pounding the door with her fist. It wouldn't budge. L.I.N. looked towards the bottom of the stairs. "Chuck!" she shouted. "Help me!" Omega and Chuck faced each other. Omega sighed.

"I must go, Chuck," he remarked.

"What?" Chuck demanded. "No! Stay here!"

"That is not of my power, Chuck," Omega replied. "Only *you* can save the lady you love. I am sorry about this." He smiled a little. "We will meet again, soon." Omega vanished. He was there one second. The next, he was gone. Chuck stared through a window. It was on the back wall of the kitchen above a pair of chrome sinks. Chuck blinked.

"Chuck!" L.I.N. cried. "Please, hurry!" Chuck looked over his shoulder. The bathroom door at the end of the upstairs hallway was three feet from the sole of his girlfriend's right shoe. Chuck looked at the stairs. They were scrambling to the top floor. They looked like the edges of gigantic, wooden gear teeth. They were moving so fast, they looked blurry. Chuck looked into L.I.N.'s shiny, emerald eyes. He remembered she didn't do so well with stairs. He figured there was no way she could make it down a row of *moving* stairs. Chuck looked at the floor below the upper hallway. He thought about telling L.I.N. to jump. The fall might break her legs. But, Chuck could always put her back together. She *was* an android after all. L.I.N. fell to her knees. She folded her arms over her face.

"Chuck!" Chuck hopped over the row of moving tiles near the kitchen. He raced across

the living area and stood at the foot of the stairs.

"I'm coming!" he shouted. "Don't worry!" Chuck looked down. Wooden steps were pouring out of the floor. It made Chuck's head spin. Chuck exhaled a shaky breath. "*My God...*" he whispered. He looked up. The door to the bathroom slid into the knob on L.I.N.'s bedroom door. The knob popped off. It fell on the floor and bounced around. L.I.N. buried her head between her knees. She shrieked. Chuck closed his eyes. He spread his arms and fell on his face. The stairs carried him to the top. Chuck rolled over the edge of the staircase and landed on L.I.N.'s shins. L.I.N.'s head popped up. Chuck opened his eyes and looked up. He was greeted by L.I.N.'s smiling face. L.I.N. tilted her head back and sighed.

"Oh, thank God!" she shouted. She wrapped her arms around her boyfriend's neck. Chuck's eyes popped open. He blew a breath between his lips.

"*L.I.N.!*" he grumbled. "*You're hurting me!*" L.I.N. gasped. She dropped her arms and backed away. Chuck hopped up. He scooped his girlfriend off the floor and swirled around. He forgot how light she was. Carrying L.I.N. was like carrying a couple of text books. Chuck looked around. "*Okay...*" he gasped. He looked down. A torrent of wooden steps was gushing towards him. It was terrifying. Chuck pinched his eyes shut. He exhaled a heavy breath. "Oh, my," he remarked. L.I.N. didn't want to see anything else for the rest of her life. She shut her eyes and threw her arms around Chuck's neck. Chuck glanced at the railing on his left. It was the only way down. It looked like a narrow, wooden slide.

"Um..." Chuck hummed. L.I.N. looked up. She couldn't stand it. She looked into her boyfriend's eyes.

"What?!" she demanded. She looked where Chuck was looking. Her eyes popped open. "Oh, no!" she shouted. "You can't be serious!" Chuck glanced to his left. Hal's bedroom door



was six feet away. Chuck looked to his right. The bathroom door was halfway across the top step. It was make or break.

"Eh, fuck it," Chuck remarked. The corners of his lips slid up his cheeks. "I always wanted to do this." Chuck squashed L.I.N.'s body against his chest. Then, he laid his butt on the edge of the railing.

"Chuck, you crazy bastard!" L.I.N. shouted. Chuck lifted his feet. He and L.I.N. slid to the bottom of the rail in one and a half seconds. They rounded the corner and dropped onto a group of checkered tiles. Chuck plopped his feet on the floor. He stood, smiled, and inhaled through his nostrils.

"Ah..." he sighed. "That was everything I hoped it would be." He looked at L.I.N. Her face was buried against Chuck's chest. L.I.N. shook like a wet dog. She exhaled a shaky sigh and looked up.

"Are we down, yet?" she demanded.

Chuck raised his eyebrows. "Let's get out of here," he suggested. "What do you say?" L.I.N. nodded. She laid her cheek against Chuck's chest and closed her eyes. The floor began rumbling. Chuck looked down. "Um..." A pair of red doors with curvy, golden handles covered the front entrance of the house. The house was made of white bricks. A pine porch lay in front of the house. A long overhang hovered above the porch. The overhang was covered with shiny, black shingles. It lay across six Roman style columns. Chuck burst through the front doors. L.I.N. was draped across his arms. Chuck raced to the edge of the porch. He hopped off the end and landed on a paved driveway. He turned around and faced the house. L.I.N. opened her eyes and looked up.

"What's happening?" she demanded. The centers of the columns across the porch

exploded. They showered Chuck and L.I.N. with powder and chunks of plaster. Chuck lowered his head and pinched his eyes shut. He buried L.I.N.'s face against his chest. He looked up. All the columns were broken in two. The tops of the columns swung towards the driveway. They plopped over the edges of the bottom halves. The bottom halves were shoved towards the front of the house. They smashed into rows of white bricks. The bricks shattered and gave way. The red doors across the front entrance splintered and caved in. The overhang dropped to the porch. Chuck stared at it, helplessly. He pressed his lips together.

"I think I should back up." He stumbled away from the house. He and L.I.N. couldn't peel their eyes away. A hole appeared in the roof. Shiny, black shingles covering the roof began sinking into the hole. Purlins appeared. They shattered and caved in. Studs along the walls cracked and disintegrated. Ceiling joists snapped like twigs. The halves flew into the air like teeter totters. Shingles, sheetrock, white bricks, and chunks of wood tumbled through the air. Bricks along the walls of the garage began breaking apart. Windows along the roll up doors burst. The doors folded up like accordions. The roof fell on top and squashed, flat. Thick, black bars surrounding the property bowed and collapsed. Debris crumbled in front of Chuck and L.I.N.'s eyes. A thick, grey cloud scattered across the property lines. L.I.N. and Chuck began coughing. They looked into each other's eyes.

*"You think that's a bad omen?"* Chuck wheezed. He turned his head and cleared his throat. L.I.N. puffed out a tiny, hollow rasp.

*"I hope not..."* Chuck pinched his eyes shut. He laid his thumb and index finger across his eyelids and rubbed them. L.I.N. dropped from his arms. Chuck exhaled a long breath. He opened his eyes and looked around. He and L.I.N. were back in the clearing in the wheat field. They were surrounded by their friends. Chuck parted his lips. He looked around. He wanted to

make sure everyone was there.

"Ah..." he sighed. "Well, then." He pointed Phillips out. "Laura..." He pointed between Hal's webcams. "Hal..." He looked at Brandy. Brandy smiled.

"Hi, Chuck."

"*Brandy...*" Chuck exhaled through a pair of chuckles. He spotted Icarus. He was crouched behind a row of wheat stalks. He hopped out and landed on all fours. His hood was drawn. A pair of wires dangled from his lips. Chuck raised his eyebrows. He pressed his lips together and pointed. "And, Icky..." Icarus' eyebrows fell in the middle. He folded his arms over his chest.

"Hey!" he shouted. Chuck looked to his right. L.I.N. was standing beside him. She looked up and smiled. "And, L.I.N.," Chuck remarked. Brandy wandered across the clearing. She wrapped her arms around L.I.N.'s shoulders. L.I.N. slipped her arms around Brandy's waist.

"Man, I thought you were a goner!" Brandy shouted. L.I.N. raised her eyebrows. She looked around.

"You guys should've seen what happened to the house!"

Detective Phillips showed everyone her palms. "I could care less who that guy was, or what happened to the friggin' house!" She pointed towards the center of the clearing. "Please! Can we just get back to the real world and stay there?" Hal stroked his chin with his index finger and thumb. It sounded like a nail scraping a pane of glass.

"Wait. Are we *sure* that's the real world out there?" He lifted his hands. His palms faced the ground. He lowered his hands and lifted them three times. "I mean, maybe *this* is the real world, right here." Icarus wandered towards the center of the clearing. He stepped through the gateway and vanished. His head reappeared. It was cut off near the neck. Icarus looked into

Hal's eyes and squinted.

"Hal, shut the hell up."

## Chapter 5: "Error Checking"

It was thirteen minutes past midnight. L.I.N. and Hal's living area was wrapped in darkness. Dim moonlight seeped through four panes of glass along the northern wall. Brandy lay on the sofa below the window. The sofa had three squishy, leather cushions. Brandy's face was buried in the cushion on the west side of the couch. A silky, crimson pillow lay on the back of her head. A squishy, multicolored quilt was crumpled across her back. Brandy's legs lay across the second cushion. Her heels were sticking out of a space between the second and third cushions. Her toes were stuffed inside. Her calves were silky and white. They looked like a pair of bowling pins. They wiggled. Brandy dragged her left foot across the middle cushion of the couch and whimpered.

Her arms flopped around. The quilt wobbled off her back and tumbled off the edge of the couch. It crumpled along rows checkered tiles covering the floor. Brandy wore the same clothes she wore the night before. She wore a black t-shirt decorated like the periodic table and a pair of red, flannel shorts. Brandy's head turned. The pillow on the back of her head toppled across her face and fell to the floor. Brandy's eyes were closed. She gritted her teeth and whimpered again. She panted through her nostrils. Her lips peeled apart. She began mumbling indistinct gibberish. She stopped after a couple of seconds. Her teeth relaxed. Her breathing slowed. She lay motionless for half a minute. She looked peaceful and relaxed.

Her eyes popped open. Her pupils were the size of dimes. Brandy gritted her teeth and sucked in mouthfuls of panicked breaths. She lifted her head. She laid her arm across the couch cushion to hold herself up. She searched the room, frantically. Her head bobbed around like a bird's. Her pupils swirled around her eye sockets. Brandy's heart thumped in her ears. She was filled with terror. Her face was caked with cold sweat. She awoke from a terrifying dream. But,

she had no idea what it was about. She remembered fragments of images. None of them made any sense. Brandy sighed. She sat on the middle couch cushion and folded her legs like a pretzel. She tilted her head back and folded her fingers over her eyes. Droplets of frozen sweat squashed against her palms.

Brandy swatted at her face and looked at the floor. She spotted the quilt and the pillow. She stared at them and swallowed, nervously. Her head jerked to the right. She thought she heard something. But, she wasn't sure. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. She felt like someone was standing behind her, staring at her. She looked over her shoulder. The feeling didn't go away. It moved with her head. Brandy faced forward. She plopped her eyes in her palms and exhaled a shaky breath. She felt her hands jiggling. They shook her whole head. Brandy sat back and sighed. She slid across the couch. She lay across the west arm of the sofa. She grabbed a tiny, plastic knob on the lamp beside the couch and twisted it. The northern half of the living room glowed orange.

Brandy crinkled her eyes. She grabbed her glasses off the table beside the couch and slipped them over her eyes. She looked around, timidly. She was filled with terror. She pinched her eyes shut. She stared at the backs of her eyelids. Her thoughts flooded with numbers. It caught Brandy completely by surprise. Her thoughts switched like a set of train tracks. One second, Brandy was haunted by fragments of nightmares. The next, she was focused on physics. Brandy yanked out a drawer below the table beside the couch. She reached inside and searched for paper. She found the notebook from the night before. She took it out and laid it in her lap. She stared at the cover. It was shiny and green.

Brandy found a pencil and closed the drawer. She laid the notebook on the coffee table and flipped back the cover. Her scrambled, jittery math equations from the night before were

scrawled across the first page. They seemed random and indistinct. Brandy had no idea what the hell she was looking at. Yet somehow, it made perfect sense. Brandy flipped the first page, folded it against the back of the front cover, and looked it over. The back of the page was littered with chaotic numerals and little, brown droplets of Brandy's dried blood. It was baffling. Brandy sighed. Her head began pounding. Brandy pinched her eyes shut and gritted her teeth. She pinched the bridge of her nose with her thumb and forefinger. Her mind filled with Greek symbols and numerical values. All her other thoughts vanished. Her fingers dropped from the bridge of her nose. Her eyes popped open. Her pupils shrank.

Brandy flipped the notebook over. She laid the tip of the pencil she found against the second page in the journal. The end of the pencil squashed against the page and refused to move. Brandy squinted. She lifted the pencil and stared at the tip. She was holding the pencil she'd broken the night before. A piece of graphite was dangling from the end. A chunk of wood beside that was smooth and squashed flat. Brandy exhaled, impatiently. She tossed the pencil across the room. It crashed into one of the stools around the bar beside the kitchen. It clattered to the floor and bounced around. Brandy snagged another pencil from the drawer and looked it over. The second pencil had a sharp, dark tip. Brandy pressed the end of the pencil against the next page in the notebook and began scribbling.

She was blinded by thoughts. She couldn't keep up. She didn't know what to write next. Symbols shot through her arm. The tip of the pencil began wiggling across the page. Brandy studied what she was writing as it came out. It made no sense. It was a series of integrals and their solutions. Brandy wasn't even sure what she wrote was correct. But apparently, she didn't need to. She already *knew* the answers. Brandy stopped. She closed her eyes and bowed her head. She slid her fingers through her hair and exhaled. She looked at the page. It was filled

from top to bottom. There wasn't a blank space left. Brandy wrinkled her nose. She flipped the page over and scribbled on the back. She began writing out sets and plotting them. She filled the lower half of the page with a series of graphs. Then, she drew curves on them derived from each set.

Brandy's eyes forced themselves shut. Her neck went stiff. Her shoulders shrugged up. She heard hummingbirds in her ears. Brandy whimpered. The pencil dropped from her fingers. It rolled across the coffee table and dropped to the floor. When Brandy opened her eyes, her cheek was lying on the notebook. It felt warm and wet. Brandy exhaled through her nostrils. She heard bubbles bursting in her left nostril. She figured her nose was bleeding again. Brandy lifted her head and looked down. She was lying in a pool of blood. The page she'd been writing on was filled with sets and pictures of curves. It was soaked in warm crimson. Brandy gasped. Blood dribbled off her chin. It splattered blood on the notebook. The blood on the notebook splashed across the coffee table.

Brandy dropped her fingers over her nose, lips, and chin. Her nostrils, lips, and cheek were painted with blood. Brandy turned to her right. She snagged a wad of tissues from the box beside the lamp. She squashed the wad of tissues over the lower half of her face and closed her eyes. Her head felt like it was being squashed in a vise. She shook all over. Brandy's face crinkled. It looked like she'd bitten into an onion. Brandy sniffled. Tears dribbled out of the corners of her eyes. They wiggled down her cheeks and dripped to her thighs. Brandy peeled her lips apart. She inhaled a shaky breath. She felt despondent and lonely. And, she was *still* shaking with terror from the nightmare that woke her up.

Brandy whimpered. She tilted her head back and blinked her eyes open. The lenses of her glasses were dotted with tears. Brandy swallowed. She yanked the wad of tissues away



from her face. They were soaked with blood. Brandy dropped them beside the notebook. She grabbed another handful of tissues and swabbed her cheek. Most of the blood was gone. Brandy cleaned up what was left. Then, she squashed the tissues over her nostrils and tilted her head back. She searched the edge of the coffee table with the fingertips of her free hand. Her fingertips landed on a column of icy, steel coils. It was the binding of the notebook. Brandy snagged a hold of the coils and slipped the journal off the coffee table. She dragged herself to the edge of the couch and slid her legs over the side. She plopped her feet on the quilt wadded on the floor. It was cold and silky.

Brandy stumbled across the living room and wandered towards the stairs. She lowered the wad of tissues and licked her lips. They tasted a little bloody. Brandy slid the tips of her fingers along the edges of her nostrils. They felt warm and sticky. Brandy reached the top of the stairs. She stopped. She peeked over the edge of the top step and exhaled slowly. She was looking at the door to L.I.N.'s bedroom. Well, technically it was L.I.N. and Chuck's bedroom. Whatever. The door was shut. The house was so dark, the door was barely visible. Brandy was afraid to go any further. She didn't want to wake her friends. She also worried she might... interrupt something.

Brandy looked towards the northern end of the upstairs hallway. It was pitch black. Brandy shuddered with terror. She got that feeling again. It felt like someone was standing behind her, watching her. Brandy pinched her eyes shut and shivered. She scampered up the stairs, slipped across the hallway, and stopped in front of L.I.N. and Chuck's bedroom door. She wadded her tissues in her pinky and ring finger. She laid the tips of her index finger, middle finger, and thumb along the rim of the L.I.N. and Chuck's door knob. Brandy exhaled a quiet, uneasy breath through her lips. She felt so dumb. She didn't know what to do. She eased the

door knob to the right. Then, she slid the door away from the door frame. A narrow rhombus of light swung across the room. It came from the lamp in the living room. But the bedroom was so dark, it looked like the surface of the sun. Brandy watched the light carefully. She didn't want to wake her friends just yet.

She slipped into the bedroom, turned, and returned the door to its frame. Then, she uncurled the knob. She faced the bedroom and looked around. Chuck and L.I.N. were cuddled under L.I.N.'s tie dye comforter. They were tangled in each other's arms. The corners of Brandy's lips curled at the ends. She slipped across the room and stood beside the bed. She stared at Chuck's face and swallowed. There was a lump in her throat. She still wasn't sure if she should wake him. But, she didn't know what else to do. All she knew was that she needed someone's help. Mainly, she needed someone to talk to, to take the edge off. Brandy licked her lips. She reached for Chuck's shoulder. But, she hesitated. Her arm curled towards her chest. Her fingers receded.

She stared at Chuck's face and tilted her head. Her eyes crinkled. They welled up with tears. The tissue dropped from her fingers. Brandy bowed her head. She laid the tips of her fingers over her eyes and sniffled. Chuck's eyes peeled apart. He raised his eyebrows and blinked. His head turned to the left. He was surprised to find Brandy standing beside him. It caught him off guard. Her eyes were buried in her fingers. Chuck heard her snuffle. He figured she was crying. Chuck inhaled a sharp breath. He slipped his arm out of L.I.N.'s blanket. He reached up and curled his fingers around Brandy's elbow.

*"Hey..."* he whispered. Brandy was startled. She dropped her fingers and laid them over her lips. Her eyes popped open. She stared into Chuck's eyes and blinked.

*"Oh, Chuck..."* she whispered. She showed Chuck her palm. *"I'm sorry."* She

swallowed. *"I'm SO sorry..."* Chuck looked at Brandy's palm. It was stained with blood. It was shaking like a leaf. Chuck curled his fingers around Brandy's shaky, bloody fingers.

*"What's the matter, Brandy?"* he rasped. *"What happened?"* Brandy shut her eyes. She inhaled through her lips and exhaled a heavy sigh. She crinkled her eyes and shook her head.

*"I don't know..."* she whined. She began shivering. *"I'm so scared, Chuck. I don't know what to do..."* Brandy bowed her head and sobbed. Chuck licked his lips. He looked to his right. L.I.N. was sleeping like a baby. She hadn't moved. Chuck smiled. He kissed the side of L.I.N.'s head. Then, he slipped away from the covers and stood in front of Brandy. He slid his arms around her waist. Brandy melted in his arms. Her head collapsed against his chest.

*"Oh, man..."* Chuck whispered. He laid his fingers on the back of Brandy's head. He squashed Brandy's soft, squishy hair. He slid his fingers down the back of her head and patted it. *"It's okay, Brandy,"* he whispered. He laid his fingers across the back of Brandy's neck. He laid his lips on the top of her head and kissed it. *"It's gonna be okay."* He slid his fingers across Brandy's shoulders. Brandy unwound a little. She hugged Chuck's back and exhaled. She swallowed and looked up.

*"I-I didn't know what else to do, Chuck."* She shook her head. *"I'm sorry."* Chuck motioned towards the hallway with his head.

*"Come on,"* he offered. *"Let me have a look at you."* Brandy nodded. Chuck led to her to the door. He eased the knob to the right. Then, he yanked the door out of the way. Brandy snuck through. Chuck followed. He jerked the door closed, eased it against the frame, and unrolled the knob. He laid his fingers on Brandy's back and nudged her towards the bathroom. Brandy staggered to the end of the hallway and wandered through a doorway. She reached beside the doorway, laid the tips of her fingers on the wall, and searched for a light switch.

Chuck flipped on the lights and wandered into the bathroom. Brandy crinkled her eyes. Chuck shut the door. He took Brandy's hand and led her across the room. He spun her around and laid his fingers on her shoulders.

"Here, sit down," he instructed. Brandy sat on a wooden lid covering the toilet. She laid the notebook in her lap and stared at the floor. Chuck stared at the journal in Brandy's lap. He narrowed his eyes. "Where did you get *that*?" he inquired. Brandy looked up. She lifted the notebook and offered it to Chuck. It wobbled in her jittery fingertips.

"Um, I don't know," Brandy mumbled. Chuck took the notebook from Brandy and laid it on the toilet tank. Brandy folded her fingers in her lap and looked down. Chuck curled his fingers below Brandy's chin. He lifted her head. Brandy looked into his eyes. She wiggled her eyeballs, nervously. "What?"

Chuck smiled a little. "Nothing." He unraveled a wad of toilet paper. It hung from a dispenser beside the toilet. Brandy looked Chuck over. He wore a pair of blue, flannel pants and a black t-shirt. "X-Team" was written across the front of his shirt. It was written in squiggly, white letters. "Did you have a bad dream?" Chuck asked. He held the wad of toilet paper below a golden faucet near the edge of the sink. He loosened the cold knob and looked up. Brandy nodded.

"Yeah." Chuck turned off the cold water. The toilet paper in his fingers was sopping wet. He wrung it out. He wandered across the room, stood in front of Brandy, and bent over. He took a breath.

"You remember what it was about?" He dabbed Brandy's nostrils with the wad of wet tissues. The outer corners of Brandy's eyebrows fell. She shook her head.

"No."

Chuck nodded. "Yeah..." He swabbed Brandy's lips. There was dried blood all over them. "Dreams are like that, sometimes." Chuck looked into Brandy's eyes. He squinted. "And, your nose?"

Brandy shrugged. "I don't know." Chuck pressed his lips together. He reached beside Brandy's arm. He grabbed the notebook off the toilet tank and looked it over. Brandy stared at the shiny green cover across the front of the notebook. She licked her lips.

"Maybe *you* can figure it out." Chuck laid the wad of toilet paper on the edge of the sink. He flipped back the cover of the notebook and read the first page. He blinked and raised his eyebrows.

"Um..." He searched Brandy's squiggly handwriting. He recognized bits and pieces of what Brandy wrote. But, he'd never seen anything like it. He looked towards the potty.

"Brandy, what the hell *is* this?" Brandy pouted. She shrugged.

"I'm not sure." Chuck flipped the page. He noticed dried droplets of Brandy's blood. He swabbed them with his fingertips. "That's from last night," Brandy explained. Chuck nodded. He tried to flip the page. It was stuck to the next one. Chuck pressed his lips together.

"Hmph." He peeled the pages apart. A fresh pool of Brandy's blood was sandwiched between them. The pages were soggy and crinkly. "Oh, Brandy..." Chuck groaned. He laid the notebook on the edge of the sink. He grabbed a fresh wad of toilet paper. He swabbed the pages of the notebook with the toilet tissues. He looked at Brandy. "Did your nose just start bleeding? On its own?" Brandy nodded. Chuck searched the bloody pages. The jumbled mess Brandy scratched down was baffling and bizarre. He looked up. "When did this start?"

Brandy stared into Chuck's shiny, tan eyes. "Chuck..." She raised her palms. "You *know* when it started."

Chuck nodded. "After that thing with Daisy?" Brandy closed her eyes. She slowly nodded. Chuck licked his lips. He tossed the bloody tissues in the trash. He grabbed the tissues he soaked with water and knelt beside the toilet. He grabbed Brandy's hand and looked it over. He began swabbing her palm. Brandy opened her eyes. She crinkled her nose. "Chuck, I'm scared." She inhaled a pair of sharp breaths. "What... What's happening to me?"

Chuck laid his fingers on Brandy's shoulder. "No, it's okay," he assured her. He laid his palm on her cheek. "It's gonna be alright, honey. I promise." He looked away. He swabbed remaining crumbs of dried blood from Brandy's palm. "We'll figure this out. Okay?" He looked up. "Don't worry." Brandy forced a smile. She looked at her lap and nodded. Chuck cupped his fingers below her chin again. "Hey," he instructed. "Look at me." Brandy looked up. Chuck smiled. "Your glasses are filthy." Brandy chuckled. Chuck slipped Brandy's spectacles off her face. He laid the lenses against the bottom of his shirt. He chucked the wad of wet toilet paper into a black, mesh wastebasket beside the sink.

Chuck stood, turned, and sat beside Brandy. Brandy scooted to the edge of the toilet seat. She looked over her shoulder and watched. Chuck slipped the fingers of his left hand under the bottom of his shirt. He held the ear piece of Brandy's glasses with the fingers of his right hand. He curled the bottom of his shirt around Brandy's lenses and swabbed them. He looked into Brandy's eyes.

"Stop crying. Okay?" Brandy pinched her eyes shut. She bowed her head and laid her fingers over her eyelids. Chuck smiled. "What did I just say?" Brandy exhaled a shaky laugh. She wiped her eyes and looked up. She sniffled. Chuck raised Brandy's glasses. There was a row of light fixtures above the sink. There were four of them. They were shaped like drinking glasses. They were made of white glass. Chuck held Brandy's glasses in front of the light

fixtures and looked through the lenses. They were still a little foggy. He laid the lenses on the bottom of his shirt and continued swabbing. He looked over his shoulder. "Are you in pain?" he asked.

Brandy licked her lips. "My head's killing me."

Chuck laid Brandy's glasses across her eyes. "You want some drugs?"

Brandy lifted her eyebrows. "You got some?" Chuck nodded. He stood and opened a mirror above the sink. He found a bottle of Tylevil. They were ibuprofen liquid gels. Chuck unscrewed the cap, dropped a couple of tablets in his palm and handed them to Brandy. Chuck returned the Tylevil to a shelf inside the mirror. He set it beside a stack of tiny, plastic drinking cups. He snagged one of the drinking cups and closed the mirror. He filled the cup with water and handed it to Brandy.

"There you go," he remarked. He sat beside Brandy and folded his arms across his lap. Brandy popped the capsules between her lips. She gulped down the tiny cup of water. Then, she tossed the cup into the wastebasket. Chuck felt the toilet seat trembling. He looked up. Brandy was shivering. A curly, wadded strand of hair was sloped over the right side of her face. Brandy lifted her fingers. They were wobbly and jiggling. Brandy slipped shiny, chocolate strands behind her ear and looked up. Chuck heard her teeth chattering. He smiled a little.

"Hey..." he hummed. He slipped his arm around Brandy's shoulders. "Come here."

Brandy pressed her lips together. "Mmm..." she hummed. "What are you doing, Chuck?"

Chuck snickered. "Come here, Brandy." He laid the side of Brandy's head against the side of his neck. He laid his cheek on top. "It's okay. You're my friend." Brandy smiled. She exhaled through her nostrils. Chuck rubbed her shoulder. "Why don't you sleep with *us*,

tonight?" Brandy lifted her head and looked up. She shook her head.

"No. No, no."

Chuck smiled. "Come on. It'll be like a slumber party."

Brandy chuckled. "Chuck, no. I can't do *that*." She pressed her lips together. "What... What will L.I.N. think?"

"L.I.N. will love it," Chuck assured her. He dropped his arm and stood up. He faced Brandy and offered his hands. "Come on..." Brandy stared at Chuck's palms. She looked into his eyes.

"We're gonna wake her up."

Chuck nodded. "I know. It's okay." Brandy looked at Chuck's fingertips. She laid her fingers in his.

"Is she a grouch when you wake her up?"

Chuck helped Brandy to her feet. "She gets pissed." Brandy snickered. Chuck flipped off the lights. He helped Brandy down the hall and led her into L.I.N.'s bedroom. L.I.N. was sitting up. She turned her head when Chuck and Brandy opened the door. She crinkled her eyes.

"What's going on out there?"

Chuck raised his palms. "Brandy..." He narrowed his eyes. "Can she sleep with us tonight?" L.I.N. folded her arms over her chest and looked into Brandy's eyes.

"Really?" Brandy licked her lips. She shrugged. L.I.N. smiled. "Cool!" She offered her hands. "Come on. It'll be like a slumber party!" Brandy looked over her shoulder. She stared into Chuck's eyes and shook her head. Chuck patted her shoulder.

"After you." Brandy faced forward. She wandered across tufts of fluffy, tan carpet and sat on the edge of L.I.N.'s bed. L.I.N. slipped across her mattress and wrapped her arms around



Brandy's waist.

"Come *on!*" she shouted. She dragged Brandy across the bed and lay down. She sucked Brandy to the mattress with her. Brandy giggled. Chuck closed the bedroom door and wandered across the room. He slipped under the covers and looked beside him. L.I.N. and Brandy's heads were on the same pillow. It had a brown pillowcase with white polka dots. Chuck was sitting up. He laid L.I.N.'s tie dye blanket across L.I.N. and Brandy's shoulders. Then, he laid his head on a pillow with a black pillowcase. He looked into Brandy's eyes. Brandy stared back. She was still shivering. Chuck laid his hand on her shoulder.

"You okay, Brandy?" L.I.N. laid her fingers on the back of Brandy's head. She stroked her buddy's soft, wavy hair.

"Yeah. You're shaking the whole bed." Brandy exhaled a shaky sigh.

"I'm sorry, guys." She closed her eyes and swallowed. "I'll be alright." Chuck smiled. He slipped Brandy's glasses off her face. He folded them and tucked them under the bed. He laid his fingers on Brandy's cheek.

"Goodnight, honey," he hummed. He kissed her forehead. Then, he lay down and closed his eyes. Brandy smiled.

"Goodnight, Chuck." L.I.N. kissed the back of Brandy's head. She had no idea what happened to Brandy. But, she figured it was something pretty bad. She hated to see her little buddy all shaky and scared. She slid her fingertips across Brandy's arms.

"We're right here if you need us. Okay?"

Brandy exhaled a slow, steady breath. "*Okay...*"

L.I.N. awoke at the crack of dawn. Her tie dye blanket was draped over her right cheek. She curled her fingers around the edge of her comforter and tugged it away. Dim rays of

sunlight shined through a window on the southern wall of L.I.N.'s bedroom. They painted the room with four giant squares of light. The top half of the bed glowed blue. The bottom half glowed green. L.I.N. looked across the room. The northeast corner of the room glowed red. The southeast corner glowed yellow. L.I.N. pinched her eyes shut and stared at the backs of her eyelids. Her stomach was killing her. It felt like it was filled with antifreeze. L.I.N.'s face shriveled up like a raisin. She was lying on her left side. Her arms were wrapped around Brandy's waist. L.I.N. slipped her arms away from her buddy's body and lay on her back.

She swallowed and opened her eyes. Her ceiling was navy blue. It was splattered with white, teal, and canary paint. A fan with five bulbs and five long, wooden blades dangled from the middle of the ceiling. The blades of the fan and most of the ceiling were dotted with squishy stars. The stars glowed in the dark. They were different colors. They were pink, teal, yellow, and white. They made L.I.N. feel dizzy. They looked like they were wandering along the ceiling. L.I.N. clutched her belly and gritted her teeth. She looked to her left. She didn't want to wake her friends. She slipped away from the covers and rolled off the end of the bed. She scurried across tufts of squishy carpet and stood beside her door. The door and the rest of the eastern wall were covered with tall rectangles of mirrors.

L.I.N. slipped her fingers around the door knob and eased it to the right. She yanked the door away from the wall, snuck through, and eased it shut. She uncurled the knob. She looked towards the southern end of the upstairs hallway. She was staring at a bathroom. L.I.N. grabbed her belly and pinched her eyes shut. She felt terrible.

*"Maybe I just need something in my stomach?"* she thought. She crept across the hallway, entered the bathroom, and closed the door. L.I.N. flattened against the inner side of the door. She reached beside her and flipped on the lights. The bathroom glowed like a tangerine.

L.I.N. looked across the room. She stared at herself in a large, oval shaped mirror. It was surrounded by a border of pale veneer. L.I.N. wore a white t-shirt and shorts. Her shorts were checkered with white and black. L.I.N. slipped across the bathroom and stood in front of the sink. There was a drinking glass by the edge of the sink. It was near the southern wall. L.I.N. grabbed the glass and held it below a golden faucet. The faucet poured out of the southern edge of the sink. There were two golden knobs shaped like plus signs.

L.I.N. turned a knob engraved with a "C." Icy water dribbled from the faucet and filled the glass. L.I.N. closed the knob and put the glass to her lips. She noticed her fingers were wiggling like worms. She downed the glass of water in two huge gulps. Then, she set the glass beside the edge of the sink. L.I.N.'s stomach gurgled. Her eyes popped open. She knew she'd made a mistake. L.I.N. raced across the bathroom and stood in front of the toilet. She dropped to her knees on a rug decorated with Greek symbols. She flipped the toilet seat and the lid out of the way. She slipped silky strands of sapphire behind her ears. She scrunched up her face and groaned. The entire glass of water spewed from her lips and dribbled into the toilet. It sounded like a fish jumping out of a lake.

L.I.N. sat on her heels and exhaled a shaky breath. She plopped her palms over her eyes and stared at the backs of her eyelids. For some reason, Omega popped into her head. She remembered what he asked her the day before.

*"This morning..."* he inquired. *"Had you taken ill?"* L.I.N. remembered nodding. Omega smiled. *"Why must that be the case?"* he requisitioned. L.I.N.'s fingers dropped from her eyes. They slid down her cheeks and plopped on her thighs. L.I.N. bowed her head and stared into space.

*"Oh, no..."* she rasped.

L.I.N. returned to her bedroom. She slipped around the head of the bed and stood behind Brandy and Chuck. She stared at the top of Brandy's head. Brandy was quiet as a mouse. She looked relaxed and tranquil. L.I.N. hated to wake her. But, she didn't have any choice. She didn't know how to drive a car. And, she wanted to get to the closest grocery store as soon as possible. L.I.N. pressed her lips together. She laid the tips of her fingers on Brandy's cheek. She slid them across Brandy's white, silky skin. Brandy's eyelids fluttered apart. Brandy tilted her head back and stared at L.I.N. from the tops of her eyes. She blinked. L.I.N. smiled.

*"Hi, Brandy,"* she whispered.

Brandy smiled back. *"Hi, L.I.N."*

L.I.N. crinkled her eyes. *"Can you take me to the grocery store?"* Brandy lifted her head. She plopped her hand on L.I.N.'s pillow to hold herself up. She looked into L.I.N.'s eyes.

*"Sure..."* she rasped. She narrowed her eyes. *"But, why?"*

L.I.N. shrugged. *"We need some bacon and some eggs..."* She looked at the tops of her eyes and thought. She looked into Brandy's eyes. *"And, some milk..."* She felt like she was lying. But the truth was, L.I.N. actually needed those things. It's just that... she needed something else as well. It was the *real* reason she wanted to go to the store. She didn't want Brandy to worry, though. Brandy nodded.

*"Okay."* She looked towards the hallway. She faced L.I.N. *"Can I take a shower first?"* L.I.N. smiled. She nodded.

B-E-H was a good sized grocery store. It was near the end of a lonely road leading to L.I.N. and Hal's place. It was on the side of a highway beside the first exit. The outer walls of the B-E-H building were made of giant panes of glass. There was an enormous parking lot. And, it was always full. There were two entrances. Each was covered by a pair of sliding, glass

doors. Two bronze posts spanned a space beyond the doors. "B-E-H" hung across a space between the posts. It was spelled with big, bold, teal colored letters. Brandy drove L.I.N. and herself in her crummy, little car. She and L.I.N. were near a gathering of waste high shelves. All the shelves in B-E-H were trimmed with pale veneer. The floor was covered with large, brown tiles. They were spotted with black, yellow, and red.

A chrome post dangled above the shelves near L.I.N. and Brandy. A slick, teal block hung from that. The top and bottom of the block were squares. The edges were long, narrow rectangles. White, raised letters spanned the edges of the block. The letters were the same font as the ones across the B-E-H logo out front. The letters spelled "Health & Beauty." Brandy pushed a shopping cart along. She wore a long sleeve shirt, indigo jeans, and narrow flats. Her shirt was wrapped with plum and lilac bands. Her jeans were dotted with red flowers with yellow centers. Her shoes were decorated like leopard print. L.I.N. wore a rainbow striped sweater and tan khakis. Her shoes were wrapped with multicolored fabric. The fabric was decorated with pink, teal, lime, and white stripes.

Brandy's shopping cart was made of chrome mesh. There was a thick, chrome bar across the back of the cart. It was wrapped with a teal, plastic handle. L.I.N. spotted the Health & Beauty section as she and Brandy passed. She turned and wandered down one of the aisles. Brandy kept going. She was looking for the dairy section. She looked down a long section of veneer covered shelves. The shelves were seven feet tall. Brandy spotted a stack of teal signs suspended from the ceiling. They were near the end of the aisle. None of them said milk. Brandy stopped. She looked around. She was surrounded by people. Most of them pushed carts of their own. Brandy noticed that L.I.N. was missing. She threw her hands out at her sides.

L.I.N. searched a row of waist high shelves. She spotted a shelf near the middle. There

was a group of pink, cardboard boxes. L.I.N. snagged one and looked up. She noticed Brandy was near the other side of the store. L.I.N. pocketed the tiny, cardboard box. Then, she hurried towards her friend. Brandy looked over her shoulder. She smiled and squinted. L.I.N. smiled back.

"Sorry!" she called. "I got distracted." L.I.N. caught up and stood beside Brandy. Brandy looked around.

"Where's the milk around here?"

L.I.N. pointed towards the end of the aisle. "That way," she instructed. Brandy and L.I.N. rounded the edge of the aisle. There was a wall beyond the end of the aisle. It was made of red bricks. It intersected another brick wall beside shelves. That wall stood to L.I.N. and Brandy's left. They were two of the few walls in the store that weren't made of glass. A short hallway was tucked into the corner where the walls intersected. There was a men's restroom on the left side of the hallway. There was a ladies' restroom on the right. L.I.N. stared down the hallway as she and Brandy passed. She felt a lump in her throat. A row of glass doors was built into the wall beside the hallway. Steel mesh shelves were stacked behind the doors. Cartons of milk were arranged along the shelves. Brandy stopped in front of the first glass door she came to. She clapped her hands together and looked around.

"Okay, then..." She opened the door and grabbed a half gallon of chocolate milk. She set it in the shopping cart. She rolled the shopping cart in front of the next door. She stopped the cart and opened the door. She grabbed two gallons of whole milk and stacked them beside the chocolate milk. She laid her fingers on the teal, plastic handle across the end of the cart and looked inside. She smiled and looked to her right. A man she'd never seen before stood beside her. He looked old and angry. A plastic, teal basket dangled from his right arm. His eyes were

cold and dark. His hair was peppered. He stared into Brandy's eyes and lowered his eyebrows in the middle. Brandy forced a smile. She swung her cart out of the man's way. She parked it beside the end of the nearest aisle. The man walked by and opened the nearest refrigerator door. Brandy looked around. The dairy section was filled with strangers. They wandered down the aisle in swarms. Brandy didn't see L.I.N. anywhere. She looked beside her.

"L.I.N.?" she called. She looked behind her. "L-I-I-I-N?"

L.I.N. wandered into the ladies' restroom. It was covered by a steel door with a curvy, chrome handle. The door was painted teal. It swung shut on its own. L.I.N. rested her back against the inside of the door and sighed. She looked around. The floor was covered with white tiles. The walls were covered with crimson bricks. There were two porcelain sinks along the wall beside L.I.N. There was a chrome dispenser between the sinks. It contained a stack of tan paper towels. Chrome cylinders hung above the sinks. Edges of plastic bags dangled from the bottoms of the cylinders. The bags were filled with blue, liquid soap. There were five stalls. They were covered with tall, teal doors. The stall door across from the entrance was wider than the others. It had a blue sign on the door. The sign was decorated with a picture of a white stick figure sitting in a wheel chair.

L.I.N. entered the stall beside the one with the wheel chair sign. A porcelain toilet was hiding inside. It had a toilet seat. It didn't have a lid. L.I.N. closed the door, locked it, and sat on the pot. A toilet paper dispenser with chrome handles dug into her right kneecap. L.I.N. swung her legs to the left and shoved her fingers into her pocket. She took out the little, pink box and looked it over. She slipped the tips of her fingers under a pair of flaps near the top of the box. She opened the box and took out a tiny, paper strip. It was blue on one end and white on the other. L.I.N. also found a booklet with slick, white pages. She flipped through the

booklet and read, silently. Her lips wiggled as she read.

She returned the booklet to the box. She set the box on a roll of toilet paper dangling from the end of the dispenser beside her right knee. She sighed. L.I.N. unbuttoned her jeans. She slid the waist of her jeans and a pair of pink panties to her knees. Then, she slipped the paper strip between her thighs and peed on it. Her face felt flush. She was embarrassed. She looked around once more to make sure the room was empty. L.I.N. finished peeing. She wiggled drops of urine from the end of the strip of paper. Then, she lifted it and looked it over. After a few seconds, two red lines appeared near the middle of the strip.

L.I.N. faced forward. She cupped her fingers over her lips. Her eyes welled up with tears. She dropped the paper strip into the toilet. Then, she looked over her shoulder. She spotted a long handle sticking out of a stack of chrome plumbing parts. She pressed the handle. The toilet began flushing. L.I.N. turned around and pinched her eyes shut. Tears dribbled out. They wiggled down her cheeks and splattered slick, white tiles along the floor. L.I.N. rested her elbows on her knees. She inhaled cool air through her lips. She exhaled a long, breathless moan.