

“The Telltale, Telltale Heart”

By Michael Atkins

## Chapter 1: “The Lee Sanders Dilemma”

Lee Sanders was big and intimidating. He had biceps like basketballs. He had thighs like tree trunks. He stood six foot, eight and weighed 250 pounds. His neck was as wide as his face. His hair was blonde and shaved close. His eyes were beady and blue. His skin was pale and flush. He moved fast. He moved a lot. He twitched and shuffled. His actions were frantic yet precise. He stood in front of his bathroom mirror. It concealed a medicine cabinet. It hovered on Lee’s bathroom wall, above a granite countertop. Lee looked himself over. He wore a pair of black jeans and a pair of athletic shoes. His shoes were decorated with splashes of black and turquoise. Lee laid his hands on his chest. His fingers were like bratwursts. His flesh was wet and hairy. There was a long, fat scar along his breastbone. His pulse was racing. His pulse was racing. He closed his eyes and inhaled through his nostrils. He breathed slowly and deeply. He exhaled quietly through his lips.

Lee opened his medicine cabinet. It was filled with glass vials. They were arranged in rows along five shelves. The vials were labeled. Each label faced forward. They were white with tall, black letters. The labels read “Nitroglycerin.” Lee snagged the vial on the far, left side of the top shelf and closed the cabinet. He unrolled a drawer below the sink. It was filled with syringes. They were packaged individually in clear, plastic wrappers. Lee tore one open and shut the drawer. He yanked a protective cap off the end of the syringe and laid it on the counter. He slid the syringe’s needle into the top of the vial and eased back the plunger. He measured five cubic centimeters and removed the syringe’s needle from the vial. He laid the vial on the counter, pointed the needle towards the ceiling, and tapped the syringe. He didn’t see any air bubbles. He eased the plunger towards the needle until nitroglycerin drizzled from the tip. He nodded and laid the syringe on the counter.

Lee wandered into his kitchen. It was pretty dark. It was just before dawn, and the bathroom lights were the only ones in the house that were on. Lee's kitchen countertops matched the ones in his bathroom. A bar separated a small dining area and the kitchen. There was a porcelain sink and a counter on the side opposite the dining area. A short, granite wall separated the sink side of the bar from the dining side. A counter with a stove, a refrigerator, and a microwave stood across from that. There was a tall, glass jar next to the sink. It was filled with gummy worms. Lee stopped next to the sink. He unrolled a drawer below the gummy worms. It was filled with bags of thick, tan rubber bands. Lee reached into one of the bags and grabbed a rubber band. He wrapped his thick, sausage fingers around the rubber band and pulled his hands apart. The rubber band snapped like a twig.

Lee wound the rubber band around his left bicep and tied it off. He made a fist and patted his arm. A thick, blue vein appeared on his bicep. Lee closed the drawer. He slipped a chrome cap off the glass jar next to the sink and grabbed a gummy worm. He popped it in his mouth, replaced the cap, and faced the refrigerator. There was a row of shiny, white cabinets above and below the counter beside the refrigerator. Lee opened a cabinet door above the stove. A storage space behind the door was filled with rows of orange, prescription bottles with white, plastic caps. Lee snagged the nearest one, popped the top, and dribbled half a dozen capsules onto his palm. The capsules were blue on one end and red on the other. Lee closed the prescription bottle, returned it to the cabinet, and returned to the bathroom. There was a porcelain sink with a long, chrome faucet below the mirror. The faucet had two chrome knobs, one for hot water and one for cold. There was a glass next to the cold knob.

Lee slipped his fat fingers around the glass, held it below the faucet, and turned the cold knob clockwise. He filled the glass halfway and shut the water off. He tossed the capsules onto

his tongue, held the glass to his lips, and tilted his head back. He gulped down the water and pills and replaced the glass. He held up his left palm and made a fist. He looked his bicep over and nodded. He picked up the syringe, spiked his vein, and eased the plunger towards the needle. He exhaled slowly through his lips. There was a potty next to the sink. There was a small, plastic wastebasket next to that. It was filled with syringes. Lee eased the needle out of his bicep, recovered the protective cap from the counter, and draped it over the end of the needle. He tossed the syringe into the trash. Then, he returned the vial of nitroglycerin to the medicine cabinet. He slipped his fingers below the rubber band on his bicep and ripped it off. He tossed it into the trash and made a fist with his left hand. He eased his fist towards his shoulder a few times. He felt nitroglycerin sliding through his veins. It felt icy and thick. He pinched his eyes shut and scrunched up his face.

Lee's head began to throb. Blotches of blue and violet lights scattered across the backs of his eyelids. Lee took a deep breath through his nostrils and exhaled slowly through his lips. His neck and the back of his skull felt like they'd been beaten with a baseball bat. His knees and fingers began jiggling. His mouth went dry. His teeth chattered. His palms felt clammy. Lee shook the feeling away and opened his eyes. He looked at the toilet tank. A red t-shirt was sitting on top. Lee sighed. He dug his fingers into his eyes and swirled them around. He threw on the t-shirt, flicked off the lights, and wandered towards the living room. He stood by the front door and looked to his right. There was a fluffy, white couch next to the door. A brown, corduroy jacket lay over the arm. Lee picked it up and threw it around his shoulders. He slipped his hand into a pocket on the right side. He found his keys and his billfold.

He wandered outside and locked the door. A shiny, red Cammy was parked in Lee's driveway. It was a seventies model. Lee hopped inside and fired up the engine. It was pretty

cold outside. The car needed to warm up for a bit. Lee eased back and pinched his eyes shut. A sharp pain scattered across his scalp. It made his hair stand on end. Lee scrunched up his face and gritted his teeth. He dug his fingers into his eyes and swirled them around. He blew a breath through his lips and relaxed. He laid his palms on his chest. His heart was beating softly. His heart was beating softly. Lee nodded and opened his eyes. He spread his fingers in front of his face and curled them. They felt tingly. Lee pressed his lips together and exhaled through his nostrils. He thought about eating another gummy worm. But, he knew better. There was a CD player in the middle of the dash. Lee tapped a knob, and a disc loaded. The Cammy filled with death metal. It pounded Lee's eardrums. It rumbled his seat. His lips twisted into a grin.

The Cammy was a standard. It had a floor shifter with a long, chrome stick. The handle looked like an eight ball. Lee stomped the clutch pedal to the floor, wrapped his thick fingers around the eight ball, and shifted the Cammy into reverse. He drove to the end of his driveway and peeled away. He was on his way to his girlfriend's. But, he needed to pick up some smokes. He decided to stop at Blue Wall. It was a small grocery store five blocks away. Lee nodded and headed that direction.

Brandy was a pharmacist at Blue Wall. She was short and thin. She wore a black blouse, black trousers, shiny, black flats, and a long, white coat. There was a pocket on the left breast of her jacket. Three blue pens were tucked inside. Brandy had dark, wise eyes and shiny, pink lips. A set of glittery spectacles lay over her eyes. They were long and thin. There were no rims around the lenses. Brandy had long, brown hair. The top half was straight and organized. The ends draped around her shoulders in jagged coils. Brandy hated her hair. She brushed it every morning. When she left her apartment, it was a curtain of long, shiny strands. When she got to work, the bottom half was separated into wavy clusters. It drove her crazy. She thought about

chopping it off. But, she worried it might coil to the top of her head.

Brandy worked the pharmacy with Joan and Ronnie. Joan was Brandy's friend. They'd known each other since high school. Joan had short, red hair, pale skin, and a face filled with freckles. She was short and pudgy. She had pretty, green eyes and a big, happy smile. She was wearing a maroon turtleneck, dark blue jeans, and soft, brown, leather boots. She wore a long, white coat on top. Ronnie was the pharmacy supervisor. He was a real dick. He was tall and skinny. He had peppered, black hair and a goatee. His eyes were dark and frigid. He wore a pair of glasses with thick, black frames. He had on a white, collared shirt with thin, blue stripes, a red and yellow tie, grey slacks, shiny, black shoes, and a long, white coat. He walked around with a frown and a clipboard. Joan walked in front of him. She was staring at the floor, timidly. Her fists dangled at her sides. The cuffs of her jacket sleeves surrounded her knuckles.

Ronnie nudged Joan along. They were wandering through rows of long, white shelves. The shelves stood behind a shiny, white counter near the back of the store. Ronnie shoved Joan around a corner and stopped. He pointed at a grey, composite bin on one of the shelves. Joan looked it over. She slid her lips to the side of her face and looked up. Ronnie widened his eyes.

"Well?" he inquired. Joan licked her lips. She looked at the contents of the bin. It was lined with tall, white, plastic bottles. They were arranged in rows. Joan stocked them the night before. She was under the impression they were antibiotics. They were supposed to be red and white capsules dispensed in white, plastic bottles. Joan didn't understand. She looked into Ronnie's eyes.

"What?"

Ronnie threw his hands out at his sides. "Really?" He picked up a bottle near the top, left corner of the bin. He unscrewed the cap and sprinkled pills onto his palm. Joan parted her

lips and tilted her head back. The bottle was filled with pink, oval caplets. They were also antibiotics. That's why they were in the same type of bottle as the ones Joan stocked the night before. But, they were different than the red and white capsules. Joan checked a label below the bin. It read "azithromycin, 250 mg." Joan pressed her lips together. She looked at Ronnie.

"When did you change *that*?" She motioned towards the bin. "We've always stocked amoxicillin there."

Ronnie nodded. "Can you read?"

Joan exhaled through her nostrils. "Of course."

Ronnie pointed at the label below the bin. "What does the tag say?"

Joan smiled. "'Amoxicillin?'" She gritted her teeth. Her smile faded. Ronnie narrowed his eyes. He returned the caplets to the bottle. Then, he dumped the pills on Joan's head. Joan pinched her eyes shut and shrugged up her shoulders. Little, pink caplets tumbled down her hair and bounced off her nose. They filled the collar of her maroon turtleneck and toppled down the sleeves of her lab coat. They clattered on rows of white tiles covering the floor. Joan opened one eye a crack and looked up. Ronnie patted the bottom of the bottle. One last pill plopped on Joan's head. She winced.

"Fix it," Ronnie instructed. He returned the cap to the bottle. He balanced the bottle on the tip of Joan's head. Then, he stomped towards the back of the pharmacy. There was an office in the back with a thick, wooden door. Ronnie wandered in, closed the door, and locked it. Joan looked at the tops of her eyes. She reached above her forehead and grabbed the empty bottle. She laid it next to the azithromycin bin. Then, she lowered her head and patted her hair. Little caplets toppled to the floor. She flapped the collar of her turtleneck. Caplets around her neck fell and bounced on the tiles. Joan tilted her head back and sighed. She flapped her coat. Three

additional pills tumbled to the floor. She looked towards the counter. Brandy was standing there, staring at her. She was chewing something. She crinkled her eyes and shook her head. Joan threw her hands out at her sides.

*“He’s an ass!”* she whispered. Brandy raised her eyebrows and nodded. Curly rolls of brown hair bounced around her shoulders. She swallowed and held up a half eaten candy bar. It was a Giggles chocolate bar. Brandy put the tip to her teeth and took a bite. Joan smacked her lips and pointed at her. “Hey, don’t be eating all the Giggles.” She plopped her hands on her hips. “That’s why we’re always running out.”

Brandy shrugged. “I missed breakfast.” She smiled. “And, *you’re* the one that eats them all.” Joan narrowed her eyes. Her eyebrows fell in the middle.

“Shut-up.” There was a wall of windows next to the pharmacy. It overlooked a parking lot out front. A shiny, red Cammy came squealing down the road. It skidded across the parking lot and stopped across two and a half spaces. Brandy’s head twisted to the right. Joan’s head twisted to the left.

“Hmph,” Brandy remarked. The Cammy’s passenger door faced the windows. It popped open, and Lee tumbled out. He landed on his side and twitched. His head twisted from side to side. He looked around, frantically. Brandy and Joan looked at each other.

“Um...” Joan mumbled. Brandy looked towards the front of the store. There was no one running the front counter. Brandy rolled her eyes.

“Well, *that* figures.” She faced Joan. “I guess Freddy hasn’t shown up, yet.” She looked towards the parking lot. Lee was on his knees, facing his car door. She snaked his arm over the top, lifted himself, and tilted his head. His eyes were wide and frantic. He looked around, suspiciously. Joan and Brandy faced each other. “I guess we’re gonna have to help this freak.”



Joan smiled. She looked over her shoulder.

“No, wait...” she whispered. She faced Brandy. “*Let’s sneak out back real quick and get some air.*” She motioned towards the office with her head. “*Then, Ronnie will have to help him!*” Brandy cupped her fingers over her lips and snickered. She shook her head.

“No!” she whispered. “*We can’t do THAT!*” The girls faced the parking lot. Lee stumbled around his passenger door. It seemed like he was having trouble judging depth. He stepped five feet from his door, snuck around, and stood near the front bumper. He leaned forward and batted at the door. It was a yard from his fingers. His face turned angry. He inched towards the door and continued to swat. Finally, he struck the door with his fist. It eased shut but not all the way. Joan narrowed her eyes.

“*Is he on acid?*” she inquired.

Brandy shook her head. “*I don’t know.*” She faced her buddy. “*But, I’m not hanging around to find out.*”

Joan faced her and smiled. “*Ronnie’s gonna kill us!*” She wandered around the counter. Then, the girls snuck to the other end. There was a pair of steel doors to the left of the pharmacy. Brandy and Joan slipped through the door on the right and eased it shut. There was a pair of automatic, glass doors near the front of the store. They were next to the front counter. A handful of heavy footsteps rattled the glass. Then, the doors slid aside. Lee’s head poked through. He looked around with a pair of wide, paranoid eyes. He looked to his right. He was staring down an aisle of groceries. It looked a mile long. The floor was covered with millions of black and white, checkered tiles. They lead into nothingness and veered to the left. Lee took a deep breath through his nose. He closed his eyes and exhaled slowly through his lips. He looked towards the front counter. There was no one there. The counter was a mountain of slick surfaces, chewing

gum, register keys, and incoherence.

Lee stumbled through the entrance, made a right, and headed towards the pharmacy. It seemed light years away. Lee felt flush. He stopped and checked his heart rate. It seemed a little high. It seemed a little high. Lee decided he'd better slow down a tad. He tried to focus on the journey rather than where the journey would take him. It was infuriating... and painstaking. A cool rush of air brushed across Lee's forehead. His skin felt slick and wet. He plopped his fingertips against his forehead. It was coated with sweat. Lee slung it aside and continued. He paced himself. He couldn't afford to get excited.

*"Just a few more minutes..."* he whispered. *"Then, the SSRIs will kick in."* Finally, he made it to the pharmacy. The trip seemed to take days. Lee laid his arms on the slick, white counter and sighed. He lowered his head, wiped sweat off his face, and slung it aside. He looked around. He was all alone. Lee slid his lips to the side of his face. "Hmph." Ronnie emerged from the office in the back. Lee looked up and grinned. He was elated. He was finally going to get his cigarettes. Ronnie held a clipboard. He was scribbling on it in a fury. He stopped and looked up. He narrowed his eyes.

"Uh... what the hell?" He looked around. "Joan? Brandy?" He looked into Lee's beady, little eyes. Lee smiled. Ronnie frowned. His eyes narrowed. His eyebrows fell in the middle. He mumbled something under his breath and headed towards the counter. The sole of his shoe rolled across a pellet of azithromycin. "Geh-buh!" Ronnie shrieked. His foot shot in front of him. He shuffled his left foot to compensate. His left shoe slid over a row of caplets as well. "Aye, shit!" Ronnie squealed. His legs whirled around like he was riding a bike. He tumbled to the tiles and landed on his butt. His clipboard sailed across the pharmacy. The edge landed across the bridge of Lee's nose. Lee's face was doused with pain. He crinkled his eyes,

pinched his nostrils, and growled. Blood oozed out of his nose. It dotted his lips and dribbled down his chin. It filled him with fury. He began huffing and puffing like an angry grizzly bear. Ronnie lay on his back, clutching his left butt cheek. He looked to his right. The floor was covered with pink, oval caplets. Ronnie scrunched up his face and snarled.

“Damn it!” He looked towards the counter. “What... What do you want?!” he demanded. “Jeez!” He stumbled to his feet and looked Lee over. Lee dropped his hand at his side and looked up. Blood gushed down his lips and chin. His eyes widened. His eyebrows tilted towards his nose. He gritted his teeth and gasped for breath.

“I need... cigarettes!” he barked.

Ronnie threw his hands out at his sides. “What?!” He looked towards the front counter. “Where’s Freddy?” He stared into Lee’s bloody face. “Well... we don’t sell cigarettes in the pharmacy.” He pointed towards the front counter. “We sell those up front.” He stopped and sighed. “Sorry about the nose.” Lee howled like a wolf. He leapt over the counter, snagged Ronnie around the throat, and fell on top of him. He straddled Ronnie’s chest and stared into his face. He squeezed his throat like a tin can. He panted like a dog. His heart thumped in his ears. His heart thumped in his ears. Ronnie tilted his head back and spread his teeth. He tried to breathe. But, nothing got through. He snagged a hold of Lee’s wrists. They were like big, fat salamis. Ronnie felt two sets of thumps below Lee’s flesh. They felt vicious and unstable. Ronnie stared into Lee’s eyes. His face felt like it was boiling. He tried to speak. Nothing came out.

Beside the pharmacy, the door on the left opened. Joan and Brandy wandered in. Joan smiled and looked around. She expected to see Ronnie scrambling around, trying to help some freak frying on acid. She saw no one. She slid her lips to the side of her face. Brandy stopped

next to her and searched the store. There was no one around. Joan heard heavy breathing. She squinted.

“Ronnie?” she inquired. The heavy breathing continued. It was coming from the floor behind the counter. Joan and Brandy looked at each other. They wandered to the other end of the counter and peeked around the corner. They found Lee sitting on Ronnie’s chest. He was squeezing his throat. Ronnie’s face was puffy and blue. Joan gasped. Her eyes popped open. Brandy laid her fingers over her lips. She began trembling. Lee looked up. He was drenched with sweat. His eyes were fierce and penetrating. He gasped for breath. His heart pounded in his ears. His heart pounded in his ears.

“*Cig...*” he wheezed. “*Cigarettes...*” Joan squeaked. Lee growled. He hopped up and sprinted towards the girls. Joan and Brandy whirled around and took off. Lee stomped across the pharmacy, stretched his arm to its limits, and snagged a fistful of Joan’s fiery hair. Joan squealed. Her head jerked back; her feet flew in front of her; and she fell on her butt. Brandy heard her buddy scream. She skidded to a stop and turned around. Joan clawed at Lee’s fat fingers. She stared at Brandy and pleaded with her eyes. She wriggled and panicked. Her face was twisted and terrified.

“Brandy!” she shrieked. Lee’s beady eyes popped open. His eyebrows fell in the middle. His lips twisted into a grin. He gritted his teeth and slid them from side to side.

“*Hee, hee, hee...*” he snarled. He dragged Joan across the tiles by her hair. Joan growled.

“Bran-dy!” she squalled. “Don’t let him get me, Brandy!” Brandy whimpered. She stumbled towards the pharmacy. She stopped and looked around. Lee lifted Joan off the floor. Joan slid her fingers through her hair and wailed. Lee grabbed a hold of her arm. He spun her

around and stared into her face. Joan crinkled her eyes and sobbed. Brandy spotted a row of bright red, plastic chairs with steel legs. They sat along a wall next to the pharmacy. They were for people waiting on prescriptions to be filled. Brandy raced towards the chairs. She stood in front of the nearest one, bent over, and curled her fingers around the legs. She looked up. Lee tightened his fist around Joan's hair. He tightened his other fist around her bicep and twisted her body. Brandy heard Joan's neck snap. Joan stopped screaming. Brandy parted her lips and inhaled a sharp breath. Lee spun Joan's head like a top and wrenched it back and forth. Then, he tilted her head back and popped it off her shoulders. A fountain of blood gushed out of Joan's neck. It drenched Lee's red t-shirt. It dotted his lips and face. It splattered his black jeans. Brandy's fingers slipped away from the chair legs. She stood and faced Lee. She folded her fingers over her lips and groaned.

*"Joan..."* she gasped. *"No..."* Her eyes filled with tears. Her heart thumped in her ears. A hideous cackle erupted from the back of Lee's throat. He held up his fists and opened them. Joan's body crumpled around his feet. Blood pooled on the tiles. Joan's head bounced like a basketball. It rested in front of her shins. Her right cheek lay on the floor. Brandy stared into Lee's beady, little eyes. She shook her head and backed away. Lee stomped towards her. Brandy squeezed out a series of breathless shouts. Lee's sinister, toothy smile persevered. He began snickering. Brandy's heel snagged a steel chair leg. She fell on her butt with a cry. She began to shiver. She plopped her palms on the floor and dragged herself away. She backed into a corner below the windows overlooking the parking lot. She gasped for every breath. Lee loomed over her and stopped. Brandy looked at him above the lenses of her glasses. She folded her knees against her chest and laid her fingers on top.

*"Please..."* she whimpered. *"Don't..."* Lee roared like a lion. He snagged Brandy

around the throat and lifted her off her feet. Her little, black flats tumbled to the floor. Lee flattened Brandy's shoulder blades against a pane of glass. He pressed his forehead against hers.

"I'm gonna rip you to shreds!" he barked. He retracted his fist and smashed it into Brandy's belly. Brandy split the air with a hideous squall. The window splintered. Brandy heard it crackling. She looked over her shoulder. The glass looked like a chain link fence. Her bowels throbbed. She felt Lee's knuckles bash her tummy a second time. Brandy shrieked. The window shattered. Tiny pebbles of hardened sand sprinkled down her jacket and blouse. Long, sharp shards tangled in rolls of her long, brown hair. Beads of glass sliced her clothes and danced along her back. Brandy felt glass ripping her flesh. She lowered her head, pinched her eyes shut, and gritted her teeth. Lee giggled. He socked Brandy again. Brandy grunted and gasped for breath. She curled her fingers around Lee's. She struggled to pry them off her throat.

"Bitch!" Lee snarled. "I'm gonna tear you apart!" Brandy felt Lee's pulse thumping against her chin. Brandy felt Lee's pulse thumping against her chin. She pressed her teeth together and sucked in air. She curled her fingers around one of the pens in her breast pocket. She yanked it out and pressed a button on the end. Lee yanked back his fist for another blow. Brandy jabbed her pen into his right eye. She felt Lee's fingers go limp. "Gah!" Lee screeched. He hopped away and plopped his fingers over his eyes. Brandy crashed to the floor. Her left knee, shoulder, and temple smashed into the tiles. She curled into a ball and sucked air through her teeth. Lee began jumping up and down. He stomped his feet against the floor like a little boy throwing a fit. "God damn it!" he cried. "God damn you! God damn you! God damn you!" Brandy slid her fingers around her throat. She lay on her back and took a breath. It felt like she was inhaling nails. She tilted her head back and filled the air with jagged coughs.

Lee looked down at Brandy. Everything in his right eye looked blurry and blue. He

retracted his foot and buried it in Brandy's ribs. Brandy rolled onto her side and sobbed. Springy rolls of hair dangled across her face. She folded her arms over her head and flattened against the wall. Lee's eyeball felt like it was going to pop. Bloody tears began dribbling down his cheeks. He snarled and dashed towards the front of the store. He snagged a carton of cigarettes from a shelf behind the counter. Then, he darted across the parking lot and hopped into his car. Brandy whimpered and wheezed. She slid her arms off her face and looked around, timidly. She felt shards of glass pressing against her flesh. Her lower back felt wet and squishy. She patted her skin and held her palm in front of her face. It was covered with blood. Brandy blew a breath through her lips and looked towards the pharmacy. She spotted her buddy's remains in a pile on the floor. Her lips quivered. Tears trickled down her cheeks.

Brandy heard Lee's bright red Cammy peel away. Half a minute later, she heard Freddy's crummy, old compact park next to the entrance. She looked towards the front of the store. Her neck protested. It felt twisted and stiff. Brandy cringed and watched the front. Freddy wasn't known for speed. He typically showed up an hour late for work. Then, he spent an additional five minutes fumbling through piles of crap in his car. He never found anything he needed. He just wanted to make sure everything was still there. Afterwards, he usually dragged himself into the store, crumpled behind the front counter, and prayed for a slow day. Brandy never thought she'd see the day she was depending on him to stop by. She hoped that would never happen.

Finally, Freddy wandered in. He stopped beside the front doors and stared into space. He wore a faded, blue shirt with long sleeves, cruddy looking jeans, old, worn out sneakers, and a blue apron with a white nametag. His hair was tan and shaggy. His eyes were hazy and pale. He closed his eyes, folded his fingers above his head, and stretched his arms. He yawned and

looked towards the pharmacy. He spotted Brandy, lying on the floor. Freddy froze. He spotted shards of glass all over Brandy and the floor. He looked towards the window next to the pharmacy and noticed it was broken. His lips slid to the side of his face.

“Huh,” he remarked. He turned around and walked out.



## Chapter 2: “Binary Data”

L.I.N. and Chuck sat in Hal’s old laboratory. They sat in front of an oak desk along the southern wall. Chuck sat in a rolling, brown, leather chair with a high back and arm rests. L.I.N. sat in a rolling, student’s chair trimmed with grey fabric. Seven, junky, old CRT monitors were lined along the table. One of them sat in the middle of the desk. It was a big, bulky monitor with a twenty-six inch screen. It was the only monitor that was turned on. The screen was black with grey text. The text was nothing but zeroes and ones. Chuck’s elbow lay on one of the arm rests. His chin lay in his palm. His eyes were narrow and intense. He pored over binary digits, silently. L.I.N. sat with her fingers folded in her lap. Her eyes were narrow and hazy. She was staring at the floor. She looked like she was about to fall asleep. She slid her fingers along her thighs.

L.I.N. wore maroon jeans and a white blouse with long sleeves. Her blouse had two round buttons near the collar. It was dotted with tan, lime, maroon, and peacock flowers. Each flower had five, round pedals. L.I.N. wore nothing on her feet but red nail polish. She was fairly certain she started out the day wearing a pair of shoes with wooden wedges. But, she had no idea where they’d gotten off to. That wasn’t unusual. L.I.N. patted the floor with the soles of her feet, impatiently. Chuck wore a brown, corduroy jacket, a black shirt that buttoned up the front, a pair of tan khakis, and his floppy, black sneakers. The sound of L.I.N. patting the floor made him uneasy. He looked at her and scrunched up his face.

“Seriously?” he remarked. L.I.N. looked up. She smiled sadly.

“Sorry.”

Chuck forced a smile. “No. *I’m* sorry. I’m just... trying to figure this out.” He faced the screen and leaned forward. “Just give me a minute, okay?”

L.I.N. sighed. “You’ve been staring at that thing for almost an hour.”

Chuck squinted. “Really?” He looked at a clock. It hung on a wall above the monitors. The wall was trimmed with slats of oak. The clock was a huge, analog clock. It had a black frame, black numbers, black minute hand, black hour hand, and a long, red second hand. The hour hand pointed at eleven. The minute hand pointed between five and six. Chuck exhaled through his nose. He snagged a coffee mug off the desk. It sat next to a white keyboard with white and grey buttons. The mug was half full. It was two thirds coffee, one third milk. Chuck called it a “crappuccino.” He put the rim of the mug to his lips, tilted his head back, and downed what was left. He set the mug next to the keyboard and looked at L.I.N. “Wow. I had no idea it was so late.” L.I.N.’s eyebrows fell at the sides. She laid her hand on her belly and gazed into Chuck’s eyes.

“I’m star-ving...” she groaned. Chuck smiled. He faced the monitor and shook his head.

“You wanna cook something?”

L.I.N. crinkled her eyes. “Can we just go get a cheeseburger?”

Chuck stretched his chin and tilted his head. “Mm... perhaps.” He looked at L.I.N.

“Can we hang out a sec?”

L.I.N. looked at Chuck from the tops of her eyes. “Chuck, if you haven’t figured that thing out by now...”

“Laura called,” Chuck interrupted.

L.I.N. nodded. “And?”

Chuck faced forward. “I think she’s coming by.”

L.I.N. raised an eyebrow. “Coming by?” Chuck shrugged. L.I.N. slid her lips to the side of her face. “But... she’s not going to be able to find the place. It’s hidden, remember?”

Chuck raised his palm. "I told her about the hologram. And, I gave her adequate instructions to find the place." He exhaled through his nostrils. "I also opened the gate for her." He looked at L.I.N. "She'll probably be here..." He glanced at the clock. "I'm surprised she's not *already* here."

L.I.N. nodded. "Why is she coming by?"

"I don't know," Chuck replied. He faced the monitor, dragged the white keyboard towards him, and tapped the down arrow. "She just asked me how to get here. That's all."

L.I.N. smiled. "Is she bringing Icky?"

Chuck grinned. "She didn't say anything about Icarus." He looked at L.I.N. "But, I'm sure he's coming, too." Chuck looked at the tops of his eyes and tilted his head. "They're all..." He folded his fingers together and wiggled his wrists. "...now." L.I.N. snickered. The doorbell rang. Chuck looked into L.I.N.'s eyes. He motioned towards the living room with his head. L.I.N. hopped up, wandered behind Chuck, and opened the door to the living area. Chuck faced the monitor. "I'll be right there, okay?"

L.I.N. nodded. "Okay." She closed the door to the laboratory and approached the front of the house. A pair of red doors covered the entrance. Each had a curvy, golden handle. L.I.N. snagged a hold of the handle on the right, turned it, and eased the door aside. A girl she'd never seen before stood on the other side. She had long, brown hair and glasses. Her hair dangled in wavy clusters at the ends. The lenses of her glasses had no rims. Her eyes were dark brown. Her lips were crimson. She was short and skinny. She wore a white turtleneck, grey trousers, black flats, and a long, wool coat. Her coat was checkered with red and black squares. She looked apprehensive. She swallowed and looked L.I.N. over.

"Um, hi," she remarked.

L.I.N. tilted her head. “Hi.” Brandy pressed her lips together. She offered her hand.

“M-My name’s Brandy Scott.” L.I.N. looked at Brandy’s hand. It was trembling. L.I.N. curled her fingers around Brandy’s and shook her hand.

“I’m L.I.N.” She smiled. “It’s nice to meet you, Brandy.” She looked over her shoulder then faced forward. “So... who the hell are you?”

Brandy forced a smile and exhaled a shaky sigh. “I’m sorry...” She let go of L.I.N.’s hand and patted her coat pockets. “I’m looking for...” She took out a slip of paper and uncrinkled it. She studied it and looked up. “Chuck Parker?” L.I.N. parted her lips and bobbed her head. Brandy gritted her teeth. “Officer Phillips told me I could find him here.”

L.I.N. looked over her shoulder. “Chuck!” she called. “Quit screwing around and get out here!” She faced Brandy. Brandy licked her lips. She returned the slip of paper to her coat pocket and folded her arms over her chest.

“I had... kind of a hard time finding the place.” She tilted her head back and looked the house over. “I’ve never followed directions that included driving through a hologram before.” L.I.N. smiled and exhaled through her nostrils. She motioned towards the living area with her head.

“Come on in, Brandy. It’s alright.” Brandy looked relieved. She sighed and stepped across the threshold.

“Thank you.”

“Sure,” L.I.N. replied. She closed the door, turned to Brandy, and held out her palms. “Can I take your coat?”

Brandy looked up. “Oh. Sure.” She sighed. “Thanks.” Brandy’s coat had three big, round buttons down the front. She undid them, slid out of the sleeves, and laid her coat over

L.I.N.'s arms. There was a dark, wooden coat rack next to the door. Five long hooks stuck out of the top. L.I.N. draped Brandy's coat over one of the hooks. There was a soft, black, leather couch next to that. L.I.N. pointed it out.

"Have a seat."

Brandy smiled. "Thanks." She plopped down on the nearest cushion and folded her hands in her lap. There was a love seat adjacent to the couch. L.I.N. sat in the middle and folded her legs like a pretzel. She looked over her shoulder.

"Chuck! Quit looking at that stupid text file! Come on!"

*"I'll be right there!"* Chuck screamed back.

L.I.N. faced Brandy and smiled. "He'll be right out, I'm sure."

Brandy grinned. "Okay." Her smile wavered a little. She swallowed. "Officer Phillips said... that you were an android."

L.I.N. nodded. "Yes. That's right."

Brandy pressed her lips together. "Like... a robot or something."

"Mm-hmm," L.I.N. replied. "I've been online almost two and a half years."

Brandy raised her eyebrows. "I..." She turned her head without looking away. "I don't understand."

L.I.N. smiled. "Well, what do you mean?"

Brandy parted her lips. "I don't know." She looked at her lap and adjusted her spectacles. "I don't know." She looked up. L.I.N. pressed her lips together. She narrowed her eyes.

"You play chess?"

Brandy looked away and scrunched up her nose. "Bleh! I *hate* playing chess."

L.I.N. motioned towards her chest. “I do, too!” She eased back and laid her fingertips on her knees. “I suck at chess. I always lose.”

Brandy nodded. “Really?” L.I.N. shrugged. Brandy slid her lips to the side of her face. “Well, okay then. You’re on.”

Chuck stared at rows of binary digits. He looked them over eight at a time. He thought about the decimal equivalents of each group of eight. Nothing he read made a lot of sense. It seemed like random nonsense. But, Chuck knew better. He knew what he was looking at made sense to someone at some point in time. He just needed to look at it in the right way. He pressed the “i” key on the white keyboard. Then, he pressed the “End” key followed by the “Return” key. A blank line appeared below the first line in the file. A cursor disappeared from the end of the first line. It reappeared at the beginning of the blank line. Chuck glanced at the first eight digits in the first row. That was the first byte of data in the file. It read “10010111.” Chuck typed “97” below that. 97 was the hexadecimal equivalent of 10010111. The next eight digits read “11100101.” Chuck typed “e5” below that. He stopped and stared. He pressed his lips together and exhaled through his nostrils.

*“I’m gonna need some T++ code,”* he whispered. A program written in T++ could convert binary from a text file into hexadecimal automatically. It would be a bit tedious. Chuck decided to take L.I.N. to lunch first. He could write a program afterwards. There was a burst of giggles in the living area. Chuck looked up. He turned his head and faced the door.

The downstairs floor was covered with black and white, checkered tiles. In the living area, a round rug with rainbows of spiraling fractals covered the tiles. An oak coffee table sat on top. It was four feet by four feet. L.I.N. and Brandy sat on their knees near the corner of the coffee table closest to the front doors. Brandy knelt in front of the couch. L.I.N. knelt in front of

the love seat. A glass chess set rested near the corner of the coffee table. L.I.N.'s pieces were white. Brandy's were black. The pieces were scattered across the board. L.I.N. had one of Brandy's knights, two of her pawns, and one of her bishops. Brandy had one of L.I.N.'s pawns, one of her rooks, and one of her bishops. L.I.N. stared at the board, smiling. She looked up. Brandy snagged the tip of her queen and slid it across the board. She placed her queen near an opening in L.I.N.'s pawns. L.I.N. gasped. Her eyes popped open.

"Brandy, no!" she protested.

Brandy looked up and smirked. "Check."

L.I.N. dropped her cheek in her palm and sighed. "Whose stupid idea was this?" Chuck emerged from the laboratory. He looked towards the living room. Brandy looked up. L.I.N. looked over her shoulder. Chuck narrowed his eyes.

"Who are *you*?"

L.I.N. looked at Brandy. "Chuck, this is Brandy." She faced Chuck. "Officer Phillips sent her by." Chuck nodded. He looked into Brandy's dark, shiny eyes. Brandy pressed her lips together.

"M-My friend was killed yesterday morning."

Chuck gritted his teeth. "Oh, my."

L.I.N. looked at Brandy. "Really?"

Brandy faced L.I.N. and nodded. "Someone..." She looked at Chuck. "He twisted her head off like a chicken." Chuck puffed up his cheeks. L.I.N.'s eyebrows fell at the sides. Brandy licked her lips. "Killed my boss, too." Chuck slowly nodded. He threw his hands out at his sides.

"Why are you coming to *me* with this?"

Brandy shrugged. "Officer Phillips said you could help."

Chuck squinted. "Uh..."

"She said you deal with stuff like this all the time." L.I.N. looked at Chuck. She smiled.

Chuck laid his fingers over his lips. He looked towards the kitchen.

"I've gotta make a quick phone call."



### Chapter 3: “Cheeseburger”

Chuck drove L.I.N. and Brandy to Burger Land. They took Hal’s maroon compact. It was hiding in a garage next to the house. It had been there since Hal died. Chuck decided to take it for a spin. It was perfect. It was a roomy four door with white, leather seats. The interior was shiny and soft. The exterior was immaculate and dent free. It was better than taking Chuck’s old truck. It had no back seat. There was only a long bench covered with old, ratty fabric. It was like sitting on a burlap sack. The body was trimmed with different colored parts coated with rust. Brandy’s car wasn’t much better. It was a little, chipped up, foreign piece of crap. It barely ran. It made funny noises. Sometimes, it died for no reason. Brandy told Chuck it smelled like maple syrup. Chuck dropped his forehead in his palm and shook his head. He figured that meant there was a coolant leak. He didn’t want to take any chances.

Chuck, L.I.N., and Brandy sat at a booth next to a window. The seats were made of thick, particle board. The seat surfaces were covered with slick, blue shells. The backs were dark brown. The table was covered with shiny, pale veneer. A chrome napkin dispenser, a white salt shaker, a black pepper shaker, and a glass jar filled with sugar sat in front of the window. There was a group of paper doilies in the middle of the table. They had mustard and ketchup in them. Everyone had a large, yellow, paper cup. Burger Land’s logo was scattered along the sides.

L.I.N. unraveled a sheet of Burger Land tissue paper. A double meat, double cheeseburger was waiting inside. A giant paper box stood next to that. It was filled with French fries. L.I.N. snagged a doily filled with ketchup. She squashed the doily, plopped the ketchup next to her cheeseburger, and set the doily aside. She picked up her burger and stuffed it between her teeth. Brandy had a tiny burger and a tiny order of fries. She grabbed a ketchup

doily and laid it next to her food. She skimmed the top of the ketchup with a couple of fries and nibbled off the tips. She looked at Chuck. Chuck sat across from her, next to L.I.N.

“So... you *don't* deal with stuff like this all the time,” Brandy remarked. Chuck looked up. He narrowed his eyes.

“More than *you*, I suppose.” He smiled. “Less than others.” Chuck had a double meat, double cheeseburger of his own. He scooped it up and laid it between his lips. Officer Phillips appeared next to Brandy. She stood next to Brandy's seat and pointed beside her.

“Is this seat taken?” she inquired. Brandy looked up. She smiled and shook her head. Phillips sat next to her and scooped over. She laid a receipt and a large soda in front of her and faced forward. Chuck stared into her eyes. He scrunched up his face. Phillips puffed up her cheeks and raised her eyebrows. Icarus appeared next to them. He looked at Chuck. He looked at Phillips.

“Um... is something the matter?” Chuck didn't look up. He stared at Phillips, coldly. He pointed next to the table.

“Have a seat, Icarus.” Icarus slid his thin lips to the side of his face. He snagged a chair from a table behind him. It had a blue backrest made of long, thin bars, a seat trimmed with pale veneer, and blue legs. Icarus scooted the chair next to the booth table and sat down. He set down a large drink and exhaled a satisfied sigh.

“Okay, then. Continue.”

Chuck threw his hands out at his sides. “What the hell?!”

Phillips grinned and shrugged. “What?”

Chuck tore a chunk off his burger with his teeth. “Why am I here?” he grumbled. He chewed what was in his mouth and washed it down with water from his yellow, paper cup.

“Why am I *here* instead of tearing through binary code?” He motioned towards Brandy. “Why is *she* here?” He looked at Brandy and smirked. “I mean, I like Brandy. But...” He stared at Phillips, dropped his elbows on the table, and wobbled his hands.

Phillips gritted her teeth and crinkled her eyes. “Too much to ask?”

Chuck raised his eyebrows, tilted his head, and sighed. “Eh...” He looked at Brandy. “I mean, I guess not.” He faced Phillips. “A little head’s up might’ve been nice.” L.I.N. sipped soda through a fat, white straw with red stripes. She looked at Brandy and smiled.

“I *like* Brandy. We had a lot of fun this morning.”

Brandy finished chewing and grinned. “Thanks, L.I.N. I like you, too.” She sipped her soda. “I’ll come over and play chess with you anytime you like.”

L.I.N. leaned forward. “Good. I was *hoping* you would say that.” Chuck pressed his lips together. He looked to his right. Icarus was wearing his eyeball jacket. Below that, he wore a navy blue, button up shirt, red and white suspenders, maroon, corduroy britches, and a pair of brown, suede boots. His hair was long, shiny, and black. It was standing on end. Chuck smiled and shook his head. He looked Phillips over. She wore a turquoise sweater, grey trousers, and pointed, black boots. Chuck squinted and pointed at her.

“Laura,” he remarked.

Phillips raised her eyebrows. “Yes, Chuck?”

Chuck smiled. “Did you get a promotion?”

Phillips fought back a smile. “They’re trying me out as a detective.”

“Oh, how cool,” L.I.N. remarked.

Chuck pointed at Icarus with his thumb. “But, you’re dating the half crazed car thief over here.” Icarus looked into Chuck’s eyes. Icarus’ left eye was ocean blue. It was nearly shut. His

right eye was caramel. It was wide and wiry. The left side of his upper lip pointed towards his left nostril.

“I didn’t steal it,” he grumbled. “I *found* it.” Chuck snickered. He faced Phillips. Officer Phillips slid her lips to the side of her face.

“Um... I’m working homicide, Chuck.” She licked her lips and looked at Icarus. “Not carjacking.” She curled her fingers around Icarus’. Brandy looked around suspiciously. She faced L.I.N. and smiled.

“What in the world are you guys *talking* about?”

A lady’s voice blew out of a round, white speaker on the ceiling. “*Number fifty-seven, your order’s ready.*”

Icarus slid his chair back and hopped up. “Yes. Well then... I think I’ll go pick up our order, now.” Officer Phillips looked at Brandy and grinned. She scooted to the end of their seat and stood next to Icarus.

“Yeah... I think I’ll join you, Icarus. I wouldn’t want you to have to carry all that food by yourself.” She and Icarus wandered towards the front counter. Brandy pointed at Chuck.

“What’s *up* with that guy?”

Chuck chomped down on a handful of French fries. “He’s cool. He’s on *our* side.”

“Yeah,” L.I.N. added. “Icky’s cool.” Brandy faced her. “He’s just a little...” L.I.N. tilted her head and looked at the tops of her eyes. She snapped her fingers and faced forward. “Unorthodox.”

Brandy pointed at her forearms. “What’s with the little cameras?” She looked at Chuck. “They look like eyeballs.”

Chuck nodded. “They *are* eyeballs.” Icarus and Officer Phillips returned. Icarus held a

red tray with two burgers and two orders of fries. Phillips held nothing. She returned to her seat. Icarus laid a burger and an order of fries in front of her. He laid the others next to his drink. He laid the tray on the table behind him and sat down.

“Thanks, Icky,” Phillips remarked.

Icarus snapped his fingers and pointed at her. “What did I say?”

L.I.N. looked at Icarus and smiled. “Icky.” Icarus fought back a smile. He leaned forward and pointed between L.I.N.’s eyes.

“Enh!”

Brandy looked around. “No ‘Icky’?”

Icarus sank his teeth into a double cheeseburger and looked up. “Nope. No ‘Icky’.” Chuck smiled. He laid his elbow on the table. He rested his chin in his palm.

“I *like* ‘Icky’.” He looked Icarus over. “It fits your...” Icarus glared into Chuck’s eyes. His left eye twitched. Chuck pointed at him. “Personality.” Phillips smiled. She patted Icarus’ arm.

“It’s okay, Icky.” Brandy and L.I.N. snickered. “It’s just a friendly nickname.”

Icarus sipped his soda. “Boy... am I glad I came and sat down at *this* table.”

Dr. Powell hated her neighbors’ kids. They had a son who was ten and a daughter who was twelve. They passed Dr. Powell every morning on their way to school. They went to Jefferson Junior High, three blocks away. They always passed Dr. Powell at the exact moment she was leaving her house. They waved their little hands and said, “Hello.” Dr. Powell narrowed her eyes and forced a smile. She waved back coldly and went about her business. It made her blood boil. It was insignificant. They were two little kids, skipping merrily down the sidewalk. But, it made Dr. Powell sick to her stomach. “*How DARE those little shit-heads*

*interrupt me while I'm in the middle of my morning routine," she always thought. "I'm a board certified surgeon! I have doctorates in chemistry, biology, and immunology. I'm on my way to save another life."* She scowled at the sidewalk and gritted her teeth. *"What have YOU two done lately? Stood in front of the mirror for two hours, popping zits?"*

It was nearly one o'clock. Nicholas and Emma hadn't made it to class. Dr. Powell was not at work. She was taking a personal day. Her basement was below the kitchen. There was a door built into the tiles. There was a layer of polycarbonate squares between the tiles and the basement. A bomb could've gone off down there. No one would've been the wiser. Dr. Powell's basement wasn't a laundry room. It wasn't an extra bedroom. It was a torture chamber. The walls were covered with grey cinderblocks. The floor was a cold slab of concrete. A row of creaky, wooden stairs led to the floor from the ceiling. There were four hospital beds along a wall opposite the stairs. They were made of cold, shiny steel. Each had a thin, squeaky mattress trimmed with a wrinkled, white sheet. A stiff, white pillow lay at the head of each mattress. The hospital beds stood on four legs with black, composite wheels. A pulse monitor and an I.V. tower stood beside each bed. The beds were fitted with leather straps. A strap was buckled to each post. Three additional straps lay across each mattress.

Emma lay on the bed furthest to the left. A leather strap lay across her throat, her belly, and her thighs. Her right cheek lay on her pillow. Her eyes were shut. Her breathing was slow and steady. The pulse monitor beside her bed beeped calmly. Emma had long, blonde hair. Her eyes were big and blue. She wore a yellow sweater and a pair of light blue jeans. The sleeves of her sweater were rolled above her elbows. The bottoms of her jeans were rolled above her knees. Little flaps of flesh poked out of her sleeves. There were rows of red stitches at the ends. Little, fleshy nubs were sticking out of the bottoms of her jeans. They were sewn shut below the

knees. Dr. Powell rolled a shiny, steel cart across the basement. A white sheet was draped across the top. Dr. Powell wore a white blouse, a short, white skirt, a white hat with a red cross, white stockings, and white, canvas sneakers. Her hair was shiny and black. It was tucked into a bun. Her lips were puffy and red. Her eyes were hazel and fierce. Her eyebrows were angry and strained. She gritted her teeth and slid them back and forth.

Dr. Powell rolled the cart next to Emma's bed and stopped. She slid the white sheet off the top. Two syringes and two glass vials lay below. One vial was labeled "Amphetamine." The other was labeled "Diazepam." Dr. Powell folded the sheet neatly and laid it beside the syringes and vials. She picked up the vial labeled "Amphetamine" and one of the syringes. She shoved the syringe needle into the vial, yanked back the plunger, and laid the vial on the tray. She held the syringe in front of her face with the needle sticking up. She tapped the side of the syringe and eased the plunger towards the needle. An I.V. was sticking out of the stump at the end of Emma's arm. It was connected to a bag hanging from the tower next to the bed. A piece of tubing with a tiny, blue cap was sticking out of the I.V. near Emma's arm. Dr. Powell slid the needle of the syringe into the blue cap and shoved the plunger all the way down.

Emma's pulse began to race. She turned her head and faced the ceiling. Her big, blue eyes popped open. She began gasping for breath. She looked up at Dr. Powell. Her eyebrows fell at the sides. She whimpered. Dr. Powell stared coldly into Emma's eyes. She tilted her head.

"Hello, Emma," she snarled. She yanked the syringe out of Emma's I.V. and laid it on the cart. Emma pressed her lips together and exhaled through her nostrils. Her arms didn't feel right. She moaned. She held up her right arm and looked it over. She gasped. She looked at her left arm. Her eyelids sank into her face. Her lips peeled apart. She filled the basement with

panicked shouts. She fought to sit up. The leather straps across her neck and stomach dug into her flesh. She laid back and groaned. She looked into Dr. Powell's eyes.

"W-What did you do?!" She gritted her teeth. "What did you DO?!" Emma lifted her head and looked towards the end of the bed. She raised her legs. She stared at the stumps below her knees and squealed. She slammed the back of her head against her pillow and pinched her eyes shut. There was an old, steel refrigerator between the wall and Emma's bed. It had a long handle that pulled out. Dr. Powell wandered to the refrigerator and yanked it open. She stared at Emma and smirked.

"Looking... for these?" she inquired. Emma opened her eyes and faced Dr. Powell. There was a row of tall, glass jars along the top shelf of the refrigerator. They were filled with clear liquid. Emma's missing limbs were submerged in the liquid. Two jars contained Emma's left and right forearms and hands. Two contained Emma's calves and feet. Emma painted her nails turquoise the night before. The polish was still there.

"NO!" Emma screamed. She shut her eyes and laid the back of her head against her pillow. "Stop it!" Dr. Powell cackled. She shut the refrigerator and returned to the side of Emma's bed. She loomed above Emma and grinned.

"Look at me," she demanded. Emma sobbed. Dr. Powell lowered her head. Her face hovered half a foot above Emma's. Her eyes were icy and intense. Her teeth were gritted and grinding. "*Look* at me!" Emma peeled her eyelids apart and gasped for breath. She stared into Dr. Powell's eyes and trembled. "Now, if you'll be a good girl and behave yourself, I'll give you your arms and legs back."

"Please, Dr. Powell!" Emma screamed. "Please, give them back!" Dr. Powell laid her fingers across Emma's lips. She lowered her head a little and snickered.



“You won’t be walking by and waving anymore, huh?” Emma shut her eyes and shuddered with sobs. Dr. Powell backed away. She grabbed the vial marked “Diazepam.” She plunged the other syringe into the vial, loaded it, and jabbed it into Emma’s I.V. She lowered the plunger and laid the syringe beside the vial. Emma went limp. Her head slumped to the side and her eyelids drooped. A dash of death metal shot out of Dr. Powell’s blouse. “Damn it!” she shrieked. She reached into a pocket on the left breast of her blouse. She took out a cell phone, flipped it open, and put it to her ear. “What?!” she growled.

“Gracie,” Lee’s voice replied. *“I fucked up.”*

Dr. Powell held her cell phone in front of her face and glared at it. “No kidding!” she shouted. She returned her phone to her ear. Her eyes were wide and angry. She waved her free hand beside her face. “What were you thinking?”

Lee was downtown. He was inside a glass phone booth with the door closed. The sky was half filled with puffy, white clouds. Lee was surrounded by buildings and thick traffic. He wore an olive shirt, a denim jacket, dark blue jeans, and his black and turquoise sneakers. He laid his palm against a pane of glass to his right. He pressed his lips together. “SSRIs didn’t kick in until after I left.” He closed his eyes and exhaled a shaky breath. “After I... killed those people.”

Dr. Powell rolled her eyes and sighed impatiently. “You’re supposed to take the SSRIs, first.” Her eyebrows fell in the middle. “Wait half an hour. Then, you eat the gummy worm.” She threw her hands out at her sides. “How could you screw that up?! Really?”

Lee shook his head. “Sure. Just drop some acid.” He rolled his eyes. “No problem.” His eyebrows fell in the middle. He curled his fat fingers into a fist. “Every day!” He punched the glass. It splintered. “Every... single... day!” He smashed the glass again. “Day in! Day

out!”

Dr. Powell gritted her teeth and scowled. “Lee... calm down!”

Lee growled like a grizzly bear. He began smashing his forehead into the glass. The fragile pane crinkled and cracked. Lee pinched his eyes shut, tilted his head back, and rested against a wall of glass behind him. He inhaled through his nostrils and exhaled through his lips. He began panting like a dog. His heart thumped in his ears. His heart thumped in his ears.

“Lee!” Dr. Powell shrieked. “You’ve got to calm down. Now!” She exhaled through her nostrils. “Get control of yourself!”

Lee tugged at the collar of his shirt and gasped for breath. “*Focus on your breathing...*” Dr. Powell instructed. Lee nodded. He wiped beads of sweat off his forehead and slung them aside. He inhaled slowly through his nostrils and exhaled through his lips.

“Check your pulses,” Dr. Powell ordered.

Lee huffed and puffed like an angry gorilla. He laid his fingers against the right side of his neck. His right heart was above 120 beats per minute. He laid his fingers against the left side of his neck. His left heart was above 150. Lee gritted his teeth and shook his head. “*It’s bad...*” he gasped. He swallowed. “I feel like my head’s gonna explode.”

Dr. Powell licked her lips. “How long’s it been since you had nitro?”

Lee scrunched up his face and exhaled a shaky breath. “This morning...” He wiped sweat off his forehead. “I snuck into my house this morning and got some more.”

Dr. Powell’s eyebrows fell in the middle. “Lee!” she shouted. “You idiot! The cops are gonna be all *over* that place!”

“I *had* to!” Lee shouted. He punched the shattered glass. “What was I supposed to do?!” He gritted his teeth and gasped for breath.

“Lee!” Dr. Powell shouted back. “Your breathing! Focus on your breathing!”

Lee rolled his eyes and sighed.

Dr. Powell shook her head. “You should’ve come *here*. I could’ve taken care of you.”

She folded her arm across her chest. “I’ve got everything you need right here.”

Lee looked over his shoulder. “I’ve gotta go back.”

“Lee!” Dr. Powell shouted.

Lee faced forward and sighed. “It’s almost time for my next dose. And, my pulse is sky high.” He looked over his shoulder. “My place is only ten minutes away.”

Dr. Powell laid her forehead in her palm. “*You’re nearly forty-five minutes away,*” Lee added. Dr. Powell looked up. She laid her chin in her palm and curled her fingers over her lips. She tilted her head. “Use the tunnel.”

“How do you think I got in this morning?” Lee inquired.

Dr. Powell nodded. “Use the tunnel...” She wandered across the basement and stood next to the refrigerator. “And, I’m going to meet you at the other end when you come back out.”

Lee sighed and nodded. He slid his fingers across his forehead. It was coated with cold, oily sweat. “Ten-four,” he remarked.

Dr. Powell pressed her lips together. “Think you can keep from fucking up anything else until I get there?”

Lee narrowed his eyes. He slammed the telephone on the hook and whirled around. He slid the phone booth door out of the way and wandered towards his Cammy. It was in a parking lot half a block away.

Dr. Powell pressed a button on her cell phone and returned the phone to her breast pocket. She opened the refrigerator and looked around. Emma’s limbs were on the top shelf.

Nicholas' were on a shelf below that. Dr. Powell looked over her shoulder. Nicholas was strapped to a hospital bed across the room. Dr. Powell's eyebrows fell in the middle. She gritted her teeth and slid them back and forth.

"I'll deal with *you* two, later," she snarled. She slammed the refrigerator door and wandered towards the stairs.

#### Chapter 4: “Twist of Fate”

Chuck, L.I.N., and Brandy stood in Lee Sanders’ kitchen. Chuck faced the cupboards and crossed his arms over his chest. L.I.N. stood in front of Lee’s bar, watching. Brandy sat on a granite slate covering the bar. She laid her palms beside her thighs. L.I.N. looked Brandy over. She hopped on the counter and copied her. Chuck opened a cabinet above Lee’s stove. He discovered rows of orange prescription bottles with white labels. They were all the same size. The capsules inside were all the same medication and dosage. It turned out to be fluoxetine, 20 mg. Chuck tilted his head.

“Huh.”

Officer Phillips and Icarus stood in Lee’s living room. They stood on either side of the front door. They both had their arms folded over their chests. Officer Phillips licked her lips.

“Antidepressants,” she remarked.

Chuck looked over his shoulder. “I know,” he replied. He snagged the nearest bottle and looked it over. “Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors.” He narrowed his eyes and studied the cabinet. “Why so many?”

Phillips shrugged. “No one knows.” She pointed towards the bathroom. “It gets weirder.” L.I.N. looked behind her. She spotted a glass jar filled with gummy worms. She squinted and slid her lips to the side of her face.

“Hey, Brandy,” she remarked. Brandy looked at L.I.N. She looked where *she* was looking.

“What?” She smiled. “What’s with the gummy worms?”

L.I.N. smiled at Brandy. “Gummy... worms?”

Brandy nodded. “Yeah.” She looked into L.I.N.’s eyes. “You’ve never eaten gummy

worms before?”

L.I.N. shrugged. “What is it?”

Brandy tilted her head. “It’s like a candy.”

“Oh.” L.I.N. stared at the jar of gummy worms. “What do they taste like?”

Brandy grinned. “Why don’t you just eat some?”

L.I.N. pressed her lips together. “Well...” She looked around. Phillips was coming her way. L.I.N. looked into her eyes and pointed at the jar. “Can I?” Phillips stopped. She peered over a tiny wall running down the middle of the bar. She spotted the jar and looked up.

“You want... gummy worms?” L.I.N. shrugged. Phillips pressed her lips together. “Well...” She looked towards the bathroom. Chuck and Icarus were gathering inside. Phillips looked into L.I.N.’s eyes. “I *guess* it’s okay.” She shrugged. “We’ve already gathered samples from the entire house.” L.I.N. popped the top off the jar and laid it on the bar. She reached inside, grabbed a gummy worm, and dangled it in front of her eyes. The gummy worm was red on one end and yellow on the other. L.I.N. wiggled it. She looked at Brandy.

“Are you sure this is candy?”

Brandy giggled. “Just eat it.” L.I.N. laid the tip of the gummy worm between her teeth. She bit the worm’s head off and chewed it up. She looked at Brandy and smiled.

“Tastes like cherries!” Brandy smirked. L.I.N. pointed behind her. “You want some?”

Brandy shook her head. “No. That’s okay.”

L.I.N. dropped the rest of the gummy worm on her tongue. “We *know* this is the guy that killed Joan.” She shrugged. “The least he could do is give you some gummy worms.”

Brandy looked at her lap and nodded. “Sure, that makes right up for it.” L.I.N. sucked her fingertips. Brandy closed her eyes. Her lips quivered. L.I.N.’s eyebrows fell at the sides.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Brandy.” Brandy laid her fingers over her lips and sobbed. L.I.N. patted Brandy’s shoulders. “No, stop it.” Brandy dropped her eyes in her palms. L.I.N. scooted over and wrapped her arms around Brandy’s shoulders. L.I.N.’s eyeballs burned. Her nostrils tingled. She laid her cheek on the back of Brandy’s head and exhaled a shaky sigh. “Don’t cry, Brandy.” L.I.N. closed her eyes and shook her head. Her chin trembled. A hot, salty tear dribbled down her cheek. “Don’t cry...” L.I.N. tightened her arms around Brandy’s shoulders. Brandy found L.I.N.’s hands. They were warm and squishy. Brandy smiled and shook her head. She curled her fingers around L.I.N.’s knuckles and breathed out through her nostrils. L.I.N. swallowed. “I’m sorry about your friend.” Brandy pinched her eyes shut. She swatted tears off her cheeks and sighed.

“Don’t worry.” She turned her head and looked up. L.I.N. lifted her head and looked down. “I have a new one.” L.I.N. forced a smile.

The medicine cabinet in Lee’s bathroom was open. Chuck, Phillips, and Icarus were gathered around the sink. They studied rows of glass vials.

“Huh,” Chuck remarked. “That’s a lot of nitroglycerin.” Icarus reached across the sink. He snagged the nearest vial and looked it over.

“Why would someone need to inject themselves with nitroglycerin?” He looked at Chuck. Chuck shrugged.

“It’s a vasodilator.” He looked at Phillips. “Some kind of regimen for like... extremely high blood pressure?”

Phillips nodded. “You think?”

Chuck pressed his lips together. “Can’t think of any *other* reason a person would have so much.” He motioned towards the medicine cabinet. “I mean, look at that.” He looked into

Phillips' big, blue eyes. "And, where's the medication to counteract it?"

Phillips tilted her head. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, daily injections of nitroglycerin would cause..." He blew a breath through his lips. "Migraines, sweats, tremors, sleep disturbances..." He shook his head. "I can't *imagine* why a person would need to do this. It's... quite strange."

Icarus smirked. "You seem to know an awful lot about drugs there, Chuck."

Chuck closed his eyes, tilted his head, and shrugged. "I have my moments." He closed the mirror and looked up. L.I.N. and Brandy wandered up behind him and smiled.

"What about the SSRIs?" Phillips inquired.

Chuck faced her. "What do you mean?"

"Could *they* have something to do with it?" She squinted. "Counteracting the nitro, I mean."

Chuck looked at Lee's faucet and shook his head. "No." He looked at L.I.N.'s face in the mirror. L.I.N. grinned and waved. Chuck smirked. "I'm not seeing the connection." He spotted an electric razor next to the faucet. It was plugged into an outlet. The outlet was above the sink on the right. Chuck picked up the razor and flipped a switch on the side. Nothing happened. The battery was dead. Chuck took a breath through his lips and exhaled through his nostrils. He looked Lee's razor over and tilted his head. He smiled and looked over his shoulder. "Hey, L.I.N."

"What's up?" L.I.N. inquired. Chuck yanked an adapter out of the wall. It was attached to the razor. He showed it to L.I.N.

"I don't suppose you've got a one-ten hiding in there somewhere." L.I.N. parted her lips and raised her eyebrows.



“As a matter of fact, I do.” She laid her thumb and index finger below her left palm. She dug her nails into her flesh and spread her fingers. A shiny, white, 110 outlet was hiding inside.

“How nifty,” Chuck remarked. He slid the adapter into L.I.N.’s 110 socket and flipped on the razor. It came to life and jiggled in his hand. Chuck grinned. He looked at Phillips. Phillips pressed her lips together and furrowed her brow.

“Is the outlet broken?”

Chuck pointed at Lee’s outlet with his thumb. “This is a false outlet.”

Phillips narrowed her eyes. “Huh?” Chuck flipped off the razor and removed the adapter from L.I.N.’s wrist. He laid the razor and its plug next to the faucet. Then, he slid his fingernail behind the upper, right corner of the outlet bezel on Lee’s wall. The bezel and the 110 sockets slipped out in one piece. The sockets weren’t wired into the wall. They were attached to the bezel. A tiny, storage compartment was attached to the back. Chuck showed it to Phillips. Phillips folded her arms over her chest. “I’ll be damned.” She leaned towards Chuck. “What’s in it?” Chuck removed a glass vial from the storage compartment and looked it over. It was filled with clear liquid. The vial had no label. Chuck slid his lips to the side of his face and looked up.

“I have no idea.” He offered the vial to Phillips. Phillips retrieved a handkerchief from the pocket of her jeans and laid it over her palm. Chuck laid the vial on Phillips’ hankie. She dangled the vial in front of her eyes and looked it over. She looked into Chuck’s eyes.

“It gets weirder.”

Chuck looked at his reflection in Lee’s mirror. “Weirder than a medicine cabinet filled with nitroglycerin?”

Phillips set the unlabeled vial on the edge of the sink. “Seriously. This one takes the

cake.”

Phillips led everyone to Lee’s bedroom. The walls were covered with posters of metal bands and flyers from concerts. The floor was covered with blue, green, and black shag. Lee had a king size, oak bed. A thick, black blanket with white stripes coated the top. There was a closet beside the bed. It was covered by a pair of sliding doors trimmed with mirrors. Laura slid the door on the left out of the way, bent over, and reached inside.

“*This* is what made me want to call you,” Phillips remarked. She slid a shiny, oak trunk out of the closet. It was the size of an ottoman. There were brass handles on the sides and brass protectors on the corners. There was a lid on top with a brass handle. There was a brass latch on the side of the lid. It was sealed with a padlock. Phillips knelt next to the trunk and looked at Chuck. “Notice... anything strange?” Chuck puffed up his cheeks. He sat next to Phillips and folded his legs like a pretzel. He grabbed the handle on the right side of the trunk and lifted it. He looked at Phillips.

“It’s empty.”

Phillips smirked and pointed between his eyes. “See? That’s the first thing *I* noticed.” She slid her fingers through her long, blonde hair. She curled her fingers around a bobby pin. “I didn’t show this to anyone else. So, consider yourself privileged.”

Chuck smirked. “Okay.” Phillips slid the wavy side of her bobby pin into the lock and eased it around. She tugged on the base of the lock. It popped loose. She yanked the lock out of the latch and laid it aside. She returned her bobby pin to her hair. She flipped up the latch and flipped back the lid. Brandy and L.I.N. stood behind Phillips and Chuck. Icarus stood beside Phillips. Everyone leaned forward and looked inside the trunk. It had four shiny sides and a shiny bottom. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Chuck looked into Phillips’ eyes. “And?”

Phillips motioned towards the trunk with her head. “Put your hand in there.” Chuck narrowed his eyes. He draped his arm over the side of the trunk and straightened it. He expected his palm to lie on the floor of the trunk. It didn’t. Chuck looked over the side.

“What the...” His hand was nowhere near the bottom. The sides and bottom of the trunk had the illusion of being the sides and bottom of a trunk. But, they weren’t. They weren’t even close. Chuck didn’t understand. He looked around. The first thing he noticed was his hand didn’t cast a shadow on the bottom of the trunk. He waved his hand around. He spotted hints of shadows near the tops of the trunk’s sides. But, that was it. Chuck looked into Phillips’ eyes. “Laura, what the hell *is* this?”

Phillips sighed and shook her head. “You got me.” She leaned over the opening in the trunk and looked inside. “I’ve never seen anything *like* it.”

“Cool!” L.I.N. remarked. “Are we gonna go inside?”

Chuck looked over his shoulder. “How deep is that, L.I.N.?” He returned his attention to the trunk. “You got some kind of software to figure that out?”

L.I.N. pressed her lips together and exhaled through her nostrils. “Sorry. Nothing like *that*.”

“Throw something down there,” Brandy suggested.

Chuck looked at Phillips. “Bum a smoke?” Phillips took a pack of cigarettes out of her pocket. She took out a cigarette and tossed it into the trunk. It tumbled half a second and bounced on the bottom of the trunk. “Wow!” Chuck remarked. Icarus flipped the hood of his jacket over his head. It was covered with eyeballs.

“That’s weird,” he added. Chuck turned the trunk on its side and studied the bottom. The bottom looked normal. It was the bottom of a trunk. There was nothing strange about it.

“What the hell?!” L.I.N. demanded. Chuck knocked on the bottom. It seemed fine. He turned the trunk upside down and held it above the carpet. Half a second later, Phillips’ cigarette came tumbling out. It bounced on the carpet like it dropped from the ceiling of Lee’s bedroom. Chuck laid the trunk on the floor. He picked up Phillips’ stogie and studied it.

“Laura, I’ve seen some strange things in my day...” He handed her cigarette back. “But, *this* is extraordinary.” Phillips returned the stogie to her pack of cigarettes. She returned the cigarettes to her pocket.

“What do think it is?”

Chuck blew a breath through his lips. “I have no idea.” He looked into Phillips shiny, blue eyes. “I might... have some idea how it works.” He pointed into the trunk. “You didn’t go down there?”

Phillips showed Chuck her palms and widened her eyes. “No way!” Chuck smiled. He rubbed the back of his neck and tilted his head.

“Well, the only way to figure it out is to go down there, like L.I.N. said.” Phillips scrunched up her face and exhaled a disgusted breath. She stared into Lee’s trunk and folded her arms over her chest.

“I don’t know, Chuck.” She looked up. “How deep do you think it is?”

Chuck shrugged. “About as tall as this room.”

Phillips looked at L.I.N. and Brandy. “You guys gonna come with me?” She looked at Icarus. Icarus rolled his eyes.

“Oh, for God’s sake...” He hopped onto the trunk. The sole of his left foot rested along the edge of one wall. His right foot lay along the opposite edge. He looked into Phillips’ eyes and reached into his hood. He retrieved a pair of alligator clips and clamped them to the sides of

his tongue. He slipped his fingers inside the cuffs of his jacket sleeves and tapped a pair of power buttons. Then, he bent his knees, launched into the air, and dove into the trunk.

“Icky!” Phillips shouted. Icarus fell through the opening in a series of back flips. He tumbled to the bottom and landed on his feet. He looked up, impatiently.

“You guys coming or not?”

Phillips folded her arms along the edge of the trunk and stared into Icarus’ eyes. “You’re a freak!” Icarus shrugged. Chuck folded his arms next to Phillips. He glanced around the trunk, skeptically. He looked at Icarus and bobbed his head.

“How do we look?” he inquired.

Icarus flattened his thin lips. “Really, really big.” He squinted. “How did you *think* you would look?”

Chuck nodded. “So, you mean the trunk isn’t any deeper than it looks. You just shrank?”

Icarus threw his arms out at his sides. “Of course.” He stared into Chuck’s shiny, tan eyes and shook his head. “I thought you were a scientist.”

Chuck wobbled his hand beside his face. “Eh...”

“Well, I’m going down there,” Phillips remarked. She threw her right leg over the edge of the trunk and looked at Chuck. “You think?” Chuck shrugged. He motioned towards the opening in the trunk with his head. Phillips dangled her other leg into the trunk. She sat on the edge and looked down. It was disconcerting. It felt like dropping off the roof of a house. Yet, she had to squeeze through an opening that was barely big enough to fall through. Phillips took a breath. She straightened her legs and slid off the edge. She landed in Icarus’ arms. She exhaled and looked around. The walls were slick and shiny. They were painted with divots,

scrapes, and whirls of imperfections. The tiny space inside the trunk stank of polyurethane.

Icarus set Phillips on her feet and looked up. Chuck looked over his shoulder.

“You girls coming?”

Brandy grinned. “Are you kidding? There’s no *way* I’m gonna miss out on this!”

Chuck looked at L.I.N. “L.I.N.?” L.I.N. curled her fingers together and laid her knuckles against her lips. She looked into Chuck’s eyes. Her eyebrows fell at the sides.

“How... far is it?” Chuck chuckled. Brandy looked at L.I.N.

“You’re not scared, are you?”

“She’s afraid of heights,” Chuck explained. Brandy looked at L.I.N. She furrowed her brow. L.I.N. faced her. She pressed her lips together. Brandy narrowed her eyes and smiled. She grabbed a hold of L.I.N.’s wrist and dragged her towards the trunk.

“No!” L.I.N. protested. “No! No! No!” Brandy shoved L.I.N. towards the edge of the trunk. L.I.N. whimpered. She peeked over the edge. Phillips and Icarus seemed miles away. L.I.N. looked into Brandy’s eyes. She shook her head frantically. “I can’t do this, Brandy. Stop it!” Chuck was standing behind her. He snaked his arms around her waste and lifted her off her feet. “Chuck!” she shouted. “No!” She kicked and squirmed. Brandy laid her fingers over her lips and chuckled.

“It’ll be okay, L.I.N.,” Chuck remarked. “Will you relax?” He dangled his girlfriend over the edge of the trunk. L.I.N. looked down. She curled into a ball and folded her arms over the back of her head. She shook like a leaf. Icarus’ long, thin lips twisted into a nightmarish grin. He held out his arms.

“I got her, Chuck.”

Chuck swung L.I.N. forward. “One...” he remarked. L.I.N. shrieked. Chuck swung her

again. “Two...” L.I.N. filled the trunk with panicked shouts. Brandy buried her face in her hands and giggled like a chipmunk. Chuck swung L.I.N. again. “Two and a half...” L.I.N. threw her arms away from her face and looked over her shoulder.

“Chuck!” she cried. “That’s not funny!” Chuck was grinning so hard, it hurt. He let go of L.I.N.’s waste. She fell half a foot and landed in Icarus’ arms. Icarus stared into her big, green eyes and smiled.

“You okay?” he asked. L.I.N. panted like a dog. She looked towards the top of the trunk. Brandy and Chuck stood outside, looking in. They looked a hundred feet tall. L.I.N. looked at Icarus. She shivered and gasped for breath.

“Um, um... Um, um, um...” Chuck dropped to the floor. L.I.N. faced him and exhaled a shaky sigh. “D-Don’t...” She pinched her eyes shut and blew a breath through her lips. She glared into Chuck’s eyes. “Don’t ever... do that... again.” Chuck, Icarus, and Phillips chuckled. Brandy squealed. She dropped next to Chuck and landed on her butt.

“Ow,” she groaned. She scrunched up her nose and rubbed her butt. Icarus set L.I.N. on her feet. Her legs were so wobbly, she could hardly stand. Her teeth chattered. Chuck tried not to laugh. He fought back a smile. A pair of chuckles puffed out of his nostrils. L.I.N. pointed a shaky finger between his eyebrows.

“It’s not funny! Stop laughing.” Chuck threw his arms around her shoulders. L.I.N. relaxed against his chest and stopped shaking. Brandy looked towards the top of the trunk. Her eyebrows fell in the middle.

“Aw, crap!” she shouted.

Chuck looked over his shoulder. “What?”

Brandy motioned towards the top of the trunk. “How the hell are we supposed to get out

of here?”

Icarus threw his hands out at his sides. “Same way we got in.” He turned his head without looking away. “Duh.” Brandy went slack and sighed. She looked at Chuck.

“Huh?”

Chuck looked at Icarus. “She’s right, Icky.”

Icarus pointed at Chuck and snapped his fingers. “Hey. Stop calling me that.”

Chuck smiled. “Sorry.” Brandy, L.I.N., and Phillips fought back giggles. Chuck looked towards the top of the trunk. “How exactly...” He looked at Icarus. “How?” Icarus narrowed his eye. He smirked and shook his head.

“Chuck, you disappoint me.” He raised his palms and shook them. “I thought you understood this stuff.”

Chuck shrugged. “Explain.”

Icarus motioned towards the top of the trunk. “You jump up there, grab a hold of the edge, and climb out.” He scrunched up his face. “What is there to explain?”

Brandy hopped up. “Right,” she remarked. She smoothed her long, checkered jacket and patted her grey trousers. “Well, you can just show us how it’s done when the time comes.” She looked into Icarus’ rivaling eyeballs and smirked. “Icky.” Icarus glared into Brandy’s deep, brown eyes. The left side of his upper lip fidgeted. Phillips looked around.

“Well, Icarus,” she remarked. “What do you see?” Icarus stared straight ahead. He stood perfectly still and focused. The left sleeve of his hoodie scanned the left wall. His right sleeve scanned the right. His chest studied the wall in front of him. His back stared down the wall behind him. His hood was still drawn. It studied the opening at the top of the trunk. Icarus narrowed his right eye. His left eye was always nearly shut. He looked to his left and pointed.



“That way,” he remarked. “There’s a door.” Everyone looked towards the wall Icarus pointed out. Phillips shrugged.

“What door?” She looked at Icarus. “What are you talking about?”

Icarus faced his girlfriend. “It took *me* a while to spot, too. But, trust me. It’s there.” L.I.N. stood next to Chuck. She looked the wall up and down.

“Well, I don’t see shit.” She looked at Icarus. “What the hell are you talking about, Icky?” Icarus fought back a smile. He motioned towards the wall with his head.

“Come on.” He removed the alligator clips from his tongue and flipped back his hood. He wandered towards the wall and stopped. He stood in front of a rectangular gap. It was barely noticeable. It was a faint line that left the floor, made two ninety degree turns, and returned to the floor. It was seven feet tall and three feet wide. Icarus laid his palm against the left side of the rectangle. His fingers curled around a doorknob. Icarus smirked. He lifted his hand and studied the knob. It was painted to match the trunk. He studied the right side of the rectangle. There were three hinges along the edge. They were painted like the doorknob. Icarus looked over his shoulder. “See? It’s right where I said it was.” He turned the knob and pulled the door out of the way. He stepped aside and looked back. “Who’s first?” He looked at Phillips. Phillips sighed and shook her head.

“No way.” Icarus narrowed his eyes and smirked. He looked at L.I.N. and Chuck. L.I.N. looked at Chuck. Chuck looked at L.I.N. L.I.N.’s eyes popped open. She stared into Chuck’s eyes and shook her head.

“No, Chuck. Don’t do it.” Chuck slid his lips to the side of his face. He turned and started towards the door. L.I.N. grabbed a hold of his arm with both hands. “Chuck!” she shouted. Wooden wedges along the soles of her shoes slid across the slick, wooden floor of the

trunk. Chuck stopped and looked over his shoulder. L.I.N. pleaded with her eyes. Icarus smiled and shook his head. He looked at Brandy. Brandy looked disgusted. She tilted her head and folded her arms over her chest.

“Oh, come on!” She dropped an angry pair of fists at her sides and stomped towards the door. “It’s obviously safe.” She stopped next to Icarus and looked him over. She threw her hands out at her sides. “I mean, we’re down here. Right?” Icarus shrugged. Brandy looked through the doorway. It led down a long, dreary tunnel that veered to the right. Brandy laid her fingertips against the edges of the doorframe and looked around. The tunnel was dark. There was no lighting. It was only partially visible because of light coming from Lee’s bedroom. Brandy looked over her shoulder. “Anyone got a flashlight?” She looked at Phillips. Phillips took a tiny flashlight out of the left pocket of her trousers. She mashed a button on the side and aimed it towards the doorway. Brandy looked at L.I.N. L.I.N. held up her left, index finger. The tip folded back. A shiny, black tube popped out. Brandy squinted. L.I.N. smiled. The black tube clicked three times, and a flame appeared at the end. Brandy smirked. “Cool.”

The tunnel was perfectly round. It was lined with shiny, slick stones. Networks of bumpy, charcoal grout filled the gaps. The tunnel was wavy, curvy, winding, twisting, and turning. It seemed random and impulsive. And, it was pitch black. Icarus and Officer Phillips led the way. Officer Phillips searched the tunnel with her flashlight. Icarus searched the tunnel with his eyes. Brandy wandered in their footsteps. L.I.N. and Chuck followed her. L.I.N. held her lighter beside her face. It replaced suffocating blackness with dull, orange flickers. L.I.N. felt funny. She wasn’t sure why. Her right hand was free. She stuffed it in the right pocket of her maroon jeans. She took out a gummy worm and wobbled it in front of her eyes. The little, wiggly worm bounced like a fish out of water. L.I.N. grinned. She dropped the gummy worm

between her teeth and gobbled it up. She looked at Chuck. He seemed a little spacey. There was something on his mind. L.I.N. could tell. She figured he was thinking about the drugs they'd found at Lee's. Or, he was wondering about the long, winding tunnel they were traversing. Or, he was thinking about the flash drive Hal left behind. Or, maybe he was thinking about all three.

It made L.I.N. sad. She wanted Chuck to think about *her*. More specifically, she wished Chuck would include her in whatever he was thinking about. She worried he thought she was too stupid to understand what he was pondering. Or, maybe he didn't *want* to include her in his thoughts. Maybe she bored him. Maybe she was boring. Maybe everything was boring. Maybe nothing was boring. L.I.N. felt flush. She felt upset. She felt angry. She began to shake. Chuck's eyelids fluttered. He looked around. He noticed the glow coming from L.I.N.'s lighter was shaky and unsteady. He looked at L.I.N. L.I.N. stared at the ground. She looked frustrated and upset. Her legs were wobbly. Her arms were shaky. And, tears were pouring down her cheeks. Chuck squinted.

"Uh..." he groaned. "L.I.N.?" L.I.N. looked up with a shaky gasp. She swallowed and looked around. The room was spinning. That is, as much as a long, winding tunnel can appear to spin. The stones seemed blurry. Chuck tilted his head. He knew something was wrong. "Guys, hang on a second." Phillips, Icarus, and Brandy stopped and turned around. L.I.N. stopped in her tracks. She shrugged up her shoulders and looked around. Her eyes popped open. She looked terrified. She stared at Chuck with fiery intensity.

"W-What?" she demanded. She turned and faced him. "What is it?"

Chuck smiled a little. "L.I.N., what's the matter? Is something wrong?" L.I.N. shook her hands in front of her face. Dim, orange light from her lighter danced along the shiny, stony

walls of the tunnel. It was like being at a rave, surrounded by disco balls.

“Chuck, what *is* it?!” L.I.N. shrieked. “What do you want from me?!” L.I.N. blew out a giant breath and narrowed her eyes. She looked around. She was just as confused by her behavior as everyone else. She felt erratic and hysterical. She had no idea why. She looked at Chuck. “Um... Um, um, um, um, um...”

Chuck gritted his teeth. “L.I.N., will you turn off your lighter?” L.I.N. tilted her head. Chuck raised his eyebrows. “Please? I’m worried you’re gonna hurt yourself.” L.I.N. sighed. She realized Chuck understood. He was so intelligent and empathetic. L.I.N. felt elated. Her lips twisted into a hideous grin. She filled with happiness and joy. She looked around. She was surrounded by friends. It was wonderful. Life was wonderful. “L.I.N.,” Chuck remarked. L.I.N. looked into his eyes. Chuck smiled a little. “Your lighter?” L.I.N. parted her lips. She held her lighter in front of her face and looked it over.

“Right,” she replied. The flame at the end of the black tube disappeared. The tube returned to her finger. And, the tip of L.I.N.’s finger flopped closed. She looked at Chuck. Her eyes were fiery and bright. “Sorry!” she heaved. She looked at the ground and gasped for breath. Chuck looked her over. He shook his head.

“What’s wrong with her?” Brandy demanded. L.I.N.’s head twisted around. She stared coldly into Brandy’s squishy, little face. She felt like tearing her apart. Chuck glanced at Brandy.

“Nothing’s wrong with her, Brandy.” He returned his gaze to L.I.N. L.I.N. stared back. She panted like a dog. Chuck smiled. “Everything’s just fine.” L.I.N. was utterly confused. She couldn’t decide if she should start ripping stones out of the wall and throwing them at everyone or smile and give them all big hugs. Chuck held out his hand. “Laura, let me borrow

your flashlight.” Phillips tossed Chuck her flashlight. Chuck tried to brush L.I.N.’s hair away from her eyes. She flinched and jumped away.

“Whoa!” L.I.N. shouted. “Stay back!” She looked around. “All of you! Stay back!” Brandy showed L.I.N. her palms and backed away. Phillips puffed up her cheeks and narrowed her eyes. Icarus smirked. Chuck tried to stay calm. He dropped his hand at his side and covered his face with a warm smile.

“L.I.N., will you calm down?” He spoke as slowly and as calmly as he could. L.I.N. backed against the side of the tunnel. She laid her head and her back against rows of cold, slick stones. She was short of breath. Tears tumbled down her cheeks. She looked at Chuck and shook her head.

“I-I don’t know what’s going on.” She swallowed. “I think there’s something... wrong with me.” She stuffed her hand into her pocket. She took out a gummy worm and dangled it between her eyes. Chuck pointed at it.

“Whoa!” he shouted. L.I.N. shook and tingled all over. She dropped the gummy worm in her lap and looked up. Chuck pointed at L.I.N.’s lap. “What the hell is *that*?” L.I.N. felt terrified. Her eyes popped open. She stared at her lap and shook her head.

“I-I... I don’t know!” She looked up. “Chuck, what *is* it?!”

Brandy squinted. “Is she... frying on acid?”

Chuck pressed his lips together. “I think... she’s frying on acid.” He looked at Brandy. “Pretty sure about that.” L.I.N. looked around. She looked frantic. She curled her thighs against her chest and hugged her knees. She began to shiver. Chuck furrowed his brow. “L.I.N.?” he inquired. “What is it?” L.I.N.’s eyeballs climbed columns of stones. Each stone was a different size, shape, and color. Some were chipped. Some were cracked. Some were round. Some were

square. L.I.N. felt like she was trapped in a labyrinth. The stones appeared to move. L.I.N. focused on one beside her feet. She figured it out. The stones were growing and shrinking. It was subtle. But, it was noticeable and unnerving. L.I.N. looked up.

“It... It’s the walls,” she remarked. Her eyes popped open. They looked like saucers. “I think they’re... breathing.” She looked around in a panic. Chuck knelt beside her. He shined Phillips’ flashlight into L.I.N.’s eyes. Her pupils were gigantic and unresponsive. They were like shiny, black marbles. Chuck exhaled through his nostrils. L.I.N. looked into his eyes. She laid a row of shaky fingers on the sleeve of Chuck’s brown, corduroy jacket.

“Don’t touch me,” Chuck remarked. L.I.N. jerked her hand away. Her face lit up. She looked terrified.

“Sorry!”

Chuck fought back a smile. “It’s okay. It’s just...” He spotted the gummy worm on L.I.N.’s lap. It was green on one end and clear on the other. “I think these little gummy worms you’ve been eating are coated with L.S.D.” Chuck cupped the sleeve of his jacket around his knuckles. He dusted the gummy worm off L.I.N.’s lap and looked into her eyes. “You’ve probably got it all over you.”

Phillips scrunched up her face. “I’m confused. How could she be frying on acid?” Chuck faced her. “She’s an android.”

Chuck looked at L.I.N. “She’s covered with nanotechnology.” He slid his fingers through L.I.N.’s shiny, blue hair. “That’s what her skin’s made of.” He looked at Phillips. “And her hair, and her eyes, and her nails...” He looked into L.I.N.’s eyes. “Digestive system?”

L.I.N. stared at Chuck in a daze. “Parts,” she replied. “Don’t know very much about it.”

Chuck nodded. “Well, I’m assuming Hal used nanotechnology in your digestive system

as well.”

Phillips shrugged. “I don’t even know what that *is!*” Chuck looked up and smiled. “What the hell is that? What are you talking about?”

Chuck squinted. “Little machines,” he explained. He held up his hand. He made a tiny gap between the tips of his index finger and thumb. “Tiny little things. The size of cells.” He looked at L.I.N. “I’m guessing that’s how you absorb energy. The little machines carry pieces of what you ingest to a series of compartments somewhere in your body.”

Brandy squinted. “Uh…”

“Your body has some way of…” Chuck looked at the tops of his eyes. “It strips electrons off different kinds of molecules.” He looked into L.I.N.’s eyes and scrunched up his face. “Yeah? Am I close?”

L.I.N. threw her arms out at her sides. “I really don’t know, Chuck. I’m sorry.”

Phillips shook her head. “Well, I *still* don’t understand.”

Chuck looked up and sighed. “Does that need more explanation?” Brandy and Phillips nodded. Icarus folded his arms over his chest and rolled his eyes. Chuck smiled. “I’m saying her body is capable of identifying what’s inside of it.” He looked at L.I.N. “And, what’s on her skin.” He looked at Phillips. “Yeah?”

Phillips threw her hands out at her sides. “Still not getting it.”

“The little machines tell her software she’s on acid. Her software is simulating the effects.”

“Ah,” Phillips remarked. She rolled her eyes. “Why didn’t you just *say* that?” Chuck tossed Phillips her flashlight and hopped to his feet. Brandy squinted.

“But, why?” she inquired. “I mean, why go to all that trouble?”

Chuck offered L.I.N. his hands. "It's imperative to her survival," he explained. L.I.N. reached for Chuck's palms. Chuck jerked them away. "Don't... Don't touch my skin," he reiterated. "Be careful."

L.I.N. smiled. "Sorry." She grabbed a hold of Chuck's wrists. They were covered with his brown, corduroy jacket. Chuck grabbed a hold of L.I.N.'s wrists and dragged her to her feet. He looked at Phillips.

"And, now that I know her software can simulate the effects of L.S.D., I know it can probably simulate the effects of fluoxetine."

Phillips narrowed her eyes. "Huh?"

Brandy parted her lips and bobbed her head. "Oh, I get it." She motioned towards Lee's house with her thumb. "That's why he had all those SSRIs."

Phillips shined her flashlight into Brandy's face. "Do what?"

Chuck smiled. "Don't you understand? That's what's going on here. Lee's using L.S.D. to counteract the effects of the nitroglycerin." Phillips shined her flashlight at Chuck. "I just said earlier, if he's shooting up all that nitro, he'd be getting migraines on a regular basis."

Phillips nodded. "Okay." She motioned towards L.I.N. "So, what's with the acid?"

"They use L.S.D. to treat cluster headaches, sometimes," Chuck explained. He looked at Brandy. "Right, Brandy?" Brandy looked at Phillips and nodded. Phillips shrugged.

"So, what about the antidepressants?"

Chuck pressed his lips together. "Lysergic acid diethylamide enhances serotonin synthesis." He narrowed his eyes. "Do you understand?"

Phillips smiled and shook her head. "Not really."

"It increases serotonin levels in the brain," Brandy explained.



“Right,” Chuck added. “So, if you had to take it on a daily basis, you’d have to burn up all that excess serotonin.” He shrugged. “Otherwise, you might go around twisting people’s heads off.” Brandy looked at the floor. She folded her arms over her chest and nodded.

“And, fluoxetine could do that?” Phillips inquired.

Chuck nodded. “That’s how SSRIs work. They shove serotonin into as many receptors as possible and keep it there.” He turned his head without looking away. “It would cancel out the acid.”

Phillips sighed. “Okay.” She stroked her chin with her index finger and thumb. “But, why take the nitro in the first place? That’s what *I* don’t understand.” Brandy slid her fingers up and down her neck. She closed her eyes and thought back to the day before. She imagined Lee’s fat fingers strapped around her throat. She remembered feeling his pulse. She remembered feeling his pulse.

“I think I understand,” Brandy remarked. Phillips and Chuck looked at her. Icarus stared at the ground and tapped his foot, impatiently. L.I.N. buried her eyes in her palms and giggled.

“Explain,” Phillips demanded.

Brandy looked up. “He has two hearts.” She looked at Chuck. “That’s why his blood pressure is so high. And, that’s why he’s so aggressive and strong.”

Chuck nodded. “What do you *mean* he has two hearts? How do you know that?”

Brandy gritted her teeth. “I felt his pulse.” She looked at Phillips. “And, I felt his pulse.” She tapped her neck. “When he was strangling me.” L.I.N.’s eyes popped open. She dropped her hands at her sides and gasped.

“He was strangling you?” Brandy faced L.I.N. She slowly nodded. L.I.N.’s eyebrows drooped at the sides. Tears began pouring down her cheeks. “Oh, you poor, poor thing!” She

stumbled across the tunnel and wrapped Brandy in her arms. She squeezed so hard, Brandy felt her ribs bowing. Brandy gritted her teeth and patted L.I.N.'s shoulder.

*"Okay..."* she groaned. *"L.I.N., you're hurting me!"*

"Sorry!" L.I.N. gasped. She dropped her arms and backed away. "I'm sorry, Brandy!"

Brandy smiled. "It's okay, L.I.N." She patted L.I.N.'s arm. "Just... try to calm down. Okay?"

L.I.N. nodded, vehemently. "Okay. Okay. Sure. Right. Yeah. I've gotta calm down, now. I've gotta calm down." She looked at the ground and blew a breath through her lips.

"Calm down, L.I.N. Calm down." Chuck smiled. He laid his hand on L.I.N.'s shoulder and gazed into her eyes.

"It's okay, sweetheart," he assured her. He motioned towards Lee's house with his head. "Why don't we take a nice, slow walk back to the trunk. And then, we can get you a big, tall glass of water." L.I.N. grinned and nodded. "And, some fluoxetine to take the edge off."

L.I.N. slugged the air. "O-kay!" she shrieked with passion. She hooked her arm through Chuck's, looked into his eyes, and grinned from ear to ear. "Lead the way."

Icarus pressed his lips together. "The tunnel splits up ahead."

Chuck looked over his shoulder. "What?" Icarus snagged Phillips' flashlight. He aimed it down the tunnel. Brandy, Chuck, and L.I.N. had a peek. There was a fork in the road. Ahead, the tunnel became two. One curved to the left. The other bobbed to the right. Chuck looked at Icarus and Phillips. They were grinning. They'd spotted the split right before L.I.N. started freaking out. Chuck licked his lips. "I've gotta take her back. I can't go with you."

Phillips nodded. "Then, we're going without you." She looked at Icarus. "This is just too weird. I've never seen anything like it. I can't stop now." She looked at Brandy. "You

coming, Brandy?”

Brandy parted her lips. “I...” She stared down the tunnel. She looked along the stony walls where it parted. It was the most intriguing thing she’d ever laid eyes on. She looked to her right. L.I.N. looked nauseated and pale. Her head swayed. Her eyeballs bobbed around. She closed her eyes and shook her head. She spread her fingers and stared at her palms. She looked at Chuck and swallowed.

“My hands feel all tingly.” Chuck patted L.I.N.’s shoulder. He looked at Brandy.

“Brandy?” he inquired.

Brandy looked at Phillips and Icarus. “I’m sorry, guys. I think I’m gonna head back to the house.” She pressed her lips together. “I’ve got a... friend in need.”

Phillips exhaled through her nostrils. “Alright.” She looked at Chuck. “You guys gonna be okay without us?”

Chuck slipped his arms around L.I.N.’s waist. “I think so.” L.I.N. laid her cheek on Chuck’s shoulder and closed her eyes. Brandy stood next to her. She laid her knuckles against L.I.N.’s temple. Her skin felt cold and clammy. Brandy looked at Chuck.

“We need to hurry.”

“Aw, don’t worry,” Chuck remarked. He scooped L.I.N. in his arms. L.I.N.’s shoulder blades rested against Chuck’s right arm. Her calves dangled over his left. “She probably just needs to throw up.”

L.I.N. scrunched up her nose. “Aw, man...” she groaned. “I hope not.” Chuck and Brandy started walking. Chuck shrugged.

“Don’t know what to tell you. I think your stomach wants the rest of those gummy worms out of there.”

Brandy rubbed L.I.N.'s shoulder. "It'll be okay, L.I.N. I'm right here." L.I.N.'s face lit up with a bright smile. She held up her left, index finger. Her lighter popped out and ignited.

Lee stopped at the corner of Lisa Avenue and 21st Street. It was thirty-four blocks from his house. 21st and Lisa were two lane, neighborhood streets. Lee was surrounded by brick houses and long fences with wooden pickets. He stood next to a stop sign. There was a manhole in the middle of 21st and Lisa. That's what Lee was looking for. He stumbled into the middle of the intersection and straddled the manhole. It had a rusty, iron cover. There was a number stamped in the middle. It was the number fifty-five. The digits were surrounded by two finger sized holes. Lee stuffed his fat index fingers into the holes, lifted the cover, and laid it beside the opening. A ladder dropped from the top of the manhole to the bottom. It had thirteen steps. It was eight feet tall. The manhole led to a tunnel lined with shiny, slick stones. After the length of five city blocks, it joined another tunnel. That tunnel led to Helga Avenue and 21st Street. That intersection was also thirty-four blocks from Lee's. Three additional three blocks of tunnel led from the joining point to the trunk in Lee's bedroom. The trunk was one foot long, two feet wide, and one foot deep. Lee sighed. He dropped into the manhole, grabbed the cover, and laid it across the opening.

The little door inside Lee's trunk opened. Brandy wandered through and stepped aside. Chuck followed her in. L.I.N. was sprawled along his arms. Her head lay on his shoulder. Brandy closed the door and looked up. She sighed.

"So... we just hop right out of here, huh?" Chuck looked towards the top of the trunk. The edges looked as far away as a ceiling in a regular sized room. He looked at Brandy.

"I'm betting we can jump up and grab a hold of the top of one of the walls." He looked up. "Then, we just climb out."

Brandy crossed her arms over her chest. “Somehow, I don’t think it’ll be that easy.”

Chuck smiled. “Hang on. I’ll give you a boost.” He slid his knuckles along L.I.N.’s cheek. L.I.N. scrunched up her face and groaned. “L.I.N., I’ve gotta set you down for a little bit,” Chuck remarked. L.I.N. peeled her eyelids apart. Her stomach felt like it was filled with thumb tacks. She turned her head and exhaled a shaky sigh.

“*Will you... turn me off for a little while?*” she moaned. Chuck squinted. L.I.N. cleared her throat. “After I take these pills, I mean.”

Chuck tilted his head. “Just turn your *self* off. Use the ‘down’ command.”

L.I.N. lowered her eyelids and shook her head. “I can’t use the ‘down’ command. My software won’t let me.”

Chuck slid his lips to the side of his face. “Use the ‘kill’ command. Use it to remove any tasks named ‘lin’.”

L.I.N. looked into Chuck’s eyes. “Chuck, I can’t. I’m telling you.”

Chuck scrunched up his nose. “Well, surely the lin binary has a ‘stop’ command. No?” L.I.N. smiled. She stared into Chuck’s golden irises and shook her head.

“It can’t be done. Not by me.”

Chuck looked away and closed his eyes. “What if you used a script?”

“Chuck!” L.I.N. shouted. “I can’t turn myself off! Stop it!” Brandy laid her fingers over her lips and giggled. Chuck looked into L.I.N.’s shiny, green eyes.

“What happens if you try?”

L.I.N. shut her eyes and sighed. “Will you set me down, please? I feel dizzy.” Chuck set L.I.N. down. He slid her across the floor and rested her shoulder blades against the nearest wall. L.I.N. looked at Chuck from the tops of her eyes and smiled. Chuck curled his fingers

around L.I.N.'s calf and lifted her foot. L.I.N. narrowed her eyes. Chuck slid off her wedge and laid it beside her.

"All the times I dropped acid," Chuck remarked, "I only ever had a few bad trips." He slid off L.I.N.'s other shoe and laid it beside the first. "I remember... I always felt better if I just took off my shoes." He folded L.I.N.'s legs like a pretzel. "I have no idea why."

Brandy smiled. "You've dropped acid before?"

Chuck looked over his shoulder. "Don't tell Laura." Brandy snickered. She motioned towards the top of the trunk with her head.

"Give me a boost, so I can get the hell out of here."

Chuck faced L.I.N. "Hang on a second, will you?" He cupped his finger below L.I.N.'s chin and lifted her head. He stared into her eyes. Her pupils looked like big, black buttons. Chuck smiled a little. "Man, you're really gone. Huh?"

Brandy sighed. "Chuck, please. I don't like it down here."

Chuck slid his fingers across L.I.N.'s thigh. "Wait a minute. Okay?"

"For what?" Brandy demanded. L.I.N. turned her head. She bent over and vomited next to her shoes. Chuck looked at Brandy.

"That." L.I.N. laid the back of her head against the wall and gasped for breath. Brandy scrunched up her face.

"Aw, L.I.N.!" She folded her fingers over her nose and mouth. L.I.N. looked into her eyes.

"Sorry." She turned to spit.

Phillips and Icarus reached the end of the tunnel. It ended with a ladder leading to a manhole cover. Phillips shined her flashlight towards the top of the ladder and sighed.

“Where do you think we are, Icky?” she inquired. Icarus looked at Phillips. His long, thin lips curled into a smile.

“We’re right *here*.” He stuck out his tongue and clamped on his alligator clips. Then, he tapped the power buttons inside the cuffs of his sleeves. “And, stop calling me ‘Icky’.” Phillips snickered. Icarus scampered up the ladder, popped the top, and tossed it aside. He whirled out of the manhole with a back handspring and crouched near the closest sidewalk. He and Phillips were in the middle of 21st Street and Helga. It was a neighborhood surrounded by brick houses and picket fences. The roads were clear. The sky was filled with puffy clouds. They were getting murky. Phillips’ head popped out of the manhole. She drew her 9MM and held it beside her face. She looked around.

“All clear, Icky?”

“Yeah,” Icarus replied. He stared into Phillips’ big, blue eyes. “What did I just say?” Phillips giggled.

Lee made it to the intersection of tunnels. He searched the walls with a tiny flashlight on his keychain. He was soaked with sweat. His head was pounding. His chest was burning. He needed more nitro. But, he *really* needed to get high. He felt like anything would do the trick. He aimed his flashlight at the floor and took a step towards his house. He froze.

“*You’re kidding...*” he whispered. He spotted a gummy worm on the cold, stony ground. It was green on one end and clear on the other. Lee had no idea how it got there. He didn’t care, either. He needed something to take the edge off. He felt absolutely dreadful. His lips twisted into a grin. “*Come here, little wormy,*” he muttered. “*It’s time for you to go home.*” He bent over, snatched the gummy worm off the ground, and tossed it between his teeth.

Brandy’s fingers curled around the top edge of the trunk. They tightened and turned

white. Then, her head appeared. She looked around. Lee's bedroom looked normal size again. Brandy was confused. She narrowed her eyes and sighed.

*"I guess stupid Icky was right,"* she whispered. She laid her armpit over the rim of the trunk, tugged herself over the side, and rolled onto the carpet. She knelt in front of the trunk and peeked inside. L.I.N. and Chuck looked tiny. L.I.N. sat on her knees. She looked at Brandy and giggled. She wriggled her fingers in front of her face.

"You're friggin' huge!" she shouted. "What did you *do?!?*" Brandy smiled and shook her head. She lowered her arm into the trunk and spread her fingers.

"Toss me her shoes, Chuck," she remarked. Chuck snagged L.I.N.'s wedges off the floor. L.I.N. looked them over. She gasped and looked up.

*"There they are!"* she shouted. "I've been looking all over for those!" She curled her fingers around Chuck's forearm. "Where did you find them?"

Chuck grinned. "Oh, my God..." He tossed L.I.N.'s left shoe to Brandy. Brandy set it next to her and reached for the other. Chuck tossed Brandy L.I.N.'s right shoe. Brandy set it next to the first and peeked into the trunk.

"Okay," she remarked. "You think you can keep her focused long enough to get her up here?"

Chuck slid his fingers under L.I.N.'s arms. "Come on, L.I.N.," he told her. L.I.N. shrieked and dashed across the trunk. She faced Chuck, flattened against a wall, and pointed between Chuck's eyes.

"Don't you *dare* tickle me!" L.I.N. shouted. She grinned from ear to ear. "I will punch you in the nose!"

Chuck turned his head without looking away. "You'd better punch hard." He started



towards her.

“Chuck!” L.I.N. screeched. She shuffled down the wall and cuddled in a corner. She laid her chin on her knees and hugged her shins. “You leave me *alone!* Stop it!”

Chuck smiled. “Oh, it’s on.” L.I.N.’s eyes popped open. She looked up.

“Brandy, help me! Make him leave me alone!” Brandy dropped her forehead in her palm. Chuck offered his hand.

“Come here, L.I.N. I’m not going to tickle you. I promise.”

L.I.N. shook her head. “Uh-uh. You stay away from me! I know what you’re up to.”

Chuck slid his lips to the side of his face. “Okay. But, me and Brandy are leaving. You’re going to be down here all by yourself.” He licked his lips and looked around. “In the dark.” L.I.N. gasped. Her eyes popped open.

“You wouldn’t!”

Chuck looked towards the top of the trunk. “Brandy...” He stretched his arms and reached out. Brandy leaned over the edge of the trunk. She grabbed a hold of Chuck’s hands.

“Sure, Chuck. I’ve got you.”

L.I.N. looked up. “Brandy!” she shouted. “Stop it!” Brandy lifted Chuck off the floor. Chuck laid his feet against the wall. He looked at L.I.N. L.I.N. hopped up. Her eyebrows drooped at the sides. Her lips quivered. “*Guys...*” she moaned. She looked at Brandy. “Don’t leave me down here.” Chuck snickered. He looked up and bobbed his head. Brandy let go, and Chuck dropped to the floor. He wandered across the trunk and stood next to his girlfriend. L.I.N. stared into his eyes. Big, fat tears dribbled down her cheeks.

“Wow,” Chuck mused. He smiled and shook his head. “We’ve gotta get you out of here.” He tucked his fingers inside his sleeves and held out his hands. “Come on.” L.I.N. laid a

pair of trembling hands in his. Chuck led her towards the middle of the trunk and stopped. He wrapped his hands around her waist and lifted her. Brandy cupped her checkered sleeves around her fingers and lowered her arms into the trunk. She curled her jacketed fingers around L.I.N.'s and lifted her out. L.I.N. came out with a big grin on her face.

“Whoa!” she shrieked. “That’s weird!”

Brandy dropped L.I.N. on the carpet and looked her over. “How much do you weigh? You’re like... really light.”

“Fifty-eight pounds,” L.I.N. replied. Brandy nodded. She knelt in front of the trunk and offered her hands.

“Okay, Chuck. Come on.”

“Finally,” Chuck replied. He took Brandy’s hands, scaled the wall, and rolled out. He landed on the floor, staring at the ceiling. L.I.N. sat next to him. She stared into his eyes and grinned. Chuck smiled back. “Hi, L.I.N.” L.I.N. waved hello. Brandy laid her fingers on L.I.N.’s shoulders.

“Come on. Let’s go take some antidepressants.”

L.I.N.’s face lit up. “Okay!” She hopped up and followed Brandy into Lee’s kitchen. Chuck shoved himself to his feet and joined them. Brandy led L.I.N. to Lee’s sink. It was located on the inside of the bar, next to the gummy worms. Brandy loosened the hot and cold knobs and curled her fingers below the faucet. She adjusted the knobs until the temperature of the water was lukewarm. L.I.N. stood next to her, watching. Brandy looked at her and smiled. She motioned towards the sink with her head.

“Why don’t wash your hands, hmm? And, I’ll find you something to drink.” L.I.N. nodded. There was a soap dispenser next to the faucet. It was filled with blue, liquid soap.

L.I.N. pumped a squirt on her palm, laid her fingers below the faucet, and swirled them together. Lee's kitchen appliances were shiny and white. His refrigerator had two vertical doors. The freezer was on the left. The fridge was on the right. Brandy opened the right door and looked around. She spotted a carton of orange juice. She grabbed it and closed the door. She looked to her left. Chuck was standing next to her, leaning against the freezer door. He eyed the orange juice suspiciously.

“You think there's any drugs in that?”

Brandy raised her eyebrows. “I *hope* not.” She shrugged. “I wouldn't put it past this guy, though.” Chuck brushed past Brandy and opened a cupboard door above the stove. He snagged one of Lee's prescription bottles and closed the door. He opened the cupboard door next to that and looked around. There was a row of tall glasses on the top shelf. Chuck grabbed one and set it on the counter. Brandy filled it with orange juice and returned the carton to the refrigerator. Chuck popped the top off the prescription bottle. He dropped a couple of capsules on his palm and looked at Brandy. Brandy folded her arms over her chest. She stared back from the tops of her eyes. Chuck slid his lips to the side of his face. He dribbled two more capsules into his hand and returned the prescription bottle to Lee's cupboard. L.I.N. stopped washing her hands and tightened the knobs. There was a roll of paper towels next to the sink. It was standing on a wooden stick. L.I.N. snatched a handful of paper towels and swabbed her hands. She turned around and grinned.

“Man... that seemed like forever.” She tossed the wad of paper towels over her shoulder. It landed on the bar. “How long was I standing here? Like... half an hour?” Brandy smiled and shook her head. She handed L.I.N. the glass of orange juice. Chuck held out his hand. It was filled with red and blue capsules. L.I.N. stared at them in a daze. It seemed like there were

hundreds of them. They were stacked in Chuck's hand like a mountain. L.I.N. looked up. She raised her eyebrows. "*All* of those?"

Chuck narrowed his eyes. "It's just four, L.I.N. It should be okay." He looked at Brandy. "You think?" Brandy nodded. L.I.N. stared at Chuck's hand. She focused on the capsules. Chuck snickered. "Hold out your hand." L.I.N. smiled. She held out her palm and spread her fingers. Chuck dropped the capsules in her hand. L.I.N. dribbled orange juice into her mouth. It was chilly and serene. It tasted sweet and cheerful. It tasted like a bright, sunny day. The flavor was sparkly and shiny, like a sea of emeralds baking in the sun. L.I.N. closed her eyes. She pulled the glass away, swallowed, and licked her lips. She stared into Chuck's face and fluttered her eyelids. She smiled and tilted her head.

"Hi, Chuck." Brandy dropped her face in her palm. Chuck chuckled. He curled his fingers around L.I.N.'s hand, the one with the capsules in it.

"L.I.N.," he remarked. "The antidepressants?"

L.I.N. stared at her hand and gasped. "Oh... right!" Chuck licked his lips. He dangled L.I.N.'s hand in front of her eyes.

"Put them in your mouth," he instructed. L.I.N. popped the pills between her lips. "That's good," Chuck remarked. Brandy curled her fingers over her lips and giggled. "Now, wash them down." L.I.N. exhaled through her nostrils. She put the glass to her lips, filled her mouth with orange juice, and swallowed. Chuck nodded. "Good girl."

L.I.N. smacked her lips. "Sorry."

Chuck slid his knuckles along her cheek. "It's okay. You're doing fine." He looked over his shoulder. "I have to use the restroom."

Brandy motioned towards Lee's bathroom. "By all means." Chuck wandered into the

restroom and shut the door. L.I.N. looked at Brandy. She tilted her head back and finished off the orange juice. She laid the empty glass on the counter and looked around. She wandered around the refrigerator and headed towards Lee's bedroom. Brandy's eyes popped open. "Um... L.I.N.?" She scampered across the kitchen and followed. She found L.I.N. standing in front of the trunk. She stood there, staring at it. Brandy stood behind her and laid her hands on her hips. L.I.N. looked over her shoulder.

"Did you hear that?"

Brandy squinted. "Hear what?"

L.I.N. smirked. "You didn't hear that just now?" Brandy shook her head. L.I.N.'s eyes lit up. She pointed towards a window across the room.

"There!" she shouted. "You didn't hear that?"

Brandy shrugged. "No. What did it sound like?"

L.I.N. crinkled her eyes. "Not really sure." She gritted her teeth. "Someone... teeing off for golf? Maybe?"

Brandy shook her head. "Got me. I didn't hear anything." There was a noise inside the trunk. The girls turned and looked it over. Someone was walking around inside. He looked up and froze. L.I.N. and Brandy stared at the trunk and narrowed their eyes.

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

Brandy shook her head. "I have no idea." Lee stood at the bottom of the trunk. He clutched his chest and gasped for breath. His heart thumped in his ears. His heart thumped in his ears. He looked the girls over. He recognized one of them from the pharmacy. He shook with ferocity. He smashed his teeth together and slid them around. He sucked in a breath and snarled like a dog. Brandy's eyes popped open. She gasped and backed away.

“Uh-oh.” Lee dashed across the trunk. He jumped, curled into a ball, and tumbled through the air. He landed next to L.I.N.’s shoes. They were sitting beside the trunk. L.I.N. swallowed. She looked at Brandy.

“Um... is that who I *think* it is?” Brandy’s eyes were like saucers. She nodded, nervously. L.I.N. faced Lee. Lee towered over her. He looked like a ten story, brick house. He breathed deeply and quickly. His face was fierce and penetrating. His chest and arms were like giant, bulging boulders. A denim jacket was painted on top. It looked like it was going to burst. L.I.N. shook all over. She felt like she was made out of rubber bands. Her breathing turned into sharp panting. Her teeth chattered. Her eyes popped open. She whimpered and slithered away. A jagged, sadistic grin twisted across Lee’s hideous precipice. He stared L.I.N. down through a pair of vulgar, penetrating, sunken, angry, blue eyes. He stalked across his bedroom and backed L.I.N. into a corner. L.I.N. rested between adjoining walls. Her neck and fingertips stuck to smooth, chilly speckles of dried whitewash. She gasped. Lee bent over and stared into her face. His eyes were vicious and dreadful. His smile was toothy and repulsive. His breath was hot and putrid. L.I.N.’s lips quivered.

“*P-Please...*” she squeezed out. Lee shrieked like an angry gorilla. He closed his fingers around L.I.N.’s wrists and pulled them apart. L.I.N. felt her shoulders, elbows, and hands distending. A network of piano wire filled her body. Tiny, electric wheels rolled and unrolled strands of wire when triggered. That was how L.I.N.’s body parts moved. L.I.N. felt wires in her arms and fingers stretching and straining. She heard them plunking under the tension. She crinkled her eyes and gritted her teeth. “Gah!” she shouted. “Stop it!” Lee cackled. He pulled harder. He felt L.I.N.’s left arm tearing loose. Brandy felt her blood boiling. She crinkled up her face and gnashed her teeth.

“You piece of shit!” she screeched. “I’ll fucking kill you!” L.I.N.’s left arm popped loose. Her skeleton was mostly composite. Her humerus, the upper part of her arm, threaded into a plastic ball. The ball fit into a rubber sleeve attached to her shoulder blade. The threads in L.I.N.’s humerus disintegrated and ripped out of the ball. Her flesh and the sleeve of her blouse tore like strips of paper. Electrical wire and piano wire twisting through her composite bones stretched and broke. Geysers of blood gushed out of her shoulder. Warm, wet crimson splashed across L.I.N.’s face. It soaked her soft, blue hair and turned it purple. L.I.N.’s blood splattered Lee’s eyes, nose, and lips. Lee crumpled his face and giggled like a maniac. L.I.N. crashed to the carpet. She lay on her left side, folded her right arm over her head, and curled into a ball. Her left arm dropped beside her feet. Lee studied it, curiously. He noticed strands of electrical wire and shards of wadded, grey plastic sticking out of the end. He looked L.I.N. over.

“What the hell?” Brandy shrieked. She lowered her head and charged Lee like a bull. Lee glanced at her. He bent over, rammed his shoulder against Brandy’s chest, and tossed her across the room. Brandy exhaled every ounce of air in her body. She felt like she’d been shot in the ribs with a cannonball. Her butt smashed into a wall on the opposite side of the room. It cracked the sheetrock and left a bowling ball sized hole. Brandy pinched her eyes shut and gritted her teeth. A sharp twinge shot up her spine. Her left temple and cheek collided with the floor. Long, squishy strands of shag carpet ripped flesh off her face. Her skull cracked against a slab of concrete underneath. Brandy crumpled in a heap and went limp. She inhaled through her nostrils and exhaled a painful whimper.

Chuck wandered in. He looked to his left. He found Lee stooped over his girlfriend, slathered in her blood. He looked to his right. He saw Brandy sprawled across the floor, nearly unconscious. He looked below Lee’s bed. He spotted a metal baseball bat lying on the floor.

Chuck glanced at Lee. Lee gritted his teeth and snarled. He charged towards Chuck with a full head of steam. Chuck narrowed his eyes.

“Crap.” He dove through a gap between Lee’s legs and rolled underneath his bed. Lee grabbed a hold of his doorframe to stop his momentum. He looked over his shoulder. Chuck wrapped his fingers around the baseball bat and slid out. He took a batting stance and stared into Lee’s face. “Bitch, I’ll kill you,” Chuck told him. Lee shouted. He whirled around and dashed across the bedroom. Chuck stepped aside and cracked him over the back of the head. Lee shrieked like a little girl. He stumbled to the floor and rolled onto his back. His eyes popped open. His face twitched with terror. Chuck raised the ball bat over his head. He crinkled his nose. His eyebrows lowered in the middle. “I’m gonna smash you to pieces, you giant, grizzly bear, meat-head, jerk off!” Lee screamed with terror. He staggered to his feet and raced across the bedroom. There was a window on the other side of the bed. Lee crashed through the window and ran away, screaming.

Chuck pressed his lips together. He laid the tip of the bat against the floor and looked to his left. L.I.N. was looking at him over her shoulder. She lay on the floor, gasping for breath. Her face was pale and bloody. She looked like she was dead. Chuck exhaled a shaky breath. He looked at Brandy. She hadn’t moved. But, she was still breathing. Chuck laid the bat on the floor and wandered across the room. He knelt beside L.I.N. and laid his hand on her shoulder. She was trembling.

“You okay, L.I.N.?” he asked. L.I.N. forced her eyes shut and swallowed. She puffed out a series of panicked breaths through her nose.

“*N-No...*” she managed to get out.

Chuck tried to roll her over. “Let me see.”



L.I.N. jerked away and stared at the wall. “No...” she gasped. She cleared her throat and looked over her shoulder. “I don’t... I don’t want you to see me like this.”

Chuck furrowed his brow. “I wasn’t asking. I was telling.” He patted her shoulder. “Turn over. Let me have a look.” L.I.N. closed her eyes and began to cry. She slowly turned and lay on her back. Chuck leaned across her chest and inspected the damage. Blood was trickling out of her left shoulder. L.I.N.’s nanotechnology had nearly sealed the wound. Chuck looked it over and nodded. He stared at a knot of mangled wires and plastic dangling out of the hole. He laid his fingers on the edge of the wound. L.I.N. tilted her head back and gritted her teeth.

“No, stop...” she begged. “Stop, stop, stop...”

Chuck faced her. “Sorry.” He laid his hand on her chest. L.I.N. closed her eyes and swallowed. She curled her fingers around his and squeezed.

“G-Go check on Brandy.” She gazed into Chuck’s eyes. “Make sure she’s okay.”

Chuck sighed. “I’ve gotta shut you off.”

“You can’t,” L.I.N. replied. She licked her lips. “My USB port is on my left arm.” Chuck stared at L.I.N.’s left arm. It floated atop a pool of shiny claret.

“Oh, man,” Chuck remarked. He looked into L.I.N.’s big, green eyes. “We’ve gotta get you back to the lab and wire it back up.” He exhaled through his nostrils. “How bad does it hurt?”

L.I.N.’s face rippled with frustration. “It’s *killing* me! Make it stop!” Chuck exhaled a heavy breath. He kissed L.I.N.’s knuckles and nodded.

“Okay. We’ll do that.” He looked over his shoulder. Brandy managed to lift her head off the floor. She stared at a tiny puddle of blood on the carpet. It was dribbling from her nose.

She sniffled and wiped her nostrils. She looked up. Her eyes were red and puffy. Tears tumbled down her cheeks. She exhaled a shaky sigh and swatted them away.

“Brandy?” Chuck inquired.

Brandy looked at the floor and showed him her palm. “*I’m... I’m okay...*” she grumbled. She cleared her throat and looked up. “Is L.I.N. alright?”

Chuck looked at his girlfriend. “No. We need to get her back to the house.” He looked up. “Now.” Officer Phillips climbed out of the trunk. She puffed up her cheeks and looked around.

“Uh...” Icarus came flying out of the trunk. He tumbled through the air and landed on all fours. His jacket was wired to his tongue. His hood was drawn. He scanned the room and looked into Chuck’s eyes.

“What happened?” he inquired. He stood up, tapped the cuffs of his sleeves, and yanked the wires off his tongue. “Where’s Lee?”

Chuck motioned towards the broken window with his head. “I’m not chasing him. I’m afraid I might *find* him.” He stood and scraped L.I.N. off the floor. He looked at Icarus. “Grab her arm, would you?”

“*And, my shoes,*” L.I.N. groaned. She cleared her throat. “Has anyone seen my shoes?”

## Chapter 5: "L.I.N. Is Necessary"

Hal's old place was enclosed by a border of thin, black bars. The house was covered with white bricks. A garage stood next to that. It was also covered with white bricks. There were two shiny, red doors that rolled up. Each had rows of three rectangular windows. There was a pair of gates at the edge of the property. Chuck parked Hal's maroon compact in front of the gates. Officer Phillips parked behind him. She was driving an unmarked police car. It was a tan Tiara Paulette. Icarus sat next to her. He folded his arms over his chest and exhaled through his nostrils. Chuck looked over his shoulder. L.I.N. and Brandy were in his back seat. L.I.N. lay across Brandy's lap. Brandy's checkered jacket lay across her shoulders. Her eyes were pinched shut. She was shivering. L.I.N. opened her eyes a crack and looked up.

*"D-Did we get there... yet?"*

Chuck licked his lips. "We're home, honey." He motioned towards the windshield with his head. "I need you to open the gates." L.I.N. closed her eyes and inhaled an icy breath. The gates swung out of the way. Chuck drove across a paved driveway and parked by the front doors. Phillips parked beside him. The gates closed behind them. Brandy rubbed L.I.N.'s shoulder.

"Okay, L.I.N. Come on. We're gonna get you all fixed up." L.I.N. scrunched up her face and groaned. Chuck hopped out, wandered towards the back of the car, and opened the rear, passenger door. He knelt next to Brandy and L.I.N. and held out his hand. L.I.N. looked up.

"Come on," Chuck told her. "The quicker we get inside, the quicker I can shut you off." L.I.N. swallowed. She closed her eyes and nodded. Brandy peeled her jacket off L.I.N.'s shoulders and laid it on the seat. Chuck slipped his fingers around L.I.N.'s and dragged her to the edge of the seat. He lifted her in his arms and carried her beneath the front porch. "You still

feeling funny from the acid?” L.I.N. shook her head. Chuck stopped next to the front door. Brandy, Phillips, and Icarus gathered behind them. Icarus was carrying L.I.N.’s left arm. Brandy was carrying her wedges. L.I.N. held out her pointer finger. The tip flipped back, and a pair of lock picks popped out. L.I.N. slipped them into a lock on the right door handle and flicked her wrist. Chuck yanked the door out of the way and wandered inside. L.I.N. sighed and collapsed in his arms. Brandy, Phillips, and Icarus followed them to the laboratory. Chuck used the first door on the right. Brandy laid L.I.N.’s wedges beside the door on her way past.

Chuck flipped on the lights. He carried L.I.N. to a rolling hospital bed at the other side of the room. It was tucked into the northwest corner. It had a memory foam mattress. Chuck laid L.I.N. on the mattress and plopped her head on a pillow at the other end. He straightened her legs and slid his fingers through her shiny, sapphire locks. There was a rolling cart between the bed and the wall. There was an L.C.D. monitor on top. Chuck turned it on and grabbed a video cable. He looked into L.I.N.’s eyes and held out his hand. L.I.N. laid her hand in his. Her thumb folded in half. A VGA port was hiding below the tip. Chuck attached the monitor to L.I.N.’s video port and looked at the screen. L.I.N.’s video feed consisted of a desktop and a taskbar. The desktop background was an image of what she was seeing.

“Okay, now open a terminal.”

L.I.N. sighed. “Chuck, it won’t work. I’m telling you.” Chuck exhaled through his nostrils. He stared between L.I.N.’s big, green eyes.

“Why not?”

L.I.N. shrugged her right shoulder. “I kept... turning myself off.” She smiled a little. “Hal changed my source code a little so I couldn’t do that anymore.” She pressed her lips together. “I have no idea how any of that stuff works. But, I *do* know that I can’t shut myself

off anymore.”

Chuck nodded. “Try it.” He looked at the screen. “Use the ‘down’ command.” L.I.N. rolled her eyes. A black mouse arrow with a white border zipped across the screen. It clicked an icon on the taskbar, and a terminal opened. The word “down” appeared in the terminal. It printed beside a group of characters near the upper, left corner. The characters spelled “smash,” followed by a greater than symbol. A white rectangle stopped at the end of the word “down.” It was a cursor. It just sat there. Chuck looked at L.I.N. “Well?”

L.I.N. exhaled a painful, shaky breath. “That’s it.”

Chuck shrugged. “*What’s it?*” He looked at the screen. “Press ‘return’.” L.I.N.’s eyes crinkled. She issued a return command. The letter “w” disappeared from the word “down.” Then, the cursor disappeared. A message printed below that. It read, “don is not in the path.” The word “smash” appeared below that, followed by a greater than character. Chuck looked at L.I.N. “Do that again.” L.I.N. entered “down” into the terminal and issued a return command. The “w” disappeared from down, and the terminal returned the same error message. Chuck looked into L.I.N.’s eyes. L.I.N. licked her lips.

“I never know what it’s going to do next. Sometimes, characters will disappear. Sometimes, the letters scramble.” She tilted her head. “Sometimes, the terminal will just close.”

Chuck stared at the monitor. “It’s done the same thing twice in a row.”

L.I.N. nodded. “Yeah, I noticed that.” She shook her head. “I never know *what* it’s going to do.”

“Try ‘down’ with two ‘w’s,” Icarus suggested. L.I.N. sighed. She typed “dowwn” and gave a return command. The cursor disappeared. A message appeared below that. It read, “dowwn is not in the path.” L.I.N. looked at Icarus.

“Try d-o-o-w-n,” Brandy proposed. L.I.N. tried to snicker. Her laughter was weak and unenthusiastic. She groaned and clutched her shoulder. Chuck patted her arm.

“Easy, L.I.N...” He grabbed a hold of her hand and squeezed. “Take it easy.” L.I.N. began gasping for breath. She looked up and shook her head.

“It-It’s not going to work, guys. I’m telling you.”

“Try the ‘kill’ command,” Chuck suggested. L.I.N. sighed. She typed “kill lin” into the terminal. She issued a return command. The “l”s swapped. The command became “kil llin.” A message printed below. It read “kil is not in the path.” Chuck rolled his eyes. L.I.N. looked up.

“Told you.”

Officer Phillips tapped her chin. “Isn’t there some *other* kind of keyboard we could use?” Chuck faced her. Phillips held up her index finger. “Before there were USB keyboards, there was... something else.” She squinted. “Right?”

“P-S-2,” Chuck and Icarus said, simultaneously.

“C-MOS protocols,” Chuck added. “P-S-2 has to be plugged in when the computer starts. Otherwise, it won’t work.”

Phillips dropped her hand and exhaled an angry breath. “Really?”

Chuck rolled his eyes. “Annoying, isn’t it?”

Brandy slid her lips to the side of her face. “And, before P-S-2?”

“Serial,” Chuck replied. He looked L.I.N. over. “But, you don’t have one of those, do you?” L.I.N. shook her head. Chuck shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. They’re the same as P-S-2. You have to have them plugged in when the computer starts.”

“Can’t you plug one in and restart her?” Brandy inquired.

“Of course you can,” Chuck replied. He looked into Brandy’s dark brown eyes. “But,

you have to use the ‘down’ command to restart her.”

Brandy looked at the floor. “Oh.” Chuck looked at L.I.N. He bobbed his head. L.I.N. entered “down --restart” into the terminal. “o” and “n” disappeared from the word “down.” A message appeared below that. It read “dw is not in the path. L.I.N. looked at Chuck. Chuck licked his lips.

“Move your hand,” he remarked. L.I.N. took her fingers off the hole in her left shoulder and rolled onto her right side. She turned her head and stared into Chuck’s eyes.

“Don’t short me out.”

Chuck smirked. “Don’t worry.” He looked over his shoulder and held out his hand. Icarus laid L.I.N.’s arm across Chuck’s palm. There was another rolling cart near the head of the hospital bed. A wire basket was lying on top. There were a couple of scalpels in the basket among other things. Chuck snagged one and looked into L.I.N.’s eyes. He motioned towards the other side of the room with his head. “Don’t watch.” L.I.N. looked away and pinched her eyes shut. Chuck traced the tip of her left thumb with the scalpel. A little blood trickled out. Chuck dug through a thin layer of flesh. Then, he twisted the tip of L.I.N.’s thumb and popped it off. L.I.N.’s USB port was hiding underneath. Chuck returned the scalpel to the wire bin. He snagged a pair of needle nose pliers, opened them, and laid the tips of the pliers against the USB port. He grabbed the edge of the connector and pulled. The connector slid out, followed by four, long, thin wires. The wires were the length of L.I.N.’s arm. One was white. One was green. One was red. And, one was black.

Chuck looked the wires over and nodded. He laid L.I.N.’s left arm behind her and licked his lips. He found corresponding wires sticking out of L.I.N.’s shoulder. They were sticking out less than an inch. Chuck slid his lips to the side of his face. He looked at Icarus.

“Find me a pair of splicing pliers.” Icarus nodded. He attached his eyeball clips and tapped the cuffs of his sleeves. He wandered across the room. There were wire shelves in the opposite corner. Rows of grey, plastic bins rested on top. Icarus found one labeled “wiring.” He found a pair of pliers and a handful of wire connectors. He returned to the hospital bed and handed them to Chuck. Chuck nodded. “Thanks, Icky.”

Icky snapped his fingers and pointed between Chuck’s eyes. “Enh!” Chuck laid the connectors and L.I.N.’s USB port next to the wire bin. He grabbed a hold of a green wire sticking out of L.I.N.’s left side. There was a row of holes along the bottom of the splicing pliers. They were used for stripping wires. Chuck fit one of the holes around the green wire and curled his fingers around the handles. He stopped. He narrowed his eyes and looked across the room. He stared at Hal’s servers.

“Secure shell,” he remarked.

Brandy squinted. “Huh?”

L.I.N. pinched her eyes shut and dropped her forehead in her palm. “Oh! Duh.” Chuck laid the splicing pliers next to the wire bin. He wandered across the room and sat at the server desk. Icarus scratched the back of his head as Chuck passed.

“Yeah, I should’ve thought of that.”

Phillips shrugged. “I don’t even know what you guys are talking about.” Chuck turned on a big, bulky monitor with a twenty inch screen. He dragged a white keyboard with white and grey buttons across the desk and looked over his shoulder.

“What’s your username?”

“lin,” L.I.N. replied. “All lowercase.”

Chuck nodded. “Are you tapped into the wireless?”



L.I.N. nodded. “One ninety-two, one, one, twelve.” Chuck faced the monitor. It had a black screen with white text. The text read “smash” followed by a greater than symbol and a cursor. Chuck typed “sshell lin@192.1.1.12” and pressed return. A prompt printed below what Chuck typed. It read, “Password: .” Chuck looked over his shoulder.

“Password,” he remarked.

“p-4-5-5,” L.I.N. began.

Chuck typed “p455.” “w-0-r-d?” he inquired.

“Yeah,” L.I.N. replied. Chuck finished typing L.I.N.’s password and pressed return.

“smash” printed followed by a greater than symbol and a cursor. Chuck smirked.

“Finally.” He typed “down” and looked over his shoulder. “I’ll see you in a little while,” he remarked.

L.I.N. forced a smile. “Good-bye, Chuck.” Chuck pressed enter. A blank line printed. It was replaced with a message. It read, “Connection to ‘lin@192.1.1.12’ lost.” Below that, “smash” printed followed by a greater than character and a cursor. Chuck turned off the monitor and looked over his shoulder. L.I.N. stared back. She took a deep breath and exhaled through her nose. The monitor attached to her thumb went black. L.I.N. licked her lips and looked around. After five seconds, she went limp. Her eyes rolled back and her eyelids flopped down. The tip of her right pinkie flipped back. An RJ45 port was hiding underneath. Chuck hopped up. He slipped off his brown, corduroy jacket and laid it over the back of his chair. It was the leather chair with armrests and a high back. Chuck looked across the room.

“You guys should get out of here.” He wore a black, button up shirt with long sleeves below his jacket. He rolled up his sleeves and looked around. “Unless you want to see L.I.N. naked.” Icarus took off his alligator clips and laid them inside his hood. He tapped the power

buttons on the sleeves of his jacket. Phillips looked at him.

“Let’s get out of here for a minute, Icarus.” She pressed her lips together. “I need to get back to the station. Report to the captain.” Icarus nodded. He and Phillips headed for the door.

“There’s a keypad near the gate,” Chuck told them. “The code is one forty-four, two thirty-three.” Phillips nodded. She opened the door and wandered out. Icarus stopped next to Chuck. He looked into his eyes. It made Chuck’s hair stand on end.

“You have any problems, Chuck...”

Chuck nodded. “I’ll give you guys a call.”

Icarus grabbed a hold of Chuck’s arm. “Hal’s behind this,” he added. He squeezed Chuck’s arm like a vice. Chuck scrunched up his face. “Hal Damon.”

Chuck licked his lips. “Yes, Icky. I know.”

Icarus’ right eye popped open. “*I’m serious!*” he snarled. He shook Chuck’s arm. Chuck looked down. He grabbed a hold of Icarus’ fingers. “*Hey!*” Icarus rasped. Chuck pried at his fingers. “*Look at me!*” Chuck exhaled an angry breath. He gazed into Icarus’ freakish eyes. Icarus pointed between his eyes. “Look right here.” Chuck locked his eyes on the spot between Icarus’ narrow, sapphire, left eye and his poppy, caramel, right eye. “I don’t know exactly what Hal’s intentions were with this project.” He pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. “But whatever it was, it’s something big.”

Chuck tilted his head. “You think I haven’t figured that out, Icky? Seriously?”

Icarus patted Chuck’s chest. “*Chuck!*” he growled. Chuck went limp and sighed. Icarus exhaled through his nostrils. “The fate of the world is at stake.” He stared into Chuck’s eyes and nodded. “Tell me you understand that, Chuck.”

Chuck swallowed. “You think so?”

Icarus' long, thin lips twisted into a hideous grin. "I know Hal. He doesn't waste time with small stuff. Something's going to happen." He pressed his lips together. "Soon." He tapped Chuck's chest with the tip of his index finger. "And, you and her..." He pointed at L.I.N. with his thumb. "You're both at the center of it."

Chuck laid his fingers on Icarus'. "What are you trying to say?"

Icarus' hand went limp and dropped at his side. "*L.I.N. is necessary...*" he whispered. He looked over his shoulder. Brandy was staring at them. Her eyebrows fell at the sides. Her lips were sad and droopy. Icarus faced Chuck. "Don't screw this up." He backed away and sighed. "And, call me... if you have *any* problems." He pointed between Chuck's eyes. "You got me?"

Chuck bobbed his head. "Sure, Icarus." He smiled a little. "But don't worry, okay? She's in good hands." Icarus exhaled a long breath through his nostrils. His lips curled into a confident smile. Phillips laid her palm on Icarus' shoulder.

"Are we going, or what?" she inquired. Icarus whirled around and took her hand. They wandered across the living area and left. Chuck sighed. He looked across the room. Brandy folded her arms over her chest and sighed.

"I'm staying. I wanna help." She scrunched up her face. "How can I help? What do you need me to do?" Chuck smiled. He wandered across the room and stood next to the wire shelves. He spotted a bin labeled "dermis." There were two white, plastic bottles inside. They were the size of travel shampoo bottles. They had plastic caps that flipped open. Chuck picked them up and showed them to Brandy. He motioned towards a door across the room. It was between L.I.N.'s bed and a bookshelf on the opposite wall.

"There should be more of these in the back room," he told her. "I remember L.I.N.

telling me that.”

Brandy nodded. “What are those?”

Chuck wandered towards the hospital bed. “It’s nanotechnology,” he explained. “That’s what her skin is made of.” He stood beside L.I.N. He slid his fingers through her long, shiny, blue hair. “And, her hair.” He looked into Brandy’s eyes. “And, some other things.” Brandy nodded. She turned around, opened the door, and wandered inside. There was a light switch beside the door. She flipped it on and looked around. There were two foldout tables. They were littered with beakers, flasks, and test tubes. There were a couple of microscopes and some slides. There were a couple of Bunsen burners. There were more books as well. The wall at the other end of the room was tiled with chalkboards. The chalkboards were covered with chemistry formulas. Brandy was somewhat familiar with chemistry. But, she’d never seen anything like what was on Hal’s chalkboards. She looked at the floor. It was covered with white tiles like the ones in the server room. The walls were trimmed with similar slats of wood.

There was a giant refrigerator along the right wall. There was also a plastic replica of a human skeleton. The walls were lined with rows of wire shelves. Brandy couldn’t take it all in. There was stuff everywhere. There were things in jars. There were plants and U.V. lamps. There were three solved puzzle cubes of various sizes. One shelf had a stack of chess sets. Brandy counted nine of them. She was drawn towards the refrigerator. It was stainless steel. It had two vertical doors. Brandy wandered across the room and opened the door on the right. It was filled with bottles like the one Chuck showed her. She slid her lips to the side of her face. She looked towards the server room.

“How many do you need, Chuck?”

*“No idea,”* Chuck replied. *“As many as you can grab.”* Brandy spotted something

beside the door. She froze. She stood absolutely still and looked it over. She wanted to be sure she was seeing what she thought she was seeing.

Chuck unbuttoned L.I.N.'s blouse. That is, he unbuttoned what was left of it. It was ripped to shreds and covered in blood. It made him sick. Brandy stumbled out behind him. Chuck looked over his shoulder. Brandy had two handfuls of white bottles. Her eyes were squinty and confused. She pointed inside the doorway.

"Th-There's another robot in here," she remarked.

Chuck narrowed his eyes. "Really?" Brandy nodded. Chuck turned around and faced her. "Like L.I.N.?"

Brandy stepped aside. "No. This one's really crappy." She wandered up to the hospital bed. She laid the bottles beside the wire bin. "And, it's made of metal."

Chuck furrowed his brow. "Huh. I didn't know anything about that." He wandered towards the doorway. "I've never been in there before."

Brandy sighed, impatiently. "Chuck, I'm confused about you and Icky..." She pressed her lips together. "I mean, about what you guys were talking about. Who's Hal? Is this *his* house?"

Chuck smiled and peeked inside the back room. "It's kind of complicated." He spotted the other android. It sat against the wall beside the door. It was made of shiny brass. It had two white, ball shaped webcams for eyes. It had no mouth. Rather, there was a small, brass square above the android's chin. It had five, tiny holes in it. It resembled a speaker for a telephone receiver. The android's legs were folded like a pretzel. Its head was slumped over. Chuck narrowed his eyes. He spotted a USB port on the side of the robot's skull. He slid his lips to the side of his face. "Interesting." Chuck flicked off the lights and shut the door. He looked at

Brandy. “I have no idea where that came from. L.I.N. never mentioned it.”

Brandy nodded. “So, what do you need me to do first, boss?”

Chuck licked his lips. “Take off her shirt.”

Brandy turned around. “Aw...” she moaned. She looked at Chuck over her shoulder. “Her little blouse with the flowers...” Her eyebrows drooped at the edges. “It got ruined. It was so cute, too.”

Chuck smiled. “I know.” He shrugged. “We’ll take her shopping, tomorrow. How’s that sound?”

Brandy grinned. “Okay. Sounds great.”

It was getting late. It was getting dark. The sky was getting cloudy. The air was getting thick. Dr. Powell was at the corner of 21st and Helga. She was sitting in her car, a turquoise compact. She wore a white trench coat, a black turtleneck, black slacks with white stripes, black boots, and a scarf with black and white stripes. Her lips were puffy and crimson. Her shiny, black hair was tucked into a bun. She was staring at a manhole in the middle of the street. She was growing less and less patient by the minute. A shiny, steel watch was clasped around her wrist. It had a round, blue face bordered by twelve tiny dots. Dr. Powell shook her watch towards her hand and looked it over. It was just after seven. Dr. Powell narrowed her eyes. Her eyebrows fell in the middle. She smashed her teeth together and slid them back and forth. Her eyes darted about. She pounded her fist against the steering wheel.

“Where the hell is he?!” she snarled. She punched a knob on her radio. Bach began drifting out of the car’s speakers. Dr. Powell eased back and sighed. She tucked her hand into her coat pocket. She took out a vial of nitroglycerin. She grasped the tip of the vial between her thumb and index finger and dangled it in front of her eyes. She sloshed it back and forth.

*“Should’ve been here a long time ago,”* she whispered. She shook her head. *“He’s not gonna make it much longer.”* She held the vial upright and rotated it. She read a row of tall, black letters. They were printed along a white label wrapped around the middle. Dr. Powell’s bottom lip began to tremble. Her eyebrows squashed towards the outer corners of her eyes. Tufts of hot, oily tears bobbed along the rims of her lower eyelids. *“Lee...”*

A big, fat fist pounded Dr. Powell’s passenger window. She gasped and looked across the passenger’s seat. Lee was standing outside, shivering. His face and the collar of his shirt were soaked with sweat. Thick rivers of blood gushed out of his nostrils and dribbled down his chin. Blood leaked from his ears and trickled down his neck. He panted like a dog. Dr. Powell’s forehead strained. Her face became stern. She bashed a button on her door and exhaled a fiery breath. Lee’s fingers jiggled like towers of gelatin cubes. He wriggled them under Dr. Powell’s passenger door handle and yanked as best he could. He slithered into Dr. Powell’s passenger seat and eased the door shut. He scrunched up his face and gasped for breath. Dr. Powell smacked him over the back of the head.

“What the fuck are you thinking, Lee?!” Lee’s head still throbbed from Chuck smacking him with a ball bat. “I told you to take the tunnel! How hard is that for you to understand? What are you, fuckin’ retarded?” She smacked Lee over the head again. “Huh?!” Lee leaned forward and clutched the back of his skull. Streams of warm blood trickled down his icy fingers. Dr. Powell threw her hands out at her sides. “Answer me!” Lee cuddled his fingers under his arms. He leaned forward and shook like a leaf.

“C-Can you give me some nitro?” He looked in Dr. Powell’s eyes. “P-Please?” Dr. Powell stared into Lee’s beady, blue eyes. His pupils were as big around as chocolate sandwich cookies.

“My God, you’re stupid.” She took a syringe out of her pocket and flipped off the cap. “Stupid, stupid, stupid...” She jabbed the syringe needle into the end of the vial and pulled back the plunger. She pointed at her glove box. Lee yanked it open and looked inside. It was filled with big, fat rubber bands. Lee ripped off his denim jacket and tossed it on the floor. He strapped a rubber band around his bicep and smacked his arm. A nice, fat vein appeared along the muscle. Dr. Powell stared into Lee’s face and shook her head. She slipped the needle into Lee’s vein and squashed the plunger flat. Then, she curled her finger inside the rubber band and popped it loose. Lee stared at the hood of Dr. Powell’s car and huffed like a gorilla. His breathing slowed over the course of a minute. His eyelids drooped. His lips and face sagged. He eased back and exhaled a long, shaky breath.

“God damn it!” Dr. Powell snarled. She tossed the syringe next to Lee’s jacket and reached into her pocket. She took out four capsules of fluoxetine and offered them to Lee. “Here.” Lee stared at Dr. Powell’s hand. He held out his palm and cleared his throat. Dr. Powell dropped the pills in his hand. There was a plastic bottle of diet cola in a cup holder between the seats. Dr. Powell offered it to Lee. Lee snagged it from her, popped the pills between his lips, and washed them down. “From now on, you do whatever I say.” Lee licked his lips and stared into space. Dr. Powell snatched the soda out of his hand. “Got it?!” She poked her pointer finger between Lee’s eyes. “Anything I tell you, you don’t question it. You just *do* it!” Lee sighed. He stared at the floor and nodded. Dr. Powell plopped the tip of her soda against her lips and tilted her head back. She returned the bottle to the cup holder. Then, she fired up the engine and drove away.



## Chapter 6: “H.A.L. Always Lies”

L.I.N. and Brandy were in their pajamas. Actually, Brandy was wearing a loaner pair from L.I.N. L.I.N. wore flannel pants that looked like an old quilt. They were made of varying sizes of maroon, olive, peacock, and violet squares. She also wore a black t-shirt with a network of white lines and capital letters. The pattern on her shirt was an atomic model for sucrose. Brandy wore flannel pants with alternating shades of blue lines and a white tank top. The girls sat on the soft, black, leather love seat in the living room. Brandy’s shoulder blades rested on the left arm of the love seat. L.I.N.’s rested on the right. They were painting each other’s toenails. There were seventeen bottles of nail polish on the coffee table. They all belonged to L.I.N. Brandy painted L.I.N.’s toenails royal purple. L.I.N. painted each of Brandy’s a different color. She was on the fourth toe of Brandy’s right foot. She painted it neon green. Brandy’s big toenail was glittery and silver. Her second toenail was turquoise. Her third toenail was yellow. Brandy looked across the love seat. She returned her gaze to L.I.N.’s foot and shook her head.

“You’re silly.” L.I.N. blew on Brandy’s nail. She squinted and looked up.

“Is it... too much?” Brandy giggled. She dropped a tiny brush in the bottle of royal purple polish she was using. She set the bottle on the coffee table. She patted L.I.N.’s foot and looked into her eyes.

“I’m just so glad you can still paint my nails.” She shrugged. “I mean, *look* at you. It’s like nothing even happened.” L.I.N. painted Brandy’s right, pinkie toe neon orange. She looked up.

“I still remember what happened.” She dropped a little brush in the neon orange nail polish bottle. She returned the bottle to the coffee table. “It sucked. It hurt so freakin’ bad!”

Brandy tilted her head. “So, you actually *feel* pain?”

L.I.N. smiled a little. “Well, now that’s a funny question.”

Brandy slid her lips to the side of her face. “I’m just... trying to understand how that would work.”

L.I.N. nodded. “Chuck explained it to me a little.”

Brandy narrowed her eyes. “But, Chuck didn’t actually build you, right? Hal built you.”

“Right,” L.I.N. replied. “But, Chuck...” L.I.N. grinned. “Chuck’s a wonderful programmer. He understands how all that stuff works.” She shrugged. “Even though he didn’t actually build me.”

Brandy nodded. “Okay.” L.I.N. looked at Brandy’s foot. She snagged the skin next to her big toe and twisted it. Brandy fidgeted. “Ow!” She looked at L.I.N. and smirked. “L.I.N.! What the hell?”

L.I.N. fought back a smile. “See? That hurt, right?”

Brandy’s eyebrows drooped in the middle. “Yeah!” She shrugged. “You know, just a little bit.”

L.I.N. narrowed her eyes. “Not a lot though, right? Just a little?”

Brandy exhaled a quick breath. “Yeah.”

L.I.N. nodded. “Your skin sensed a small amount of pain. Then, it sent a message to your brain. Your brain told you there was pain in your skin, where it was, and how much it hurt. After that, you had an appropriate reaction.” Brandy smiled. She licked her lips and nodded. L.I.N. slid her lips to the side of her face. “Pinch *my* foot.”

Brandy smacked her lips. “I don’t want to pinch your foot. It will hurt you.”

L.I.N. shrugged. “Just a little. Just to show how this works.” Brandy pressed her lips together. She snagged a hold of a similar hunk of flesh on L.I.N.’s instep. She dug in with her

fingernails and twisted. L.I.N. jumped. “Ow!” Brandy giggled. L.I.N. exhaled a quick breath. “You see? *My* skin is made of nanotechnology.” She squinted. “Tiny machines?” Brandy nodded. “Well, the little machines sensed a small amount of pain. So, they sent a message to my software.” She gritted her teeth. “More specifically... the kernel?” She studied Brandy’s reaction. “You understand what I mean by that? The kernel?”

Brandy shook her head. “Not at all.” She folded her arms over her chest. “What are you talking about?”

L.I.N. snickered. “It... doesn’t really matter, okay? The machines sent a message to my kernel. The kernel told me there was pain in my skin, where it was, and how much it hurt. Then, I had an appropriate reaction.” She shrugged. “Same as you.”

Brandy sighed. “But... did it hurt, or not?”

L.I.N. shrugged. “Did it hurt, or not?”

Brandy scrunched up her face. “What? No, I’m asking *you!*”

L.I.N. licked her lips. “And, I’m asking *you*. Did it hurt, or not?”

“When you pinched my foot?” L.I.N. nodded. Brandy raised her eyebrows. “Yes, L.I.N. It hurt.”

L.I.N. shrugged. “But, how do you know?”

Brandy parted her lips. “Well...” She narrowed her eyes. “Well, you just *told* me how I know. My skin told my brain that it hurt.”

“Right,” L.I.N. replied. “Same as me.”

Brandy pressed her lips together. “Okay...” She shook her head. “I still don’t understand.”

L.I.N. smiled. “Sorry. That’s the best I can explain it.”

Brandy exhaled through her nostrils. “I wanna know about this ‘kernel’ thing. What’s that exactly?”

L.I.N. shook her head. “Oh, no, no, no... You’re going to have to get Chuck to explain that.”

Brandy scrunched up her face. “You mean... you don’t know?”

L.I.N. looked at the tops of her eye sockets and shrugged up her shoulders. “Well... kind of.”

Brandy smiled. “But, you’re a computer.”

L.I.N. held up her index finger. “No, *I’m* a program.” She laid her palms on her chest. “Me? L.I.N.? *I’m* just a program.” She leaned in. “A binary file. Do you understand?”

Brandy’s eyebrows fell at the edges. She shook her head. L.I.N. sighed. “Well, ask Chuck about it. He can explain it a lot better than I can. But you see, my program...” She squinted. “The ‘L.I.N.’ program... it’s like a person. A person has bones inside their body. But, a person isn’t born knowing what bones are.” Brandy’s lips parted. She leaned back and nodded. “See, I have to learn new things just like anybody. I’ve never been taught how to program or how a computer works. I only know some of the things that Hal taught me.”

“I see,” Brandy remarked.

L.I.N. tilted her head. “Well... some of the things I know are things that I was born knowing.” She licked her lips. “Like, Hal gave me the ability to speak, for example. He put all that in there, himself.” Brandy nodded. “And, I was born knowing how to eat with a fork and a spoon and a knife. And, I was born knowing how to walk and how to sweep a floor...” L.I.N. held up her index finger. “How to fly a kite... Hal put that in later, I remember.” She showed Brandy her palms. “Like, he typed up a text file and added that to my knowledge later on? You

understand what I mean?”

“I think so,” Brandy replied.

L.I.N. nodded. “He just never got around to teaching me how to program or anything like that.” Brandy looked over the back of the love seat. She was staring at the laboratory. The door was closed. Brandy smiled. She faced L.I.N.

“There’s... another robot in the lab.”

L.I.N. tilted her head. “You mean H.A.L.?”

Brandy scoffed. “I thought Hal was a man.”

L.I.N. grinned. “No, not *Hal*.” She licked her lips. “H.A.L. Always Lies.”

“Ah,” Brandy replied. “Hal built another robot first, I take it? Before he built you?”

“Yes,” L.I.N. explained. “H.A.L. was a prototype. Hal said that building it taught him a lot.” L.I.N. scrunched up her nose. “The... The *real* Hal. Not the...” L.I.N. rolled her eyes. “That’s actually really confusing.”

Brandy nodded. “Does it work?”

“He used to,” L.I.N. replied. “But, he hasn’t been working for a long time. I’ve tried to turn him on before. You’re supposed to poke his eyeball.” Brandy giggled. “But, I never could get him to fire up.”

Brandy motioned towards the laboratory with her head. “Can we go try?”

L.I.N. shrugged. “Okay.” Brandy hopped up and offered her hands. L.I.N. curled her fingers around Brandy’s, and Brandy tugged her to her feet.

Chuck was sitting at the server table. He was staring at a twenty-six inch monitor. A white keyboard with white and grey buttons lay between his arms. Seven empty coffee mugs were scattered between the monitor and the keyboard. Bach was playing in the background.

Chuck sat and stared. He'd translated the entire file Icarus gave him into hexadecimal. There was now a row of hex values below each row of binary. It still made no sense. Chuck blew a breath between his lips. He snagged the closest coffee mug, pressed it against his lips, and tilted his head back. The mug was empty. Chuck rolled his eyes. He slammed the empty mug on the table and sighed. The door opened. Brandy whizzed by.

"Hi, Chuck," she remarked.

"Hey, Brandy," Chuck mumbled. L.I.N. was right behind her.

"Hi, Chuck," she remarked.

"Hey, L.I.N.," Chuck mumbled. L.I.N. stopped. She laid her chin on Chuck's shoulder and scanned the screen. Chuck caught a whiff of perfume. It made him smile a little.

"Figure that out yet?" L.I.N. inquired.

"Nope," Chuck replied. L.I.N. shrugged. She scampered across the server room and joined Brandy in the laboratory. Chuck stared at the coffee mug he'd slammed on the table. He knew he needed to do something with it. But, he couldn't decide what. Maybe he couldn't remember. He squinted and stared at the tops of his eye sockets. He tried to think that through. But, his brain felt like it was filled with mud. Chuck inhaled. He smelled perfume again. He stared into space and smiled. He laid his nose on his shoulder, closed his eyes, and inhaled. L.I.N. left a little perfume on his shirt. It was the sweetest scent in the whole world. It was light and airy. A little of this, a little of that... Chuck closed the text file. Then, he deleted it. It wasn't the only copy. The original was still on the flash drive Icarus gave him. Chuck hadn't touched it. Chuck generated the file with the hexadecimal using a program he wrote. He could recreate it later if he felt the need. He didn't figure he would. He turned off the monitor and wandered across the laboratory. L.I.N. was kneeling next to H.A.L. Brandy stood behind her,

watching. She looked up. L.I.N. poked H.A.L.'s left eyeball. It wasn't really an eyeball. It was a webcam. It pushed in and clicked. Nothing happened.

"Huh," Brandy remarked. She plopped her hands on her hips. L.I.N. looked over her shoulder.

"See? I don't understand." She looked at Chuck. Chuck shrugged.

"Does it have power?"

L.I.N. looked at H.A.L. "There's a plug." She opened a tiny panel on H.A.L.'s thigh with her thumbnail. There was a 110 adapter inside. Chuck looked at the wall. There was an outlet next to H.A.L. "I've plugged him in before," L.I.N. explained. She snagged a hold of the adapter and dragged it out of H.A.L.'s leg. A flat, black wire came out with it. L.I.N. plugged the adapter into the wall. "But, he still doesn't work." L.I.N. poked H.A.L.'s eyeball. It pressed in and clicked. But, nothing happened.

"Hmm," Chuck mused. He straddled his chin with his thumb and forefinger.

"Something's missing."

Brandy faced him. "Like what?"

Chuck shrugged. "I don't know." He knelt beside L.I.N. and looked the android over. It was shiny and brass. It looked like a robotic saxophone. Chuck smiled and shook his head. "I had an old computer one time that wouldn't turn on unless it had a hard drive plugged in." Chuck mashed H.A.L.'s left eye into his skull. Nothing happened. Chuck mashed it three more times. Brandy slid her hair out of her face. It was sloppy and curled at the ends. Brandy rolled her eyes and smiled.

"Can you open him up and see if there's one in there?"

"Probably," Chuck replied. He laid his fingers on the side of H.A.L.'s head. His

fingertips brushed along the edges of a USB port. Chuck froze. The hair on the back of his neck stood up. He heard hummingbirds in his ears. Brandy's glasses dangled at the tip of her nose. She shoved them against her face and folded her arms over her chest.

“How... hard would that be?” she inquired.

Chuck licked his lips. “Actually...” He turned, hopped up, and dashed into the server room. Brandy looked at L.I.N. L.I.N. looked over her shoulder. She threw her hands out at her sides and narrowed her eyes. Chuck returned and skidded to a stop. He almost ran Brandy over. Brandy backed away and showed Chuck her palms. Chuck showed L.I.N. the flash stick Icarus gave her. L.I.N. looked it over.

“What?” Chuck swallowed. He knelt next to L.I.N., popped the top off the flash drive, and slipped it into the side of H.A.L.'s slick, shiny head. L.I.N. stared at the little, red, flash stick Icarus gave her. It was sticking out of H.A.L.'s scalp. L.I.N. narrowed her eyes.

“Chuck... you've had a rough day.” She looked at Brandy. “We *all* have.” Chuck wrapped his fingers around L.I.N.'s. He laid her palm on H.A.L.'s eyeball and pushed. The brass speaker at the bottom of H.A.L.'s face beeped. L.I.N.'s eyes popped open. She gasped. She jerked her hand away and curled it beside her shoulder. She looked at Chuck. “What did you just do?” Chuck snatched L.I.N.'s hand, stood up, and dragged her away. He slipped his fingers between hers and stopped. L.I.N. exhaled a shaky sigh. She laid her cheek against Chuck's arm and watched. Brandy stood next to L.I.N. She was grinning from ear to ear.

“Now, what's going to happen?” she inquired. H.A.L.'s eyeballs bobbed around. They angled up and focused on Chuck, L.I.N., and Brandy. A confident, satisfied sigh shot out of H.A.L.'s speaker mouth.

“Well, now...” the android remarked. He flopped his arms around and looked them over.



He looked up. “This is interesting.” H.A.L. laid his palms on the floor and shoved himself to his feet. He looked at L.I.N. “So, this is what it’s like to be an android.” He tilted his head. “I always wondered.” L.I.N. slowly smiled. H.A.L. didn’t seem like H.A.L. He seemed like... someone else. He looked at Chuck. “Hi, Chuck,” he remarked. He looked at Brandy. “Brandy.” He folded his arms over his chest. They clanked and stacked together. “Wasn’t expecting to see you guys so soon.”

Chuck gritted his teeth. “Um... what are you talking about?” He squinted. “Who are you?”

The android looked him in the eyes. “I’m Hal Damon.” He tilted his head. “I created L.I.N. Isn’t Necessary.” He stared at Chuck and L.I.N.’s fingers. They were folded like a pretzel. He tried to smile. But, he had no mouth. It was slightly annoying. He looked up. “I see you two have gotten acquainted.” He looked at L.I.N. “I figured you might.”

Brandy looked at L.I.N. “L.I.N., what is going *on*?”

L.I.N. faced her little buddy. “I have no idea.”