

"My Name is L.I.N."

By Michael Atkins

## Chapter 1: "Things Change"

Dr. Merle's office was rather peculiar. The floor was covered with slick slats of polished pine. A large, oblong, area rug lay across the center of the room. It was composed of silky rings of black, white, tan, and grey. The rug was a blanket of yarn. It was thick and squishy. A coffee table lay across the center of the rug. It had a steel frame and a glass surface. The coffee table's surface was littered with random objects. There were shiny bar magnets, wooden puzzles, a Newton's cradle, a sketchbook, and a box of colored pencils. There were other items as well.

Three chairs and a long couch surrounded the coffee table. The couch resided near the north end of the rug. It was draped with red corduroy. The cushions were thick and fluffy. A small, round chair with no back lay on the west side of the rug. It was trimmed with slick, blue vinyl. There was a fat, blue button in the middle of the seat. A shiny, leather chair sat across from the couch. It was chocolate brown. The sitting surface was tight and bumpy. It was dotted with shiny, brass buttons. The chair had a high back and elegant arm rests. The arm rests had brass knobs at the ends. Four thick, wooden legs kept the base of the chair from scratching the floor. A similar chair resided on the east side of the rug. It was identical, except it was trimmed with black leather instead of brown.

Dr. Merle was going bald. Tufts of black hair surrounded his slick, shiny scalp. A neatly trimmed goatee surrounded his lips. Dr. Merle had dark, shiny eyes. A pair of glasses with large lenses lay across his eyes. The frames of his glasses were made of thin, steel rods. Dr. Merle's lenses were perfectly round. He wore a white, button up shirt with thin, blue stripes. His shirt had short sleeves. A creamy, yellow tie with diagonal, red bands lay across the buttons of his shirt. Dr. Merle wore tan khakis and black loafers. A row of leather frills lay across the tongues of his shoes. The necks of black socks were sandwiched between the cuffs of his khakis and the

tops of his shoes. A notebook lay across Dr. Merle's lap. It had a thick, cardboard base and bright yellow pages. The pages were decorated with faint, blue lines. Pairs of pink lines marked the margins. The tops of the pages were bound with a white strip of paper. It was stapled around the pages and the sheet of cardboard across the back of the book.

Dr. Merle sat in the brown chair. That's where he always sat. He stared at the red, corduroy couch on the other side of the coffee table. It was very inviting. Most of Dr. Merle's patients walked in, plopped down on the red couch, and made themselves at home. Today, the couch was empty. Dr. Merle looked to his right. Brandy was sitting in the black, leather chair. Dr. Merle's patients rarely sat in *that* chair. Dr. Merle used it as a prop. If someone sat in it, Dr. Merle assumed they felt they were on the same level *he* was. Typically, Dr. Merle checked a patient for narcissism or antisocial personality disorder when they sat in the black chair. But this time, he smiled. He remembered Brandy telling him she worked in a pharmacy. She kind of *was* on the same level as Dr. Merle. Also, Brandy was kind of timid. She wasn't the kind to walk into a strange place and feel like she was right at home. Stretching out on the couch didn't fit her personality.

A blue pen with a clear, plastic body dangled from the tips of Dr. Merle's fingers. He laid the end of the pen against the top page of his notebook. He wrote the word "shyness" on the top line of the page. Brandy watched Dr. Merle out of the corner of her eye. Her hair subsisted in its typical state of stubborn dishevelment. It was a luscious shade of brown. It was parted down the middle. It draped to her shoulders. The top half was straight and neat. The bottom half of Brandy's hair separated into groups of wavy clusters on the way to Dr. Merle's office. Brandy's hair *always* did that when she finished getting ready for the day. It drove her nuts.

Brandy's eyes were dark and shiny like Dr. Merle's. They were decorated with subtle

brushes of tan colored eye shadow. Brandy's cheeks were speckled with faint hints of pink blush. Her lips were dabbed with light pink lipstick. That was Brandy's typical makeup job. A pair of glasses lay across the bridge of her nose. They had thin, steel frames. Brandy's lenses were thin and rectangular. There were no rims around them. Brandy wore an olive sweater, indigo jeans, and tan loafers. The soles of her loafers lay flat on the rug. Her arms were folded across her lap. She leaned forward and licked her lips.

She looked to her right. A window lay along the northern wall of Dr. Merle's office. It was eight feet by five feet. Thick, plastic mini blinds lay in front of the glass. They were black and white. They alternated. It was just after nine o'clock. The western sky was cornflower blue. Towards the east, it became aquamarine. The sky was half filled with towers of puffy, white clouds. Brandy could tell it was going to rain before the day was over. Dr. Merle's office window overlooked downtown New Jack City. Where there wasn't sky, there were clusters of high rise buildings. Brandy looked around the office. The walls were slathered with wall paper. The wall paper had a white background. It was blanketed with columns of perfectly round, black spirals. It made Brandy dizzy. A painting hung across from Brandy's chair. It was surrounded with a bronze border.

The painting was a picture of a woman. She wore a long, flowing gown. It was decorated with red sequins. The woman wore red, velvet gloves that wrapped her forearms. The woman had long, golden hair. It flowed down her neck and wrapped a pair of silky shoulders. The woman had no face. An area of flesh below her hair was shaded and colored like a face. But, it had no features. Rather, the lady held her face in her right hand. It looked like a mask. The woman held the mask about a foot in front of the flesh below her hair. She stood on a shiny, wooden, ballroom floor. She was surrounded by people. They stood around her, staring. The

face she held in her hand looked humiliated and terrified. Brandy fought back a grin. She looked at her chair. Then, she checked Dr. Merle's chair. She figured the painting was Dr. Merle's way of testing her humility. She assumed he thought people sitting in the black chair were narcissistic. After all, the black chair was much like Dr. Merle's. Brandy wondered if *he* was a bit narcissistic. She looked into his eyes. Dr. Merle stared back. He fought back a smile. Brandy narrowed her eyes.

"Would you rather I sat on the couch?" she inquired.

Dr. Merle pressed his lips together. "You just sit wherever you want to. Okay?" Brandy nodded. She looked at her lap and exhaled through her nostrils. Dr. Merle squinted. "Why are you here, Brandy?"

Brandy looked up. "I'm having trouble sleeping."

Dr. Merle nodded. "You just... can't sleep at all?" Brandy looked towards the middle of the room. She spotted a sketch book near her end of the coffee table. It was bound with a fat cylinder of steel spirals. A box of colored pencils lay beside the sketch book. Brandy picked up the sketch book. She held it in front of her eyes and stared at the top page. It was blank. Brandy glanced at Dr. Merle.

"I don't have any trouble falling asleep," she replied. She laid the sketchbook on her left thigh. Then, she rested her right ankle above that. "I, um..." She slid her lips to the side of her face. "I have these weird dreams." Brandy slipped her loafer off her right foot. She laid it in the sketch book's place on the coffee table. She took off her left shoe and laid it beside the other. Then, she grabbed the box of colored pencils. Dr. Merle looked at Brandy's shoes. Rows of leather frills lay across the tongues of her loafers. Brandy's shoes reminded him of the ones *he* wore. He smiled. He looked up.

"Are they recurring dreams?" he asked. Brandy folded her legs like a pretzel. She laid the sketch book across her lap and looked up. She licked her lips.

"I'm not sure." She opened the box of colored pencils and looked them over. She took out a pencil that was the color of custard. She laid the tip of the pencil against the top page of the sketch book and began scribbling. Dr. Merle curled his fingers in front of his lips and thought. He rested his elbow on the arm of his chair. He laid his cheek in his palm and watched Brandy coloring.

"Do you remember what *any* of the dreams are about?"

Brandy shrugged. "Usually just... stuff that happens to me during the day." She returned the custard pencil to the box. She took out a gold colored pencil. She began coloring on top of the patch of custard she started with. The image began to resemble a head of blonde hair. "You know. People I know, places I've been... That sort of stuff." She looked up. "But then, everything starts to get kind of scary. You know?"

Dr. Merle nodded. "And, you wake up?" Brandy nodded. She reunited the gold pencil with the others. Then, she took out a tan colored pencil. "And, you're still scared?"

Brandy looked up. "I'm terrified." She looked at her drawing and continued coloring. "I'll be like... shaking and looking over my shoulder." She looked up. "And, I usually get all sweaty and cold."

Dr. Merle raised his eyebrows. "Sounds like a night terror."

Brandy nodded. "Yeah." She licked her lips. She looked down and continued coloring. "I guess I just need... SSRIs?" She looked at Dr. Merle above the tops of her glasses. "You think?"

Dr. Merle threw his hands out at his sides. "Sure. That'll probably help." He pressed his

lips together. "I *would* like to know if there's more to it." He rested his cheek in his palm again. "I mean, maybe we could treat this without drugs. You know?" Brandy nodded. She returned the tan pencil to the box. She took out a pencil that was aquamarine and one that was black.

"Yeah. That would be great." Brandy gave her drawing a pair of glittery, aquamarine eyes. She dotted the middles with black. She returned the pencils to the box and found one that was crimson. She began slathering the page with crimson strokes.

"So, do you have a lot of stress in your life?" Dr. Merle inquired.

Brandy sighed. "Yes." She finished coloring a red scarf. It dangled from the lady's neck she was coloring. Brandy began adding a crimson, knee length skirt. Dr. Merle smiled.

"Nobody *ever* says 'yes' to that." Brandy continued coloring. She tilted her head.

"Well... I can't seem to find another job. So, I'm unable to take care of myself." Brandy left tiny diamonds of paper uncolored on the skirt she was drawing. "I'm living with a couple of friends. And, *they're* always running off to work on these weird..." She looked up. "Like... paranormal cases." Brandy crinkled her eyes. "Cases that the police have trouble solving."

Dr. Merle nodded. "And, you help with that. Right?" Brandy shrugged. She looked down and continued coloring.

"I mean, I try," she replied. "I don't know how much help I am."

Dr. Merle licked his lips. "You're not getting paid for this?" he inquired. Brandy looked up. Her eyeballs bobbed around. She squashed her neck with her shoulders and looked into Dr. Merle's eyes.

"No." Dr. Merle looked down. He scribbled something on his notepad. Brandy continued coloring. She returned the crimson pencil to the box. She took out the black pencil again. She held it below the fingertips of her right hand with her thumb. She colored with the

side of the pencil's tip. She used that technique to add relief to her drawing. There were a lot of places that Brandy wanted to leave white. They would need to be shaded with black. Dr. Merle looked up.

"Let's get back to your sleep disturbances." Brandy nodded. "Is there anything else that happens?"

Brandy tilted her head. "Well, yeah." She looked up. "I wake up with these nosebleeds."

Dr. Merle furrowed his brow. "Nosebleeds?"

"Yeah," Brandy replied. She squinted. "Well, I don't wake up with them." She looked at her drawing. "Um..." She continued scribbling. "I start seeing all these... math equations in my head." Brandy licked her lips. "I usually have to grab a few sheets of paper, so I can write it all down."

Dr. Merle raised his eyebrows. "Uh..."

Brandy looked up. "Then, I have the nosebleed." She looked away and thought. "Then, I usually go back to sleep." She shrugged. She looked down and continued coloring. "After that, I'm fine. I don't wake up until the next morning." Dr. Merle sat back in his chair. He folded his arms over his chest and thought. He took a breath.

"I remember talking to you on the phone." He pointed at Brandy with his pen. "You said this girl..."

Brandy looked up. "Daisy." She swallowed. "Daisy Hill."

"Right..." Dr. Merle groaned. "You said Daisy rammed something up your nose?"

Brandy sighed. She returned the black pencil to the box.

"Yes..." she whispered.



Dr. Merle smiled. "Is something wrong?"

Brandy looked up. "I heard they put her in a mental institution." Brandy licked her lips. "I like... scrambled her brains." She looked at her drawing. "Now she's stuck in a hospital, unable to keep her drool in her mouth." Dr. Merle saddened his eyes. He reached over the arm of his chair and patted Brandy's shoulder.

"*Brandy...*" he groaned. Brandy looked up. Dr. Merle licked his lips. "Whose fault was that?" Brandy sighed. She motioned towards her chest.

"Mine! *I* did that to her!"

Dr. Merle shook his head. "No, Brandy."

Brandy nodded, vehemently. "Yes!"

Dr. Merle looked at Brandy above the lenses of his glasses. "If she hadn't connected that..." Dr. Merle wiggled his pen around. "...thing... to your brain..." He crinkled his face. "Or, whatever. Then, this would've never happened."

Brandy hung her head from her shoulders. "Well... no."

Dr. Merle shrugged. "So, it's *her* fault." Brandy lowered her head. She closed her eyes and nodded. Dr. Merle licked his lips. "Anyway, I assume the nosebleeds have something to do with that." Brandy looked up. "Like, maybe there's some kind of scabbing or tearing that's going on in there." Dr. Merle threw his hands out at his sides. "I don't know. I mean, I'm not a medical doctor."

Brandy nodded. "Right."

Dr. Merle slid his nails along the bottom of his chin. "Maybe you should have that looked at by someone who *is* a medical doctor." He looked at his notepad and began writing. "As for the night terrors, we can treat that with fluoxetine." He looked up. "I think it might be a

good idea if you got away from these people for a little while, too."

Brandy blinked. "You mean... Chuck and L.I.N.?" She licked her lips. "And, Laura and Icky?"

Dr. Merle saddened his eyes. "Look they sound like good friends, Brandy. But, the fact of the matter is they're adding stress to your life." He shrugged. "And meanwhile, you're unable to get a job in your field of study because you're spending too much time working with *them*." He raised his eyebrows. "And... you're not even getting paid for it!" Brandy fought back a smile. She licked her lips.

"Um..." She threw her hands out at her sides. "I mean, I guess I never thought about it like that before."

"Well, you should!" Dr. Merle declared. He dropped his palms on his thighs. "You should at least *consider* that." He stared at the sketch book. He motioned towards Brandy's lap with his fingers. "You gonna show me your drawing? Or, do I have to get on my knees and beg?" Brandy giggled. She handed Dr. Merle the sketch book. Dr. Merle looked it over. Brandy drew a young, blonde lady. She had big, blue eyes and glasses with thick frames. She wore a white sweater, a red skirt dotted with white diamonds, white stockings, and red Mary Janes. A red, vinyl purse dangled from her left shoulder. A long, red scarf dangled from her neck. Dr. Merle looked up and smiled. "I like it," he remarked. "Who is it?"

Brandy shrugged. "It's Daisy Hill."

Dr. Merle's office was located on the twenty-third floor of a building downtown. The building was owned by Entrepreneur bank. Paul Carmichael's office was on the same floor in the same building. A while back, L.I.N. and Chuck went to see Paul about Hal's will. He never went into specifics. But from what Chuck could tell, Mr. Carmichael forged a passport using a

photograph of L.I.N. He also forged a Social Security card. He filed them under the name "Laura Isabelle Nelson." He also had a copy of Hal Damon's will. In it, Hal left everything to Laura.

"That's not my name!" L.I.N. shrieked. Everyone laughed. L.I.N. looked around. She was standing near the middle of Paul Carmichael's office. The floor was covered with slick, black tiles. They were pretty big. They measured three feet by three feet. There was a window along the northern wall of the room. It measured eight feet by five feet. It was the same type of window as the one in Dr. Merle's office. Paul's was trapped behind a column of thick, wooden mini blinds. A shiny, wooden desk stood in front of the window. It was amber colored. There were two wire baskets near the front, left side of the desk. There was a wooden nameplate with white letters near the right side of the desk. They read, "Paul Carmichael." A laptop with a shiny, black case lay near the middle of the desk. It was closed.

A rectangular rug lay on the floor in front of the desk. It was decorated with long, thin lines. They were rainbow colored. Two brown, leather chairs rested on the rug. They had high backs and wooden arm rests. The backs of the chairs were dotted with glossy, bronze buttons. A similar chair resided between Paul's desk and the window. The walls of Paul's office were shiny and grey. They looked like they were made of slate. The office had a dropped ceiling. It was covered with sheet rock tiles. They were white and rectangular. They were dotted with tiny holes. The tiles were separated by a flat, steel grid. A small, amber desk stood beside the window. It was in the northwest corner of the office. There was a shiny, black coffee maker, two stacks of polystyrene cups, a ceramic bowl filled with sweetener, a plastic can of powdered creamer, and a tiny box filled with coffee stirrers.

The toenails of L.I.N.'s left foot were yellow. The nails of her right foot were magenta.

They blended right in with Paul's rainbow colored rug. L.I.N.'s calves were silky and white. A tangerine skirt draped to her knees. Her upper body was wrapped in a grey hoodie. It was L.I.N.'s favorite jacket. The fabric was soft and thin. It was warm and snugly. L.I.N.'s hair was the color of a sapphire. Her eyes were green and glittery like emeralds. Her lips were the color of rubies. Her hair was chopped into a row of bangs above her eyebrows. A shiny, black barrette lay above her bangs. It was actually the cover of a disk drive. The hood of L.I.N.'s jacket dangled from the top of her head. L.I.N. stood on the balls of her feet. She threw her arms out at her sides.

"Why does everyone keep laughing at me?! That's not funny!" The room erupted with laughter. Paul Carmichael sat in the chair behind his desk. He was well groomed and clean cut. He was lean and stocky. He had brown, chin length hair and rimless spectacles. His eyes were aquamarine. Paul wore a white, button up shirt with long sleeves. It was wrapped in crisscrossing black lines. Paul also wore black trousers. A pair of yellow suspenders held them in place. A yellow tie with white stripes dangled between those. A pair of shiny, black shoes wrapped his feet. Chuck sat in one of the chairs in front of Paul's desk. It was on the east side of the room. Chuck stared at a pair of shoes on the edge of Paul's desk. They were L.I.N.'s. They were cornflower colored flats with white polka dots. They had little, cornflower bows near their tips.

Chuck smiled. His hair was black and shaggy. He had shiny, tan eyes. The bottom half of his face was a bit scruffy. That was typical. Chuck wore a black, polo wrapped with narrow, white stripes. He also wore dark brown khakis and a pair of sloppy, black sneakers. A red, plaid jacket was wrapped around his shoulders. Hal sat in the other chair in front of Paul's desk. Hal died a while back. He copied his cerebral cortex to a flash drive. Chuck, L.I.N., and Brandy

figured out they could plug it into an android Hal left lying in his chemistry lab at home. Hal's body was made of shiny brass. A pair of white, plastic webcams was sticking out of the top of his face. There was a speaker above Hal's chin. It was covered by a brass square with five tiny holes. That was Hal's mouth. And of course, a little, red flash drive was sticking out of the side of his head. Chuck slipped his fingers around L.I.N.'s knuckles.

"Come here, Laura..." he sang. "It's okay."

L.I.N. peeked over her shoulder. "Shut-up, stupid Chuck." Chuck grinned. He dragged L.I.N. towards his side of the rug. L.I.N. plopped down on his lap. Chuck slipped his arms around L.I.N.'s waist. He laid his chin on her shoulder and kissed the side of her neck.

"Are those big, mean men picking on you?" Chuck teased. L.I.N. glanced over her shoulder. She fought back a smile.

"Chuck, I'm gonna punch you!" Chuck pouted. He dropped the outer edges of his eyebrows and flapped his eyelids. L.I.N. chuckled. Chuck slipped his fingers around the edges of L.I.N.'s hood. He tugged it away from her face and wadded it around her neck. L.I.N. scrunched up her face. *"Leave it up..."* she whispered. *"I'm trying to hide my stupid, blue hair."*

Paul pointed across the top of his desk. "Hey, how do you think Hal feels over here?" Paul narrowed his eyes. "He looks like some sort of musical instrument." Chuck snickered. Hal dropped his forehead in his palm.

"Oh, dear..." he groaned. L.I.N. looked around. She pretended to laugh. But really, her mind was on other things. For starters, she found out she was pregnant the day before. And, she still hadn't broken the news to Chuck. She wasn't so worried about that, though. What worried her more than anything was the fact that she was on birth control. And, Hal gave it to her. L.I.N. glanced at Hal out of the corner of her eye. Hal looked towards Paul's eyes. Well, a pair

of webcams sticking out of Hal's shiny face focused on the lenses of Paul's glasses. "Need I bring up the past?" Hal requisitioned. "I seem to recall a certain *someone* frequenting the isolation lab..."

Paul Carmichael threw up his hands. "Oh, Hal... There are certain aspects of my past I'd *really* rather other people didn't know about." L.I.N. stared at the side of Hal's head. She narrowed her eyes. Could she trust him? Or, was there something *more* to what was going on. Was he manipulating her? Was he manipulating Chuck? What the hell was going on? Chuck rested his chin on L.I.N.'s shoulder. He squinted.

"Wait a minute," Chuck remarked. "Are you guys talking about drug research?" He looked at Hal. "Like, L.S.D.? Psilocybin? That sort of thing?" Hal's head turned. He looked into Chuck's eyes and smiled. At least, he tried to. Hal's mouth had no way of smiling. Chuck pointed between Hal's webcams. "Is *that* what you used to do for a living?" Hal began cackling. Paul leaned forward. He folded his arms on his desk and stared at the side of Chuck's face.

"You would not *believe* some of the things this man has done for a living, Chuck." Chuck faced Paul. He smiled.

"How interesting," Paul and Hal laughed. Chuck looked to his left. He was staring at L.I.N.'s right cheek. He exhaled through his nostrils.

"Did you know that, Laura?" he inquired. L.I.N. stared into space. Her head twisted to the right. She looked into Chuck's eyes and took a breath.

"What?" Paul chuckled. He laid his forehead on his arms and patted his desk with his fingertips. L.I.N. licked her lips and looked around. Chuck laid his fingertips below her chin. He turned her head and stared into her eyes.

"Hey..." he whispered. "*Are you okay, L.I.N.?*" He laid his fingers on her cheek. "*You*

*seem like you've got something on your mind."* L.I.N. lowered her head. She looked at her lap and closed her eyes.

*"I'm fine..."* she whispered. She swallowed and looked up. *"Everything's fine."* Chuck faked a smile. He patted L.I.N.'s shoulder and faced Hal. But, he knew something was up. He could always tell when L.I.N. was lying. She was just so... bad at it.

*"I'll ask her about it later,"* Chuck thought. *"When all these people aren't around."* Chuck laid his palms on L.I.N.'s shoulders. He squashed her flesh around in his fingers. L.I.N. smiled. She lay against her boyfriend's chest and relaxed. She figured he knew something was up. He always did. But, he never got all macho... I'm in charge... tell me what's wrong... pissed off about it.

*"I'll talk to him about it later,"* L.I.N. thought. *"When all these people aren't around."* She laid her fingers on Chuck's and closed her eyes. The door to Paul Carmichael's office was open. The doorway was on the southern wall of the room. Brandy's hand popped in. A small piece of paper was dangling from the tips of Brandy's fingers. It was plastered with incoherent chicken scratch. Brandy's face appeared above her knuckles. She smiled and wiggled the slip of paper.

"Dru-u-u-u-ugs..." she sang. Hal looked over his shoulder. He made a fist and drew it towards his chest.

"Score!" Hal laid his fingers on his thigh. It sounded like a brick landing on a car. "Nice job, dear." Chuck and L.I.N. faced the door.

"SSRIs?" Chuck inquired.

Brandy stepped into Paul's office. "Yeah. Dr. Merle seems to think they'll help." L.I.N. nodded. She hopped off Chuck's lap and headed towards the door.

"Then, let's get to the pharmacy." She peeked over her shoulder. "I'm tired of everyone making fun of my..." L.I.N. made quotes with her fingers. "'Name'." L.I.N. smiled at Paul. "No offense, Mr. Carmichael."

Paul smiled. "None taken... Laura." He winked. L.I.N.'s eyebrows pointed down the bridge of her nose. She balled her fists at her sides and stomped towards the door. Her right foot landed on an ice cold tile. It made hair on the back of L.I.N.'s neck stand on end. L.I.N. gasped. She returned her foot to Paul's rainbow colored rug and froze. She looked over her shoulder.

"Has anyone seen my shoes, lately?"

The elevators in the Entrepreneur building were seven feet long, seven feet wide, and seven feet tall. They were surrounded by reflective steel walls. L.I.N. stood beside the northern wall of northern elevator. She looked to her left. She could see reflections of herself, Chuck, Brandy, and Hal into infinity. L.I.N. stared at the image, curiously. She wiggled her fingers around and watched. Thousands of arms followed her movements. It was dizzying. L.I.N. looked down. The floor was covered with giant, white tiles. The tiles were splattered with black speckles. L.I.N. looked up. The ceiling of the elevator was made of tiles of steel grids. The grids were made of flat bars of steel, woven together. L.I.N. looked to her right. Chuck was standing beside her, staring. He smiled and patted L.I.N.'s arm. L.I.N. leaned towards Chuck and cupped her fingers around her lips. Chuck bent over. He pressed his ear against the edges of L.I.N.'s fingers.

*"We need to talk..."* L.I.N. whispered. Chuck lifted his head and looked into L.I.N.'s eyes. He bent over and cupped his fingers around his lips. L.I.N. laid her ear against the edges of Chuck's fingers.

*"Let's ditch these two at the pharmacy. Okay?"* L.I.N. curled her fingers over her lips



and snickered. She looked at Chuck and nodded. The elevator eased to a stop, and the doors opened. There was a lobby on the first floor of the Entrepreneur building. The floor was plastered with the same tiles as the floor of the elevator. When the elevator doors opened, Chuck, L.I.N., Hal, and Brandy were facing the east wall of the lobby. It was covered with oak. The other walls were painted white. There were three oak desks along the eastern wall. Each desk had an LCD computer monitor and a flat, metallic keyboard. There was paperwork everywhere. An employee sat at each desk. They wore headsets with microphones for phone calls. They had brown, leather chairs with high backs. Three plastic chairs with steel legs were scattered in front of each desk for customers.

Everyone left the elevator. There were dual, glass doors along the northern and southern walls of the lobby. The one along the northern wall was an entrance. The one along the southern wall was an exit. There were two elevators on the west wall. Each had dual, steel doors. There were two steel panels between the elevator doorways. Each had an up button and a down button. They were glass buttons with black borders. White arrows were painted on the surfaces of the buttons. Brandy, L.I.N., Hal, and Chuck wandered towards the northern end of the lobby. They exited through a pair of glass doors. The Entrepreneur building was made of red bricks. It was eighty-five stories tall. It was surrounded by sidewalk. The sidewalk was surrounded by a parking lot. The parking lot was surrounded by additional sidewalk. A curtain hovered above the doors. It was decorated with maroon and amber bands.

The glass doors slid shut. Chuck and L.I.N. stood out front. Brandy and Hal stood behind them. Everyone froze. They were greeted by a pair of unexpected visitors. They were a man and a woman. Shiny, red hair sprouted from the top of the man's head. It was chopped even with the bottom of his chin. A pair of gentle, blue eyes lit up his face. A pair of rimless

glasses lay across his enchanting irises. The man had a pale, freckle covered face. A light smile grazed the bottom of his spotted precipice. He wore an olive colored, argyle shirt, a pair of tan corduroys, and a pair of shiny, saddle shoes. The man's britches were a little short. A pair of olive, argyle socks was visible between the cuffs of his corduroys and the tops of his shoes. A furry, black trench coat was strapped across his chest.

The young lady was very pretty. But, she wore a disgusted, angry face. Her eyes were fiery and blue. Her lips were tight and twitching. Her teeth were showing. They were gritted, like the young lady was ready to bite someone. The woman's hair was long and brown. It draped to her shoulders. She wore a vanilla colored sweater, mahogany jeans, and brown boots. She folded her arms over her chest and looked around. She narrowed her eyes. Chuck's blood boiled. He looked into the man's eyes.

"Why, Jeff," he remarked. "What a wonderfully, shitty surprise." Chuck looked into the young lady's eyes. "And, Lisa..." he continued. He squinted. "You fucking cunt." Jeff smiled a little more. He looked into L.I.N.'s glittery, olive eyes.

"Still bangin' the old, robo, sex babe, I see." Jeff faced Chuck. "How retarded." He gazed into Brandy's deep, dark eyes. "And, how's your little piece of ass on the side?" Brandy's legs turned into rubber. She looked at the sidewalk and exhaled a shaky breath. Chuck glared into Lisa's poppy, blue eyes. He smirked.

"How's *yours*?"

Lisa flipped him the bird. "Fuck you!"

Hal folded his arms over his chest. "What do you want, Jeff?" he inquired. Jeff snapped his fingers. He pointed between Hal's eyes.

"Don't start with me, old man." Jeff slipped his hand into a pocket on his trench coat. He

took out a white, plastic rectangle. It was a high dollar smart phone. Chuck's eyes latched to it and followed. Chuck pointed.

"What are you doing, Jeff?" Jeff touched a button on the side of the phone. He slid his finger across the screen. Chuck's eyes popped open. He showed Jeff his palms. "Jeff! Stop!" He exhaled an angry breath. "You've got my attention! Okay?" L.I.N. opened a terminal. She typed "prc" and pressed return. She gasped. She grabbed Chuck's arm. Chuck's head whirled around like a top. L.I.N. crinkled her eyes.

"He's logged into my operating system with a secure shell." She swallowed. "He's been connected for forty-three minutes." Chuck faced Jeff. He pointed between his glittery, blue eyes.

"Jeff... Don't." Jeff smiled a little. He tapped the screen of his phone. L.I.N.'s eyelids sagged. L.I.N. froze and stared into space. Chuck looked her over.

"L.I.N.?" he inquired. L.I.N.'s eyelids fluttered. She shook her head and looked around. Chuck faced forward.

"Jeff, what did you just do?" Jeff stared into Chuck's eyes. He tilted his head. Chuck stepped forward. "Jeff!"

Jeff pointed between Chuck's eyes. "Enh! Enh! Enh!" he barked. He ripped open his trench coat. Two rows of dynamite sticks were duct taped around his chest. A braided, steel cord dangled from a pocket inside Jeff's trench coat. There was a shiny, steel ring attached to the end of the cord. Jeff slipped his thumb through the ring. "I'll blow you fuckers straight to Hell!" He widened his eyes and gritted his teeth. "BACK up!" Chuck hopped back and froze. A cruddy, white van peeled around a corner across the street. It had only three windows. There was a windshield, a driver's side window, and a passenger's side window. The van pulled onto

the Entrepreneur building's parking lot. It squealed to a stop beside the sidewalk. A long door across the side slid open. Jeff hopped in. Lisa smiled, sadistically. She blew everyone a kiss.

"See ya, douche bags!" she shouted. She plopped down beside Jeff and jerked the door closed. The van peeled to the edge of the parking lot and drove away. Chuck watched the van carefully until it was out of sight.

"*My God...*" he sighed. He looked at L.I.N. "Are you okay?" L.I.N. stared back, blankly. She blinked. Chuck laid his fingers on L.I.N.'s cheek. A smile tore across L.I.N.'s face. She hopped away and giggled.

"Stop!" she shouted between laughs. "What are you doing?"

Chuck raised his eyebrows. "L.I.N.?" he inquired.

L.I.N. pressed her lips together. "Y-Yes?" she replied. She sighed. "That's my name." She looked around. "Who *are* you people?" She glanced at Hal. She looked at Chuck and chuckled. "That guy's *weird* looking!"

Chuck looked at Hal. "Uh-oh," he remarked.

## Chapter 2: "Stranger than Fiction"

L.I.N.'s bed was made of oak. An oak post was sticking out of each corner. A golden sphere threaded into the top of each post. A tie dye comforter was draped over L.I.N.'s mattress. It was wrapped with violet, magenta, and white swirls. There was a space between the frame supporting L.I.N.'s mattress and fluffy, tan carpet coating the floor. Hal was digging around underneath L.I.N.'s bed. He crawled around on his hands and knees. His head was tucked below L.I.N.'s bed frame. The edge of L.I.N.'s comforter lay across the back of Hal's neck. Little glints of light caught Hal's attention. Hal spotted them near the southeast corner of the area under L.I.N.'s bed. He looked to his left. Four tiny, glass chess pieces lay on the floor near the corner. They were arranged in a nice, neat row.

Hal cupped his fingers over the speaker near his chin and chuckled. Any time L.I.N. was losing a game of chess, she stole a piece and ran off. Apparently, the southeast corner underneath her bed was one of L.I.N.'s hiding places for the pieces. Hal had no idea what she did with the others. She'd stolen a lot more than just four. Hal scooped the chess pieces off the floor. He noticed five tiny pieces of paper sticking out of the wad of chess pieces. He assumed they were little pieces of trash. Hal yanked them out and wadded them in his other hand. He hopped up, turned around, and headed downstairs. Chuck and Brandy were in the server room with L.I.N. Well, they were with L.I.N.'s body. Her memory appeared to be wiped clean.

A hospital bed was tucked into the northwest corner of Hal's server room. It had a chrome frame. It stood on four shiny posts. Black, caster wheels were attached to the bottoms of the posts. A slab of memory foam lay across the surface of the frame. It was wrapped in a clean, white sheet. A pillow with a white pillow case lay at the west end of the bed. L.I.N. sat on the edge of the mattress. A dumb smile was painted on her face. She flapped her eyelashes

and looked down. The floor was covered with white tiles. L.I.N. noticed her toenails were painted different colors. The nails of her left foot were yellow. The nails of her right foot were magenta. L.I.N. wondered what she did with her shoes. She couldn't remember if she was wearing any earlier.

L.I.N. looked to her right. A rolling table stood beside her calf. There was a wire basket on top. L.I.N.'s eyes popped open. She noticed two shiny scalpels lying near the bottom of the bin. There were also three Phillips screwdrivers, a pair of needle nose pliers, two white towels, a roll of gauze, a roll of surgical tape, a bottle of iodine, and a baggie filled with cotton balls. L.I.N. felt a bowling ball sitting in her stomach. She wondered what these strange people were about to do to her. She looked over her shoulder. There was an identical cart between the bed and the northern wall. An LCD monitor sat on top. There was an image on the screen. It was an image of an LCD monitor. There was an image on *that* screen. It was an image of an LCD monitor. There was an image on *that* screen. It was an image of an LCD monitor.

L.I.N. began to feel dizzy. She looked away from the monitor and pinched the bridge of her nose. She faced forward and shook her head. She spotted Chuck and Brandy. They were across the room. They sat in front of a long, oak desk. Seven cruddy, old monitors lay along the top of the desk. One near the middle of the desk had a huge screen. It was filled with black. Rows of text lay on top of the black. Chuck sat in a brown, leather chair. It had a high back and arm rests. Brandy sat in a student's chair next to Chuck. Her chair was trimmed with grey fabric. It had a tiny, cushioned back rest. It hovered above the seat on a chrome rod. Chuck was typing on a black keyboard. The keys were really loud. They filled the room with springy, metallic crunches.

L.I.N. studied a wall behind the desk. It was trimmed with slats of oak. The slats were

dark and shiny. Three desktop computers stood beside the west end of the desk. A router sat on the one near the middle. It was dotted with little, green LEDs. They wandered around and blinked, incoherently. L.I.N. found them fascinating. Chuck stopped typing and looked over his shoulder.

"Hey, L.I.N.," he remarked. L.I.N. looked up, eagerly. Her eyes popped open and fluttered.

"What? What?" she stammered. She swallowed and sat up straight. "What is it, Chuck?"

Chuck smiled a little. "I need you to get on the Wi-Fi and obtain an I-P address." Chuck squinted. "Do you remember how to do that?" L.I.N. lifted her hands. She made rings with her fingers and thumbs. She looked around and sifted through thoughts.

"Um..." she hummed. "Um, um, um..." She crinkled her eyes and looked up. "Huh?" Chuck closed his eyes. He bowed his head and licked his lips. He felt like crying. Jeff really did a number on his girlfriend. She was helpless and confused. She was sort of like a child. Chuck stood up and wandered across the room. He stood beside L.I.N. and bent over. He laid his palms on his knees and looked into L.I.N.'s eyes. L.I.N.'s eyebrows lowered towards the outer edges of her eyes. Her lips curled towards her chin. "I-I-I'm sorry, Chuck!" L.I.N. grumbled. "I'm trying!" She dropped her eyes in her fingers. "I don't... know what to do! I can't remember." She looked up. Chuck laid his fingers on L.I.N.'s shoulder. L.I.N.'s instinct was to squirm away. She didn't, though. She just cringed a little. She turned her head and stared at Chuck's knuckles.

"It's okay, L.I.N.," Chuck assured her. He curled his fingers under L.I.N.'s chin. "Look at me." L.I.N. lifted her head. She stared into Chuck's glittery, tan eyes. She felt like someone kicked her in the chest. Chuck smiled. "It's going to be okay." He laid his fingers over his

heart. "I'll show you. Alright?" L.I.N. gazed into Chuck's eyes. She slowly nodded. Chuck rolled out a drawer along the side of the bed. It brushed against L.I.N.'s calf. L.I.N. gasped. She yanked her legs out of the way.

"Oh, God!" she shouted. "I'm sorry!" She looked down and slipped her hair behind her ears. "I didn't mean to get in your way." Chuck smirked. He patted the back of L.I.N.'s head and exhaled through his nostrils.

"L.I.N.!" he exclaimed. "It's okay!" L.I.N. looked up. Chuck sighed. He laid his fingers on L.I.N.'s knees. He slid her legs back to their original position. "Put your legs wherever you want. Okay?" L.I.N. stared into Chuck's eyes. She tried to speak. But, she didn't know what to say. She wiggled her lips around.

"Um, um, um..." she managed to get out. She swallowed. "Okay." Chuck nodded. There was a USB hub on the drawer Chuck rolled out. Chuck grabbed a USB cable sticking out of the hub. He showed it to L.I.N.

"Do you remember how to open your USB port?" he asked. L.I.N. stared at the end of the USB cable. She lifted her left hand and stuck out her thumb. She showed it to Chuck. The tip of L.I.N.'s thumb flipped back. A USB port was hiding underneath. Chuck smiled. He plugged the USB cable into L.I.N.'s thumb.

"Good," he remarked. He patted L.I.N.'s knuckles. L.I.N. laid her fingers in her lap. Chuck knelt beside the hospital bed. He studied the monitor between the bed and the wall. "Are you watching?" he asked. L.I.N. nodded. There was a mouse and a keyboard beside the USB hub. Chuck grabbed the mouse. A black arrow with a white border wobbled across the screen of the LCD monitor. There was a taskbar near the bottom of the screen. There was a blue square with a white gear on the left side of the taskbar. There was a black square with a grey border



beside that. Chuck clicked it. A terminal window appeared. It opened near the upper, left corner of the screen. Chuck pointed near L.I.N.'s left eye.

"You know what *that* is?" he inquired. L.I.N. stared into space. She shook her head. "Well... it's called a console," Chuck explained. "We're going to use it to connect you to Hal's Wi-Fi, real quick." L.I.N. looked into Chuck's eyes. She shook her head.

"I don't know what that means."

Chuck pressed his lips together. "The internet? Do you know what the internet is?" L.I.N. exhaled through her nose. She shook her head. Chuck stared between L.I.N.'s emerald eyes. He forced a smile. He patted L.I.N.'s arm.

"You know what? Don't even worry about it." Chuck focused on the LCD screen. He laid his fingers on the keyboard beside L.I.N.'s legs. "We'll learn about all that stuff some *other* time." Chuck typed "dhcp wifi0" and pressed return. L.I.N.'s terminal printed a blank line. After that, it printed smash followed by a greater than symbol. Chuck entered "ipconf." L.I.N.'s terminal spit out a bunch of text. Chuck looked it over. L.I.N.'s Wi-Fi card was using the IP address "192.1.1.12." Chuck nodded. "Okay," he remarked. "Just hang tight for a second."

L.I.N. nodded. "Okay." She glanced at Chuck's eyes. Chuck glanced back. He smiled. L.I.N. felt the corners of her lips lifting. She looked away and fought off a smile. Chuck hopped up and returned to the desk across the room. L.I.N. thought Chuck was cute. But, she kept her mouth shut about it. She figured Chuck and Brandy were together. She didn't want to start anything. She folded her fingers in her lap and stared at the floor, timidly. She had to be careful with her thumbs. A VGA cable was sticking out of her right thumb. A USB cable was sticking out of her left. It was rather uncomfortable. Chuck plopped down next to Brandy. He laid his fingers on the black keyboard and began typing. Brandy stared at Chuck's temple. She glanced

over her shoulder.

*"She doesn't even know what the internet is?"* she whispered.

Chuck glanced at Brandy. *"She can learn,"* he rasped. He stopped typing and looked up. "And, I'm sure Jeff didn't just *erase* all of her memories." He narrowed his eyes. "He's probably holding them hostage." Chuck faced the monitor in the middle of the desk and started typing. "He'll probably drop by in a little while to ask for another favor." Brandy made an "o" with her lips. She faced forward.

"What do you think he wants *this* time?"

"I have no idea," Chuck replied. He stared at colorful text dotting Hal's monitor. He shook his head. "But, L.I.N.'s memories have been completely wiped out." Chuck pointed out a couple of files on the screen. "This directory used to be *filled* with files." He licked his lips. "Now, there's only two." He glanced at L.I.N. over his shoulder. "They look like memories L.I.N. made after Jeff erased her old ones." Hal wandered in. He stood beside Brandy and held out his hand. Brandy stared at it. Four glass chess pieces lay across his palm. Chuck looked them over. He grinned and shook his head. "Where did you find *those*?" Hal tried to smile. It didn't work.

"Under L.I.N.'s bed," he reported. Chuck looked over his shoulder. L.I.N. was staring at her lap. She looked up and blinked. Chuck smirked.

"L-I-I-I-I-I-N!" he sang. L.I.N.'s eyes popped open. She showed Chuck her palms.

"W-What did I do?!" She stared at Hal. "What's wrong?!"

Hal began standing chess pieces on the edge of his desk. "Oh nothing, dear." He looked up. "Everything's fine." Hal wandered to the other side of the desk. He stopped beside Chuck and pointed below the desk. "Give me that trash can," he remarked. Chuck scooted his chair out

and searched below the desk. He dragged out a trash can made of chrome mesh. He grabbed it by the rim and lifted it. Hal dropped the scraps of paper he found under L.I.N.'s bed into the trash can. They caught Chuck's attention. He wasn't sure why. Chuck's irises floated on his bottom eyelids. He stared at the little pieces of paper in the trash can. They were blue on one end and white on the other. Chuck held the trash can in front of his chest. He bowed his head and peeked inside. Every one of the little strips of paper had two tiny, red lines near the middle. Chuck slid his lips to the side of his face. He returned the trash can to the space below the desk. He took a breath and turned to Brandy.

"Hey, Brandy," he remarked. "Why don't you go pick up your prescription?"

Brandy stared at him, blankly. "You mean... the fluoxetine?"

Chuck smiled a little. "Do you have some *other* prescription you need filled?"

Brandy chuckled. "No." She looked across the room. She glanced at Chuck out of the corner of her eye. "You don't need my help?"

Chuck pressed his lips together. "I just... I don't want you forget about that. You know?" He nodded, slowly. "It's important. I want you to be able to sleep tonight."

Brandy nodded. "Okay." She stood and looked across the room. She smiled and waved. "Good-bye, L.I.N.!" she called. L.I.N. smiled back. She lifted her hand and fluttered her fingers.

"Bye, Brandy..." She dropped her hand in her lap and looked at the floor. Brandy glanced at Chuck and Hal.

"You guys call me if you need anything. Okay?"

"Sure, Brandy," Chuck replied. "I'll see you in a little while." Brandy wandered across the server room. She opened a door on the west wall. It led to Hal's chemistry lab. The chemistry lab led to the garage. Brandy wandered into the chemistry lab and shut the door.

Chuck looked at Hal and smiled. He looked over his shoulder. "Hey, L.I.N.?" he inquired.

L.I.N. looked up. Chuck motioned towards the bed with his head. "Lay down for a second. I'm going to turn you off." L.I.N. stared into Chuck's eyes. She looked at Hal.

"Uh..." She looked at Chuck and smiled. "Okay." L.I.N. slipped her legs onto the bed. She lay across the mattress and plopped her head down on the pillow. Chuck laid his fingers on the black keyboard. He typed "down" and pressed return. After a few seconds, a message printed. It read "Connection to 'lin@192.1.1.12' lost." Then, it printed "smash > " followed by a tiny, white rectangle. L.I.N.'s eyelids fluttered closed. The tip of the pinky on her right hand flipped open. An RJ45 port was hiding underneath. Chuck looked up. Hal looked down. Chuck glared at Hal. Hal pretended to scratch his head. It sounded like nails on a chalkboard. He threw his hands out at his sides.

"Is everything okay, Chuck?"

Chuck's eyebrows pointed down the bridge of his nose. "Well, Hal..." he grumbled. He bent over and retrieved the trash can. He plopped the trash can between his thighs and looked inside. "I *think* everything's fine." Chuck grabbed one of the strips of paper. He held it in front of his eyes. "You know... aside from the fact that you're a big, fat liar." Chuck showed Hal the slip of paper. Hal bent over. His operating system had software that could zoom in on images. Hal's webcams zoomed in and focused. That's when Hal realized his oversight.

"Oh, dear."

Chuck yanked the slip of paper away from Hal's eyes. "No, shit," he grumbled. Chuck dug another slip of paper out of the trash can. He looked it over. "And, again..." He showed the slip of paper to Hal. Hal studied the paper strip. He scratched his head. It sounded like a pair of old windshield wipers. Hal sighed. He stood and shrugged.

"But, I don't understand." Chuck dropped the slips of paper in the trash can. He stared at the floor and shook his head.

"Don't lie to me, Hal."

Hal threw his hands out at his sides. "But Chuck, I have no idea what's happened here." Chuck tossed the waste basket towards Hal's fat, plastic webcams. It bounced off Hal's thick, steel skull and crashed to the floor. Hal folded his arms over his head and collapsed beside the trash can. He shrieked. Chuck dropped on top of him. He straddled Hal's chest and glared into his face.

"Don't *lie* to me, old man!" he shouted. Chuck grabbed the sides of Hal's cranium and lifted it. He stared into Hal's webcams. "Stop bullshitting me!" Chuck spotted the flash drive sticking out of the side of Hal's skull. He curled his fingers around the flash drive and looked between Hal's eyes. "Tell me the truth, or I'm gonna yank this damn thing out of your head." Hal's speaker responded with an angry growl. Hal glared into Chuck's face.

"Then, you can forget about bringing L.I.N. back," he grumbled. "Because, she'll *never* forgive you!"

Chuck's eyes popped open. "And, you think she's gonna forgive *you*?!" Chuck shouted back. "After you tricked her into getting pregnant?" Chuck tightened his fingers around the flash drive. He looked at Hal and shook his head. "This isn't even homicide, Hal. I'll do it without batting an eyebrow."

"Alright!" Hal shrieked. "Okay! I tricked her!" Chuck let go of the flash drive. He sat up, looked into Hal's eyes, and sighed. He plopped his palms on his thighs.

"Why?"

Hal shook his head. "Chuck, I can't answer that." Chuck gripped the sides of Hal's chin

with his fingers and thumb. He jiggled his head.

"Why, Hal? Why'd you do it?" Hal growled, again. He swatted at Chuck's hand. Chuck grabbed a hold of Hal's flash drive again. "Hal, tell me the truth!"

"Gyah!" Hal shouted. He looked into Chuck's eyes and frowned. At least, he tried to. "Th-The child is important!" Chuck narrowed his eyes. He kept his fingers on the flash drive this time.

"What do you mean?" Hal tilted his head back. He exhaled a heavy breath. Or rather, it sounded like he did.

"She's gonna... save the world."

Chuck raised his eyebrows. "She?" Hal faced Chuck. He shook his head.

"Chuck, please. Stop..."

Chuck tilted his head. "What's her name?" He smiled a little. "Our daughter?"

"Chuck!" Hal shouted. "Quiet!" Chuck shook his head. He pointed between Hal's webcams.

"You've traveled through time." Hal yanked Chuck's fingers off his flash drive. He turned his head and sighed.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Chuck threw his arms out at his sides. "Well, that's the only thing that makes *sense!*" He folded his arms on Hal's chest. "I mean, you went to all this trouble to replace your daughter with an android. You've got this guy Icarus out there..." Chuck waved his arms around. "He's downloading copies you made of your brain..."

Hal looked up. "Chuck..."

"You had a lawyer construct this phony identity for L.I.N." Chuck pointed between Hal's

eyes. "You knew about Jeff Forrester and how to re-code his wormhole software."

"Chuck!" Hal shouted. Chuck licked his lips. He sat back and folded his arms over his chest.

"And, what *about* Jeff Forrester," he requisitioned. "How does *he* fit into all this?" Hal stared at Chuck. He shook his head.

"I'm not saying another word."

Chuck nodded. "I'm telling him." He stood up. He turned and looked Hal in the eyes. "I'm going to tell him she's pregnant."

"Ah!" Hal shouted. He rolled over and shoved himself to his feet. Chuck shrugged.

"Maybe that'll convince him to give me L.I.N.'s memory back." He looked into Hal's eyes and nodded. "Extenuating circumstances?"

Hal grabbed Chuck's shoulders. "No!" he shrieked. He shook Chuck like a rag doll. "No..." Chuck crinkled his eyes. He smacked Hal's arms away.

"Let go of me, ass-hole!" Hal grabbed a hold of Chuck's shirt. He wadded it in his fist, dragged Chuck towards him, and glared into his face.

"*Chuck!*" he whispered. "*No!*" Hal shook his head. Chuck stared into Hal's shiny, golden precipice. He smacked Hal's hand away. He raised his palms at his sides.

"*Hal... what?*" Chuck rasped.

Hal tapped his index finger against Chuck's chest. "*Listen to me...*" he whispered. He looked around suspiciously. "*Jeff Forrester cannot know anything about this.*" He nodded. "*Understand?*"

Chuck slid his lips to the side of his face. "*Hal, what are you talking about?*" Hal grabbed a hold of Chuck's arms again. He shook Chuck like an old scarecrow.

"*Chuck!*" Hal whispered. "*I need to know that you understand!*" Chuck shrugged. He smacked Hal's arms away.

"Hal, I don't even know what we're *talking* about! How *could* I understand?" Hal curled his slick, icy fingers around Chuck's throat. He pressed Chuck's back against a wall beside a door leading to the living room. He stared into Chuck's eyes.

"*I need to know that you understand the importance of what I just told you!*" he squealed. Chuck's eyebrows jumped off the top of his head. He wrapped his fingers around Hal's forearm. He stared into a pair of lenses near the middles of Hal's webcams. "*Jeff can't find out about this!*" Hal whispered. "*He can never know about this!*" Chuck rolled his eyes. He swatted at Hal's arm.

"Well, maybe I could remember better if I knew *why* he can't know about it!"

Hal smashed Chuck against the wall. "If Jeff Forrester finds out L.I.N. is pregnant, we all die!" he shouted. He exhaled an angry breath. Actually, his speaker made a sound like a person exhaling an angry breath. Hal uncurled his fingers. Chuck smacked them away and stepped aside. He rubbed his neck and looked into Hal's eyes.

"Who's 'we'?" he requisitioned. He motioned towards his chest. "You mean like, me and L.I.N. and you..."

"*Everyone...*" Hal whispered. He stepped back and folded his arms over his chest.

"*Everyone in the world...*" Chuck stared at Hal. He shook his head.

"I have to tell L.I.N."

Hal threw his hands out at his sides. "Chuck, you can't *do* that!"

"Well she's the one having the baby, Hal," Chuck replied. He wandered across the room and stood beside the desk. He bent over and reached behind Hal's router. "She should at least



know why you tricked her." Chuck yanked a cable out of the router. It had an RJ45 connector on the end.

"Chuck, she can't know!" Hal shouted. He pointed at Chuck. "*You're* not even supposed to know!" Chuck headed towards the hospital bed. He dragged the cable along with him. He glanced at Hal.

"What's the matter, Hal?" he inquired. "Are you afraid that L.I.N.'s going to be pissed off at you for lying to her?" Chuck grabbed a hold of L.I.N.'s right hand. He dragged it across her belly and extended her pinky. He looked up. "She *should* be pissed off at you. I mean, you basically raped her." Hal hugged his chest. He shook his head up and down, furiously.

"Yes, that's what I was trying to do. I wasn't trying to save the entire world... or anything like *that*." Hal showed Chuck his palms. He lowered his fingers slowly and wobbled them. "That was all just a giant coincidence!" Chuck focused on L.I.N.'s pinky. He slipped the RJ45 connector into the end of her finger and stood up. He headed towards the desk.

"I'm starting to think you're just forcing L.I.N. to do this because you're a lonely, old man." Chuck plopped down in the brown, leather chair with the high back. "I don't know if there was even a master plan to begin with." The door to the living room opened. Jeff Forrester's head popped in. Jeff looked around.

"What's all this I hear about a master plan?" Hal whirled around and faced the door. Chuck turned his chair. He sat back and folded his fingers on his chest.

"Well, if it isn't Dick-head Forrester." He motioned towards Jeff with his fingers. "And, how are *we* on this fine, cloudy morning?"

Jeff tilted his head. "I'm good, Chuck," he replied. He motioned towards the other end of the room. "How's your little... sex toy over there?" Chuck hopped up and shoved his chair

across the room. He stomped across rows of slick, white tiles and threw up his fists.

"You want some too, pretty boy?" Chuck stopped a couple of feet from the doorway and bobbed his head. "Come on."

Jeff smiled a little. "No, Chuck." He opened his trench coat. His chest was still strapped with explosives. "I don't fight fair. Remember?" Chuck exhaled a shaky breath. He dropped his fists and licked his lips.

"What did you do with L.I.N.'s memories, Jeff?"

Jeff furrowed his brow. "They're safe, Chuck. All of them." He sighed sarcastically. "I figured that was obvious."

Chuck nodded, impatiently. "What do you need this time? More hot fixes for your stupid little science experiments?" Jeff slid his lips to the side of his face. Chuck motioned towards the living room. "What's with the freak?"

"What freak is that, Chuck?" Jeff inquired.

Chuck pointed between Jeff's eyes. "You *know* who I'm talking about, Jeff! The a-li-en!" Chuck smacked his palm with his fist. "The God damned alien you brought over from Proxima Centauri!"

Jeff adjusted his glasses. "I have no *idea* what you're talking about."

"Let it go, Chuck," Hal suggested. Chuck glanced at Hal out of the corner of his eye. Hal all but admitted he had knowledge of the future. Chuck figured he knew what he was talking about. He stepped back and folded his arms over his chest. Hal raised his palms. "We would like L.I.N.'s memories back, Jeff. What do you want in return?" Jeff smirked. He looked like a twisted psycho when he smirked. It made Chuck's skin crawl. Jeff reached inside his trench coat. He took out a shiny, green notebook. He flipped to the second page and showed it

to Chuck and Hal. It was painted with dried blood.

"I want the rest of *this*," Jeff explained. "That's what I want." He stared into Chuck's eyes. "I want Brandy Scott." He narrowed his eyes. "Where is she?" He lifted his head and searched the room.

"Jeff, you've gotta be kidding me," Chuck replied.

Jeff faced Chuck. "I want her."

Chuck scrunched up his face. "You can't *have* her!" he shouted. "No!" He shook his head. "No deal!" Jeff pressed his lips together. He returned the notebook to his trench coat. He took out his smart phone and looked it over.

"Then, I'm going to delete your precious L.I.N." Jeff tapped the screen of his smart phone. He looked up and blinked. He held his finger in front of the screen. "Bring her to me. Or, L.I.N. dies."

"Jeff!" Chuck shouted.

"Too late!" Jeff shrieked. He tapped the screen of his phone. Chuck shook his head.

"I'm going to kill you, Jeff." Jeff chuckled. He lifted his leg and smacked his thigh. He looked up and pointed between Chuck's eyes.

"Psych! Just sending a text message!" Chuck stared through the lenses of Jeff's glasses. He blinked, impatiently. "I will delete her, though," Jeff warned. He looked around. "You can bet on it."

Chuck threw his hands out at his sides. "It's not gonna happen." His arms dropped. They slapped his thighs. "I'm not trading Brandy for L.I.N.'s memories!" Hal stroked his chin. It sounded like a nail sliding across a glass of tea.

"How long do we have to decide?" Chuck looked at Hal. He couldn't believe what he

was asking.

"Until seven," Jeff replied. He looked at Chuck. "You know the place." He tilted his head. "I put you through a window the last time we were there. Remember?"

Chuck bobbed his head. "Bite me, Jeff."

Jeff grinned. "Oh!" He wandered in and lifted his arm. He squeezed the apple of Chuck's cheek with his index finger and thumb. He wiggled Chuck's flesh. "Now there's no need for hard feelings, old buddy."

Chuck gritted his teeth. "Get the hell out of here, Jeff."

"Woo! Woo!" Jeff hooted. He hopped towards the living room and waved his arms around. "Woo! Ha! Ha! Ha!" He dashed across the living room. He exited through a pair of red doors with curvy, golden handles. Chuck glanced at Hal.

"Hal, tell me you're not seriously considering trading Brandy for L.I.N."

Hal shrugged. "L.I.N. has to have this child, Chuck." He looked into Chuck's shiny, tan eyes. "And, I can't replace her memories quickly enough to keep the fetus safe while it grows. You know what I mean?" Chuck crinkled his eyes. He hugged his chest. "L.I.N. needs to be able to take care of herself in order for her child to stay healthy." He motioned towards Chuck. "And most of all, she needs to be in love with *you*. She needs someone to take care of her." Chuck looked at the floor. He rubbed the back of his neck.

"I've gotta call Laura and Icky." He wandered into the living room. He slammed the door behind him.

### Chapter 3: "Moving Right Along"

There was a huge supermarket near Hal and L.I.N.'s place. It was called "B-E-H." A narrow, two lane road led through the woods beside the house. After twelve miles, it turned into Cisco 18. Cisco 18 was a freeway that weaved through New Jack City. At most points, it consisted of three eastbound lanes and three westbound lanes. At times, there were as many as eight lanes headed either direction. From the west, the first exit leaving Cisco 18 led to the B-E-H supermarket near L.I.N. and Hal's place. From the east, it was the last exit. The outer walls of the B-E-H building were made of giant panes of glass. Two bronze posts stood out front. "B-E-H" spanned a space between the posts. The logo was made of giant, block shaped, teal letters. There were two sets of sliding, glass doors between the posts. And, there was a gigantic parking lot that was always full.

Inside, the floor was covered with large, brown tiles. They were spotted with yellow, red, and black. A pharmacy was tucked into the southwest corner of the building. It was near a gathering of waist high shelves. Like all the shelves in B-E-H, the ones near the pharmacy were trimmed with pale veneer. A chrome post hung above the shelves. A slick, teal block was attached to the end. The top and bottom of the block were shaped like squares. The sides were long, thin rectangles. White, raised letters spanned the sides of the block. They spelled "Health and Beauty." A white counter surrounded the southwest corner of the grocery store. It was shaped like a boomerang. Rows of white shelves were stacked below the counter. They were filled with cold medication.

A row of teal letters spanned a space above the counters. They spelled "Pharmacy." The letters were arranged along a chrome rod. The rod was attached to a perpendicular post suspended from the ceiling. A labyrinth of seven foot tall shelves dotted the floor behind the

counter. They were trimmed with the same pale veneer as the shelves in the Health and Beauty section. Rows of white, composite bins lay along the shelves. Bins near the front shelves were labeled A-Z. They were filled with white, paper sacks containing people's prescriptions. White, composite bins along shelves behind those contained medication waiting to be dispensed. Four plastic, teal chairs with chrome legs were arranged beside the counter along the southern wall. The southern wall was made of panes of glass. But, the southwest corner of B-E-H was covered with red bricks.

There was a tiny office surrounded by red bricks behind the shelves in the pharmacy. It was triangular. A person standing near the corner of the boomerang shaped counter would see a flat, brick wall near the rear of the pharmacy. There was a thick, wooden door near the middle of the wall. It was trimmed like the pharmacy's shelves. There was a cash register near the corner of the counter. It was tall and beige. It was made of steel. There was a tiny readout near the side of the register facing the Health and Beauty section. It was black with green letters. Chuck Parker wandered up. He headed towards the Health and Beauty section. He stepped beside shelves filled with pain medication and froze. He stared across tops of waist high shelves below the giant, teal block marking the Health and Beauty section. He spotted a brunette behind the counter of the Pharmacy. She was facing the other direction.

She stood beside the front shelf of the pharmacy. She wore a long, white coat. Bouncy coils of chocolate brown hair surrounded the collar of her jacket. Chuck smiled and shook his head. He wandered towards the pharmacy. He stopped beside the east facing side of the counter and folded his arms on top. Chuck spotted the neck of an olive sweater poking out of the top of the girl's white coat. The end of her coat reached below the knees of her jeans. Her jeans were indigo. They were colorful and lively. Chuck spotted a pair of rectangular shaped lenses

dangling from the tip of the girl's nose. The young lady carried two white, paper sacks. The tops of the sacks were folded over. Labels were stapled over the folds. The girl read a label on the sack in her left hand. She dropped the sack in a white, composite bin. It was labeled "Ba-Br." The bin was on the top shelf of a set of shelves near the front of the pharmacy.

The young lady dangled the other sack in front of the lenses of her glasses. She studied it carefully. She skimmed labels glued to bins along the front shelf. She bent over and studied bins along the lower shelves. Her butt was two feet from Chuck's eyes. The back of her coat was split near the waist. Chuck studied pentagon shaped pockets stitched to the backside of the young lady's jeans. The girl behind the counter slid out a bin near the lower, right corner of the shelf. It was labeled "He-Hu." The girl dropped the sack inside the bin. Her coat slid up her back. Chuck studied a triangle of flesh between the split in the young lady's coat and the top of her jeans. The girl's skin was as white as her lab coat. It looked like it hadn't seen the light of day in years. Chuck felt the corners of his lips curling towards his forehead.

"Brandy, what the hell?" he requisitioned. Brandy's head swirled around. Globbs of wavy, brunette curls bounced around the shoulders of her coat. Her eyes were peeled. Her lips were parted. Brandy looked into Chuck's kind, tan eyes and exhaled a heavy breath.

"Hey, Chuck." Brandy stood and turned around. Chuck threw his hands out at his sides.

"I told you to pick up your prescription," he remarked. He dropped his palms on his thighs. "Not run out and find a new job!" Brandy smiled a little. She shrugged.

"Just kind of happened." Little, plastic pads near the middle of Brandy's glasses pinched the tip of her nose. Brandy's glasses were barely hanging on. She laid the tip of her finger against a chrome rod connecting the lenses of her glasses. She slid her glasses up the bridge of her nose. "How's L.I.N.?" Brandy folded her arms over her chest and licked her lips. "I heard

she was pregnant."

Chuck narrowed his eyes. "How did *you* find out?"

Brandy rolled her eyes. "Through the grapevine." She looked towards the north. She and L.I.N. were near that end of the store the day before. L.I.N. ran off for a minute. Then, she reappeared. "Is that why L.I.N. was acting so weird yesterday?" Brandy faced Chuck. "When I brought her here?"

Chuck shrugged. "I guess so." He slipped his hands into his pockets. "Apparently, she stole a home pregnancy kit from the health section." Chuck looked towards the north end of the store. "She probably snuck into the girl's room and tested herself." He faced Brandy. Brandy nodded. Chuck pressed his lips together. "She needs your help." Brandy breathed out through her nose. She looked at the floor and laid her fingers on her lips. Chuck parted his lips. He thought for a second. "I mean... later." He took his hands out of his pockets and crossed his arms. "You know... when you get off work or whatever." Brandy's eyes crinkled. She exhaled a shaky breath. She bowed her head and laid her eyelids against the tips of her fingers. Chuck stared at the top of his buddy's head. Brandy's hair was parted right down the middle. Her part was perfectly straight. Chuck figured she spent half an hour getting it just right. He laid his fingers on Brandy's shoulder.

"Brandy, what's wrong?" he asked. He smiled a little. "Wussa matter, you?" Brandy looked up. She laid her fingers over her lips and sniffled.

"*Chuck...*" she moaned. She lowered her fingers. "I can't hang out with you guys, anymore." Chuck stared into Brandy's deep, dark eyes. He licked his lips.

"Is that what Dr. Merle told you?" The outer corners of Brandy's eyebrows squiggled down the sides of her face. She dropped her eyes in her palms and sobbed. Chuck's eyes got sad



and droopy. He leaned forward. *"Oh, Brandy..."* he whispered. He slipped his arms around Brandy's shoulders. *"It's okay, honey."* Chuck laid his cheek on the top of Brandy's head. The crease down the middle of her hair tickled stiff whiskers sticking out of Chuck's face. Chuck thought about Jeff. He wanted Chuck to trade Brandy for L.I.N.'s memories. Chuck, Detective Phillips, Icarus, and Hal came up with a plan to deal with that. They intended to trick Jeff into giving up L.I.N.'s memories. Then, they planned to snatch Brandy back. The only thing was, Brandy was a rather large part of the plan. Without her, there was no way to convince Jeff to cough up L.I.N.'s memories. Chuck lifted his head. He turned his face and kissed the top of Brandy's head. He rubbed the back of her neck.

*"Brandy..."* he whispered. He dropped his arms and stood up. *"Look at me."* Brandy sobbed. Chuck patted her shoulder. He licked his lips. *"Brandy."* Brandy looked up. She lowered her fingers and laid them over her lips. Tears dribbled down her cheeks. Chuck forced a smile. He swatted tears off Brandy's cheeks. *"It's okay,"* he told her. He exhaled through his nostrils. *"I mean, I can't believe you made it *this* long."* Brandy fought off a chuckle. She dropped her fingers.

*"I feel like... I'm losing my mind,"* she whispered. She squinted. *"You know?"*

Chuck nodded. *"Don't worry about it. Okay?"* He laid his fingers on the counter. *"Just take some time... and go back to the way things were."* He patted Brandy's elbow. *"And, if you get to feeling better... come by the house and say 'hi' some time."* Brandy bowed her head. She slid her fingers under the lenses of her glasses and wiped her eyes. Chuck wrapped his fingers around Brandy's left hand. Brandy looked up. Chuck laid Brandy's knuckles across his lips and kissed them. He looked into Brandy's eyes and smiled. *"Bye, Brandy."* He laid Brandy's fingers on the counter and patted them. *"Good luck, okay?"*

Brandy forced a smile. "Bye, Chuck." Her smile quickly faded. Chuck dropped his hands in the pockets of his dark brown khakis. He turned around and headed for the parking lot.

The downstairs floor of L.I.N. and Hal's house was covered with checkered tiles. They were black and white. A row of stairs led from an area of checkered tiles near the middle of the downstairs area to a hallway on the second story. The stairs were covered with shiny, wooden veneer. The bottom steps were wider than steps near the top. A pair of wooden rails guarded the edges of the steps. They consisted of slats of wood lying along narrow, wooden posts. A similar row of railing guarded a hallway at the top of the stairs. The rails along the edges of the stairs were parallel near the top. They curled away from the stairs near the bottom. L.I.N. and Hal were standing near the bottom step. Actually, standing was about the last thing they were doing. Brawling was more like what they were doing.

Hal stood beside L.I.N. He wrapped his arms around her waist. He curled his slick, frosty fingers around L.I.N.'s thigh. He lifted her foot off the floor and nudged it towards the stairs. The ball of L.I.N.'s foot lay against the corner of the bottom step. Her toes curled over the edge. L.I.N. lost control of her right foot. She gasped and looked at the floor. It made her dizzy. Her vision was filled with black and white squares, silky flesh covering her instep, shiny brass covering Hal's instep, and dots of magenta nail polish. It was very confusing. L.I.N. tilted her head back.

"Geh-buh!" she barked. Strands of soft sapphire brushed across Hal's webcams. Hal jiggled his head. Stacks of L.I.N.'s soft, silky hair slopped off his face. Hal slipped the rest of L.I.N.'s foot on the bottom step and sighed.

"L.I.N.!" he shouted. "Would you just hold still? I'm trying to *help* you!"

L.I.N. wiggled and squirmed. "*I'm trying...*" she rasped. She swallowed. "I-I-I don't

know what to do!" A pair of red doors covered the entrance. Each door had a curvy, golden handle. The handle on the left door turned and pointed at the floor. The door slid aside, and Chuck wandered in. He looked towards the stairs and froze. He pressed his lips together.

"Oh, my..." L.I.N. rested her back against Hal's ice cold chest. She wriggled to the side and slipped her arms around Hal's waist. Hal threw his arms out at his sides. He tilted his head back.

"L.I.N.!" he shouted. "What are you doing?!" L.I.N. looked over her shoulder. She wasn't even looking in the right direction. She was looking towards the kitchen. Hal's face was behind her other shoulder.

"I don't know!" L.I.N. shouted back. "*You* built me!" Hal grabbed a hold of L.I.N.'s wrists. He slipped her arms off his waist, hugged *her* waist with his right bicep, and lifted her off the floor. L.I.N.'s eyes popped open. "Whoa!" she shouted. "Stop!" She wriggled like a fish out of water. Chuck crinkled his face. He closed the door, folded his arms over his chest, and watched. Hal plopped L.I.N.'s feet on the bottom step. L.I.N. bent her knees. She leaned forward and curled her arms in front of her chest. She looked around, frantically. "Hal!" she shrieked. "What did you just do?!"

Hal sighed. "You're on the bottom step, L.I.N. Would you calm down?" L.I.N. looked terrified. She shook her head in a panic.

"Mm-mm!" she protested. "I don't like it!" Hal stood beside L.I.N. He laid his fingers on her waist and nudged her towards the next step.

"Come on," he told her. "Keep going."

"NO!" L.I.N. shouted. She wiggled away from Hal's fingers. "Stop it!" she sobbed. She plopped her fingers over her eyes and whimpered. "I don't want to do this anymore!" She

wiggled like a worm. Hal fought to get his arms around her waist.

"L.I.N.!" he shouted. "For goodness' sake!" L.I.N.'s fingers dropped off her face. L.I.N. stared into Hal's eyes and gritted her teeth. Her eyebrows sagged in the middle.

"Stop!" she shouted. L.I.N. pressed her palms against Hal's slick, frosty chest. She leaned forward and shoved him. The two were outmatched. Hal's clunky, brass body weighed over two hundred and fifty pounds. L.I.N.'s body was mostly plastic. It weighed less than sixty pounds. Rather than shoving Hal towards the railing, L.I.N. shoved herself off the bottom step. She fell flat on her butt. Her butt bounced off cold, hard tiles. Her spine fluttered like a strand of yarn. L.I.N. tilted her head back and pinched her eyes shut. "Ah!" she squealed. She laid her fingers on her lower back and gasped for air. Hal looked across the living area. He stared into Chuck's shiny, tan eyes and shook his head.

"This is not going well." Chuck lifted his fingers. He pointed them at Hal and fluttered them towards the living room. Hal bowed his head and showed Chuck his palm. He slipped off the bottom stair and stepped aside. Chuck wandered towards the stairs. He stopped beside L.I.N. and looked down. L.I.N. panted like a dog. She swallowed and looked up. Her face was dotted with sweat. Tears wiggled down her cheeks. Chuck stared into her shiny, green eyes. He smiled. L.I.N. flinched. She shrugged up her shoulders and fluttered her eyelids.

"N-No..." she grumbled. She looked away and shook her head. "Stay away from me."

Chuck tilted his head. "*L.I.N...*" he groaned. "You trust *me*, don't you?" L.I.N. looked up. She slowly shook her head.

"I don't know." Chuck licked his lips. He knelt beside his girlfriend and patted her arm.

"Come on," he told her. "I'll just carry you. Okay?" L.I.N. shook all over. She looked into Chuck's eyes and blinked.

"I-I just... need to go to the bathroom."

Chuck nodded. "Okay." He shrugged. "Well, I'll take you up there. And, you can use the bathroom." Chuck looked upstairs. He slid his lips to the side of his face. "And then, I'll show you your bedroom. Alright?" He faced L.I.N. L.I.N. stared back. She looked over her shoulder.

"I get my own bedroom?" she asked Hal.

Hal chuckled. "Yes, dear. It's *been* your bedroom for a long time." L.I.N. faced Chuck. She shook her head.

"Um, I don't know if I can do this."

Chuck laughed through his nose. "Why don't you just close your eyes and count to ten?" L.I.N. exhaled a series of nervous laughs. She faced forward and looked up the stairs. She blinked her eyes closed. Then, she plopped her fingers over her eyes.

"One..." she counted. "Two..." Chuck wrapped his left arm around L.I.N.'s shoulders. He curled his right arm under her knees. L.I.N. cringed. A cold shiver raced along her spine. "*Th-Three...*" she gasped. Chuck stomped his foot on the third step from the bottom. He climbed three additional stairs in one step. "Four..." L.I.N. counted. Chuck slipped up six more steps in two swipes. He hopped up the last two and faced the bathroom. It was to his left.

"Okay..." he remarked. "We're here." L.I.N. yanked her fingers off her face. She looked to her left. She was looking at the door to the bathroom. It was bare wood. L.I.N. looked into Chuck's eyes. She squinted.

"How did you do that?" Chuck smiled. He shrugged.

"It doesn't matter." He lowered his right arm. L.I.N. dropped to the floor and faced him. Chuck patted her shoulder. He motioned towards the bathroom. "Go ahead." He exhaled

through his nostrils. "I'll be right here when you get out." L.I.N. nodded. She wandered across the hall. The floor felt frosty and slick under the soles of her feet. Chuck pointed at the back of her head. "You know how to wipe your own ass, right?" L.I.N. stomped her foot. She glanced at Chuck over her shoulder.

"Yes, God damn it!" She faced forward. "Shut-up." When L.I.N. was finished in the restroom, she returned to the hallway. There was a door directly in front of the steps. It was along the west wall of the hallway. Chuck opened it and motioned inside.

"Your bedroom," he remarked. L.I.N. wandered down the hall. She brushed past Chuck and stepped into her room. She stopped inside the doorway and looked around.

"It's dark in here." She looked at the floor. It was covered in carpet. A faint glow lay across the carpet. It was four different colors. The northeast corner of the carpet glowed red. The northwest corner of the carpet glowed blue. The southeast corner glowed yellow. And, the southwest corner glowed green. L.I.N. looked to her left. There was a window along the southern wall. It was surrounded by a copper skeleton. The skeleton formed a plus sign across the glass. Four different colors of glass filled the corners of the window. The upper, left corner was red. The upper, right corner was blue. The lower, left corner was yellow. And, the lower, right corner was green. L.I.N. could see the sky. It was filled with murky clouds. They were rolling in, furiously.

Chuck reached beside L.I.N.'s left shoulder. He flipped a light switch beside the door. A fan dangled from the middle of the ceiling. It had five blades and five light bulbs. The bulbs lit. The blades swirled, lazily. L.I.N. glanced over her shoulder. Chuck was right behind her. He looked into her eyes and smiled. He motioned towards the bedroom with his head.

"Go ahead, L.I.N. It's okay." He looked around. He raised his eyebrows. "When it's

clean." L.I.N. wandered towards the center of the room and stopped. She looked at the ceiling. It was navy blue. It was splattered with white, teal, and canary yellow. Little, squishy, stick on stars were everywhere. They were pink, teal, yellow, and white. They were translucent. L.I.N. knew that meant they glowed in the dark. She squinted. She wasn't sure *why* she knew that. She faced Chuck. She saw herself.

"Whoa!" she shouted. She hopped away and stared at the eastern wall. It was covered with mirrors. Chuck stepped in and closed the door. The inside of the door was also a mirror. Chuck stuffed his hands in his pocket and looked around.

"What do you think?" L.I.N. stared at her reflection. She wandered across the room and stood in front of the eastern wall. She laid her fingers on a mirror. Her reflection laid its fingertips on hers. The mirror felt cool and slick. L.I.N. smiled.

"Cool..." She looked into her reflection's eyes. They were glittery and green. She glanced at her hair. She gasped. She laid her fingers on her hair. She gripped it around the sides of her neck. "My hair is blue!" she shouted. "What happened to it?" L.I.N. slid the fingers of her right hand across the top of her forehead. A shiny, black barrette lay across her hair.

"Hal's not sure why it comes in blue," Chuck explained. "It's probably some kind of bug in your source code. It's giving nanotechnology that makes your hair the wrong html codes."

L.I.N. looked at Chuck's reflection. She narrowed her eyes.

"What... part of that makes any sense?" she demanded.

Chuck grinned. "Don't worry about it. It's fine." L.I.N. faced her reflection. She laid her fingers on the barrette across the top of her forehead. She tapped it.

"I know this is a CD-ROM," she remarked.

Chuck nodded. "Uh-huh." L.I.N. fluttered a row of bangs dangling from the bottom of

the barrette. She looked at her reflection's clothes. She noticed she was wearing a grey hoodie. She crossed her arms and felt the sleeves of her jacket. They were soft and cuddly. L.I.N. smiled.

"I *like* this jacket." She looked down. She grabbed the edges of a tangerine skirt. It was dangling from the bottom of her grey hoodie. It draped to her knees. L.I.N. fluttered neon ruffles surrounding her thighs and turned around. The other walls of her bedroom were navy blue. They were splatter painted like the ceiling. An oak bed lay along the west wall. A tie dye comforter lay across the mattress. It was slathered with swirls of violet, magenta, and white. It made L.I.N. smile again. L.I.N. looked at the carpet. It was fluffy and tan. The glowing, colored squares went away when Chuck turned on the lights.

L.I.N. looked up. Two posters hung above her bed. One was a poster of the solar system. One was a picture of a puzzle cube. A black and white clock hung between the posters. It looked like a cartoon kitty cat. It had a long, skinny pendulum that looked like a cat's tail. It was hooked at the end. It swooped back and forth. The kitty had giant, cartoon eyes. They turned side to side when the pendulum swung. The kitty's tummy was white. It was decorated with Roman numerals, like a clock face. The numbers and the clock hands were big and black. Chuck stood beside L.I.N. He looked at the side of her head.

"Seen enough?"

L.I.N. looked into Chuck's eyes. "I get all this cool stuff?"

Chuck shrugged. "It's *your* stuff." L.I.N. looked away. She studied stars dotting the ceiling. She turned her head and blinked. She faced Chuck.

"Where's *your* room?" Chuck stared into L.I.N.'s glowing, emerald eyes. He licked his lips.



"Um..." He lowered his head and rubbed the back of his neck. He dropped his palm on his thigh and looked up. "I'm not sure, yet." L.I.N. nodded. She tilted her head.

"Thank you for showing me this."

Chuck smiled. "You're welcome." He pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. "I don't suppose you wanna... try to get *down* the stairs." L.I.N. cringed. She gritted her teeth.

"Ooo!" She stepped away and shook her head. "No!" She showed Chuck her palms. "No! No! No!"

Chuck exhaled a heavy sigh. "Alright!" He raised his palms at his sides. "I was just asking!" He dropped his arms. He motioned towards the living area with his head. "I've gotta make a phone call." L.I.N. blinked. She looked around and thought.

"I don't know what that means." She looked up.

Chuck waved her off. "It doesn't matter. I'll be right back. Okay?" Chuck turned to leave. He took two steps. L.I.N.'s eyes popped open.

"Wait!" she called. She grabbed Chuck's wrist. Chuck spun around and stared into L.I.N.'s eyes.

"What?!" he barked. "What is it?" L.I.N.'s fingers slipped off Chuck's wrist. Chuck grabbed a hold of L.I.N.'s hand. He exhaled through his nostrils. L.I.N. stared at their hands. She wasn't sure what to think. She didn't know what to do. She thought she knew the appropriate response. But, she didn't know for sure. She looked up.

"Um..." She pressed her lips together. "Um, um, um, um..."

Chuck smirked. "What is it, L.I.N.?" He patted her fingers with his free hand. Then, he let go. L.I.N. laid her fingers on the back of her neck.

"Uh..." she began. She shook her head. "N-Nothing." She folded her arms over her

chest. "Nothing." She looked at the floor and exhaled a silent breath. Chuck nodded.

"I'll be right back." He reached behind him and grabbed L.I.N.'s doorknob. L.I.N. looked up.

"Chuck!" she yelled.

Chuck grinned from ear to ear. "L.I.N., what *is* it?" His fingers slipped off the knob. L.I.N. took a breath. Her arms fell at her sides.

"That other girl... Brandy?"

Chuck nodded. "What about her?"

L.I.N. licked her lips. "Um..." L.I.N. bobbed her eyeballs around. She swallowed and faced Chuck. "Is she like... your girlfriend?"

"Ah..." Chuck replied. "No." He shook his head. "No, I'm in love with..." He laid his fingers on L.I.N.'s shoulder. He looked into her eyes and smiled. "Someone else." L.I.N. stared at Chuck's glittery, caramel eyes. She fought off a grin.

"Well... she's very lucky." She looked at the carpet. "Whoever she is." L.I.N. looked up. Chuck shrugged.

"Yeah." He nodded. "Me, too." His fingers fell off L.I.N.'s shoulder. He stepped away and opened the door. "I'll be right back. Okay?" L.I.N. nodded. Chuck shut the door and wandered downstairs. L.I.N. stared at the floor. She folded her fingers in front of her lap.

*"Someone else?"* she thought. *"Someone else?"* She looked up. She spotted her reflection along the eastern wall of her bedroom. She stared at the inverted copy of herself and shrugged. "Is he talking about... me?"

#### Chapter 4: "Wait a Minute"

Ms. McKenzie was an old bitty. At least, that's what Brandy thought. She was rude and obnoxious. Her voice was nauseating. It sounded like two kitty cats having sex. She was five foot tall. She was chubby and hunched over. She walked with an old, scraggly cane. A black blouse dotted with pink and white roses draped from her shoulders. A pair of knee length shorts was tied around her waist. They were grey. They were cut just above her knees. A pair of milky, white legs was sticking out of the bottoms of those. They were blinding. Ms. McKenzie's ankles were fat and swollen from diabetes. They were gushing out of a pair of navy blue, prescription shoes. A pair of glasses dangled across Ms. McKenzie's eyes. They had loopy, plastic frames. Ms. McKenzie's frames were shiny and black. They had curls at the ends like a cartoon character's eyelashes.

Ms. McKenzie's hair was a series of grey and black stripes. Ms. McKenzie wore her hair in a bun. It was wadded into a fat, wiggly mess on top of her head. It looked like a ball of black and grey yarn. A pair of shiny, copper, hair needles was shoved through the knot of hair on top of Ms. McKenzie's head. Little squiggles of grey and black dangled from the needles. Ms. McKenzie's eyes were pale and penetrating. Her lips were mashed together. Her face was the color of tapioca. It was rippled like the surface of a swimming pool. Her cheeks were fat and saggy. Her chin was the size of a grapefruit. Ms. McKenzie stared through the lenses of Brandy's glasses with ferocity. A pair of thin, grey eyebrows pointed down the bridge of her nose.

"Have you got that figured out, young lady?" she squawked. "I have other things to do today." Brandy stood behind the B-E-H pharmacy counter. She stood near the corner, typing on the register. Ms. McKenzie stood on the other side. Brandy stopped typing and looked up.

"I'm sorry, Misses McKenzie," Brandy replied.

"*Miss* McKenzie!" Ms. McKenzie snapped.

Brandy pressed her lips together. "I'm not used to this register," she explained. "It's my first day." Ms. McKenzie crinkled her eyes. Her upper lip slipped up a row of shiny, false teeth.

"Wah?!" Ms. McKenzie barked. She leaned forward and cupped her fingers around her ear. "Speak up, dear! That way other people can hear you!" Brandy wrinkled the bridge of her nose. She forced a smile.

"I'm not used to this register!" she repeated. Ms. McKenzie plopped her knuckles on her hips. She squinted and stared between Brandy's eyes.

"Well, you'd better figure it out," she warned. "Or, I'll take my business somewhere else!" Brandy exhaled through her nostrils. She faced the register and continued typing. She felt like telling Ms. McKenzie to go fuck herself. But, she held her tongue. It *was* her first day after all. Brandy smiled and looked up.

"That'll be forty-seven sixty-two," she kindly reported. Ms. McKenzie laid a red, vinyl purse on the counter. She unzipped the top and dug around. She took out a grey billfold and flipped through it. Brandy wandered behind a shelf near the counter. She found a bin labeled "Ma-Mc." She found a white, paper sack near the front of the bin. The top was folded over and stapled. A white label with a teal border dangled from the staple. "Emma McKenzie" was printed across the top. Brandy grabbed the sack and returned to the counter. She dropped it beside the register and looked down. A stack of five dollar bills lay on the counter. There were five of them. That added up to twenty-five dollars. Ms. McKenzie was stacking old, crinkly one dollar bills next to that.

"Thirteen," she counted. "Fourteen." Brandy looked up. She looked towards the north

end of the store.

*"Oh, my God..."* she whispered. *"You've gotta be kidding me."* She fluttered her eyelids and looked down.

"Nineteen," Ms. McKenzie grumbled. She looked up. "What was it again?"

Brandy flattened her lips. "Forty-seven sixty-two," she repeated. Ms. McKenzie flattened her eyelids.

"Do what, dear?!" Brandy licked her lips. She pointed at a tiny readout on the opposite side of the register. Ms. McKenzie stared at it. She leaned forward and squinted. She looked up. Her eyebrows fell in the middle. "Well, *I* can't read that! The numbers are too small!"

"It's forty-seven sixty-two!" Brandy shouted. Ms. McKenzie's head sank into her fat, sloppy shoulders. She stepped back and laid her fingers over her heart.

"Well you don't have to yell, dear! I'm standing right here!" Brandy stepped back. She laid her palms on the lower half of her back and looked at the floor. Her glasses slipped to the tip of her nose. Brandy pinched her eyes shut and gritted her teeth. She laid the tip of her finger against a chrome rod connecting the lenses of her glasses. She slid her glasses up the bridge of her nose and looked up. Ms. McKenzie dug through her billfold. She shook her head and looked up. "I'm out of cash!" she squelched.

*"Of course you are,"* Brandy whispered. She wandered forward and stopped beside the register. She snatched the white, paper sack off the counter and dangled it in front of Ms. McKenzie's eyes. She wiggled it. "Then, I'm sorry Ms. McKenzie!" she half-yelled. "I can't give you your meds!" Brandy retrieved her arm. She folded her fingers in front of her lap. Ms. McKenzie's sack of medication dangled from her fingertips. Ms. McKenzie smacked her lips.

"Oh!" she grumbled. "I've got enough, dear!" She turned her purse over. A mountain of

change, hard candy, and tissues spilled out. Brandy stared at the counter. Her eyebrows slipped up her forehead. "Now, let's just see here!" Ms. McKenzie spat. She swirled coins around the pharmacy counter. She slid nine quarters towards the stacks of bills she counted. "Now, that's..." She lifted her head and stared at the tops of her eye sockets. Brandy exhaled a heavy breath.

"Forty-six twenty-five," she replied.

Ms. McKenzie faced her. "Wah?!" she squealed. She waved her fingers at Brandy. She looked away and shook her head. "Don't interrupt me. I'm thinking, here." Brandy dropped her forehead in her palm. Ms. McKenzie counted on the tips of her fingers. "*One, two, three...*" she whispered. Brandy stared at the mountain of change on the pharmacy counter. She slid her lips to the side of her face. "*Ten,*" Ms. McKenzie counted. "*Eleven...*" Brandy rolled her eyes. Ms. McKenzie began picking out nickels and dimes. She got the total up to \$46.90. She looked up. "I'm still a bit short, dear." She began sliding pennies towards the register. "Hang on..." Brandy watched Ms. McKenzie's fingers.

"*One,*" Ms. McKenzie whispered. "*Two.*" Brandy folded her arms over her chest. She tilted her head back and closed her eyes. "*Eleven,*" Ms. McKenzie whispered. "*Twelve.*" Brandy thought about Chuck. She was worried about him. She figured he was scrambling around, trying to figure out a way to get L.I.N.'s memories back. She figured he was whacked out on coffee, staring at a computer screen, scraping together source code or something. He probably needed Brandy's help. Brandy shook her head.

"*Damn it,*" she mumbled under her breath. "*Why did Jeff do that?*" She opened her eyes, lowered her head, and looked at the counter. "*What does he want?*" Brandy narrowed her eyes. She tilted her head. "*Wait a minute,*" she thought. "*Why was Chuck here, earlier?*"

*"Fifty-seven,"* Ms. McKenzie counted. *"Fifty-eight."*

Brandy looked at the floor and tapped her chin. *"Was he here because of Jeff?"* Brandy folded her arms over her chest. *"Was he about to ask for my help?"* Brandy shook her head and looked up. *"Doesn't matter. I can't help him, anymore."* Ms. McKenzie slid a pile of change and dollar bills towards Brandy's side of the counter.

"Forty-seven sixty-two," Ms. McKenzie reported. Brandy looked Ms. McKenzie's money over. She scanned the pennies Ms. McKenzie counted. There were three stacks of six, four stacks of four, and two stacks of five. The rest of the pennies were scattered beside those. Brandy counted them four and six at a time. She came up with twenty-eight. She looked up and faked a smile.

"How wonderful." Ms. McKenzie leaned forward. She cupped her fingers around her ear.

"Wah?!" she screeched. Brandy shook her head. She typed keys on the register. A drawer rolled out. Brandy sorted Ms. McKenzie's money into the drawer and closed it. A tiny slip of paper printed near the top of the register. Brandy tore it off and handed it to Ms. McKenzie. She flattened her palms on the counter. She leaned forward and stared through Ms. McKenzie's slick, curvy spectacles.

"Have a nice day!" she screamed. Ms. McKenzie scraped a fistful of change off the pharmacy counter. She looked up and furrowed her brow. She swept the remaining change, hard candy, and tissues into her purse. Then, she held out her hand. Brandy offered Ms. McKenzie her prescription. Ms. McKenzie snatched the white, paper sack out of Brandy's fingers and stomped away. Well, Ms. McKenzie was incapable of stomping away. Rather, she threw her weight onto her scraggly cane. Then, she turned around and hobbled away quickly.

Brandy watched her go. She folded her arms on the pharmacy counter. She stared at the needles sticking out of the top of Ms. McKenzie's hair and shook her head. Brandy swirled around. She almost ran over Zachary. Zachary was Brandy's new supervisor. Brandy didn't know Zachary very well. But, she knew she didn't like him. He was an even bigger dick than Brandy's old supervisor, Ronnie.

Zachary was a little shorter than Brandy. In other words, Zachary was pretty short... for a man. He had dark hair and dark eyes. He was going bald. The lower half of his face was unkempt and scruffy. A pair of perfectly round lenses lay across his eyes. They made his eyes look like they were a mile away. The frames of Zachary's glasses were made of thick, red plastic. Zachary wore a white shirt with vertical, sky blue stripes. A red tie with white stripes dangled from the collar of his shirt. Zachary also wore brown trousers and shiny, black shoes. A white lab coat dangled from his shoulders. It was way too big for him. Zachary's face was usually painted with a solemn gaze. It gave the impression that everyone should *know* what he was thinking. He shouldn't have to tell them. Brandy looked down. A cotton mop with a long, wooden handle lay across Zachary's palms. Brandy looked up.

"Zachary..." she began.

"Mr. Ross," Zachary corrected. "How many times am I going to have to tell you that?"

Brandy narrowed her eyes. "You..." She lifted her chin and looked at the tops of her eye sockets. "Did you tell me to call you that?"

"I need you to mop the bathroom," Zachary interjected.

Brandy faced forward. "The bathroom?" she inquired. She looked over her shoulder. She was facing the north end of the grocery store. "You mean the store bathroom?" She faced Zachary. "Like, for the customers?"



Zachary rolled his eyes. "No. I want you to go home and mop *your* bathroom." Brandy took the mop from Zachary. She held the cotton end in front of her eyes and looked it over.

"That's not exactly..." She looked up. "Doesn't the store pay someone to do that?" Zachary was staring at the fingers of his left hand. He picked his thumbnail with the nail of his index finger. He looked up. He raised his eyebrows.

"Oh, my God..." he groaned. "Are you still here? Really?"

The ladies' room was located near the northwest corner of the store. Small, white tiles with grey speckles lay across the floor. The walls were covered with red bricks. Along the west wall, there was a steel door. It was painted teal. It had a curvy, chrome handle. A pair of porcelain sinks was arranged beside the door. A chrome box hung between the sinks. It was a paper towel dispenser. A chrome dispenser holding a clear, plastic bag of teal soap hung above each sink. The ladies' room had five stalls along the eastern wall. The one near the south wall was handicap accessible. The stalls and their doors were painted teal. There was a tiny window near the top of the north wall. It had two panes of glass stacked on top of each other. Each was surrounded by an aluminum border. The bottom pane slid up.

The door to the ladies' room flew open. Brandy stomped through. She dragged a bucket through as well. It was a plastic, yellow bucket on wheels. Brandy tugged it along with the mop Zachary handed her. She stopped beside the sinks. She yanked the mop out of the bucket and dropped it on the floor. A wringer clung to the side of the mop bucket. It had a long, black handle. The handle stuck out of the top. Brandy grabbed a hold of the handle, yanked the wringer off the side of the bucket, and laid it beside the mop. She picked up the bucket and held it below one of the soap dispensers. She squirted a few pumps of soap into the bucket. Then, Brandy held the bucket below one of the sink faucets. The sinks had chrome faucets and knobs

shaped like plus signs. The knob on the left was labeled "H." The knob on the right was labeled "C."

Brandy twisted the knob on the left. She filled the bucket with hot water. Then, she closed the knob and laid the bucket on the floor. A fountain of steam gushed out of the mop bucket. Brandy returned the wringer to the side of the bucket. Then, she picked up the mop. She dropped it in the bucket and sloshed it around. A blanket of thick, white suds swirled across a surface of steaming, hot water. Brandy looked across the bathroom. She stared through the tiny window along the north wall. She could see the sky. It was swarming with thick, grey clouds. They lay across a black canopy. It made Brandy smile. She *loved* rain. She wished it would rain all the time. A bolt of squiggly, cornflower blue lightning twisted across the sky. A ferocious rumble filled the air. Brandy felt tiles crackling below the soles of her tan loafers.

The lightning strike reminded Brandy of the power plant in Prospect. Brandy thought about the time Jeff Forrester electrocuted Chuck with a bolt of lightning from a giant Van de Graaff generator. Chuck, Brandy, Detective Phillips, and Icarus were trying to rescue L.I.N. Jeff was holding her captive in a Faraday cage. Chuck was holding the door of the Faraday cage when Jeff zapped it with a bolt of crimson electricity. Brandy closed her eyes and shook her head. She continued sloshing the mop around. She recalled squashing Chuck's ribs, trying to revive him. L.I.N. gave him mouth to mouth. But, it didn't work. Eventually, L.I.N. cut open her arm and ripped out a pair of wires. She laid the wires across Chuck's chest and used them like a defibrillator to revive him.

Brandy's concentration wavered. The mop handle dropped from her fingertips. Brandy's eyes popped open. Brandy looked down. The mop handle clattered to the floor. The swab end of the mop plopped over the edge of the bucket. It crashed to the floor. Steaming hot, soapy

water splashed everywhere. It soaked Brandy's jeans and her tan loafers. Slick suds dotted the bottom of her lab coat. Brandy looked her clothes over. She lifted her left foot and wiggled water off her shoe. She dropped her foot on the floor and threw her hands out at her sides.

"What the hell am I doing?" she inquired. Brandy looked across the room. She stared at the window along the north wall.

The northern part of the B-E-H parking lot had no parking spaces. It was a small section of pavement between the northern wall of the store and a red, picket fence along the northern end of the parking lot. Near the middle of the north wall of the store, the pavement dipped into a pit. The pit was a loading dock. A steel rail guarded the upper edge of the pit. Two fork lifts were parked at the bottom of the pit. They were painted yellow, white, and black. There were two roll up doors below the northern wall of the grocery store. They led to a warehouse. The doors were usually closed. There was a steel door with a steel knob beside the roll up doors. It was painted teal. Two stacks of pallets lay beside the west end of the pit. There was also a gathering of milk crates.

The north wall of the store was mostly glass. But, the northwest corner was covered with red bricks. Two tiny windows were cut into the bricks. Each had two panes of glass with aluminum borders. The bottom of the east window slid up. Brandy's tan loafers poked out. Her legs curled over the edge of the window and dangled down columns of bricks. Brandy's fingers gripped the bottoms of the window panes. Her thighs squirted out. Then, her butt shimmied down the wall. Her stomach appeared next. Brandy's lab coat and her sweater slid up her back. Pale flesh along her back slid across jagged, crimson bricks. Brandy felt her skin ripping. She froze with a gasp. Brandy pressed her lips together. She laid the soles of her loafers against bricks along the northwest corner of the store. She lifted her back off the edge of the window.

Then, she dropped to the pavement.

It was a long fall. Brandy's ankles tingled when they struck the ground. Her knees buckled. Her butt collided with cold, tarry pebbles. Her breasts landed on her thighs. Brandy wrinkled her eyes. She sucked air through her teeth. She shook her head and stood up. She faced the sky and spread her arms. She inhaled through her nostrils. The air was thin and humid. It was refreshing and cool. It was filled with the scent of rain. The corners of Brandy's lips slid up her cheeks. Brandy exhaled through her lips. She bowed her head and let her arms fall at her sides.

*"Freedom..."* she whispered. Brandy's feet were wet. She ripped off her lab coat and laid it across her right arm. She lifted her right foot and slipped off her shoe. She lifted her shoe and turned it over. A cup of water poured out. Brandy shook her head. She wiggled her shoe and patted the bottom. She wrapped her foot in the sleeve of her jacket and dried it off. Then, she swabbed the inside of her shoe with her jacket. She returned her right foot to her shoe. She dried her left foot the same way. Then, she patted the pockets of her jacket.

She found her cell phone. It was a tiny, white phone with a touch screen. There were two flat buttons along the bottom. Brandy tapped the button on the left. The screen lit up. There was an icon near the lower, left corner of the screen. It was a tiny, blue square with a picture of a white telephone on it. Brandy touched the icon. The screen turned into a grid of digits. There was also an asterisk and a pound sign. Brandy dialed Detective Phillips' number. She plopped her cell phone against her ear and listened.

*"Brandy?"* Detective Phillips inquired. *"Is that you?"*

Brandy smiled. "Yes, Laura. It's me." She narrowed her eyes. "Listen... I wonder if you can do me a favor." Brandy licked her lips. "Daisy's still alive, right? The girl with the glasses

who tried to kill me?"

There was a pause. *"Yeah. She pulled through. But, just barely."*

Brandy nodded. "I wonder if you could get me in to see her." She looked over her shoulder. She looked up the northwest corner of the grocery store. "I need to talk to her."

Brandy faced forward. She was staring at a row of red fence pickets. They were pointed on top. Black and grey swirls swam above the fence pickets. They were jagged and ferocious. Blue squiggles traced edges of menacing cumulonimbus. Vicious crackles pierced crisp, humid air.

*"That's definitely not possible,"* Detective Phillips replied.

Brandy shrugged. "Why not?"

*"Well..."* Phillips explained. *"You did a real number on her, Brandy. She's not able to speak. She's not able to keep her drool in her mouth. Not anymore."*

Brandy squinted. "Really?" She looked towards the east end of the parking lot. She shook her head. "Well, I don't care. Okay? I want to see her, anyway." Brandy swallowed. "I need to see her. Where is she?"

There was another pause. *"She's at the Fountain of Hope mental institution,"* Detective Phillips explained. *"I'm sure I could get you in if you want. But, I doubt you'll get much out of her."*

Brandy nodded. "Well, do it. And, tell me how to get there." She dug through the pockets of her lab coat. She found her keys, turned, and headed towards the east end of the store.

*"Okay,"* Phillips replied. *"Listen, is that all you want? I mean... you're not calling about L.I.N.?"*

Brandy took a breath. "Oh, I'm sorry. I wasn't even thinking about that. How is she?"

Detective Phillips took a moment to reply. *"Well, she's... She's not doing so well."*

Brandy heard Phillips swallow. *"Didn't Chuck come to see you?"* Brandy looked around. She was nearing the edge of the northern lot.

"What do you mean?"

Phillips scoffed. *"You mean, he didn't tell you about the plan? I thought he was going to tell you about the plan!"*

Brandy narrowed her eyes. "What plan?"

Free Bird Road was a lonely, curvy, two lane road near the western outskirts of New Jack City. Free Bird burrowed through old, twisted oak trees dotting patches of hills. Most plant life near New Jack City was green and lively. Scraggly oak trees bordering Free Bird Road were dry, crackling, grey, and petrified. A jagged landscape below the fossilized canopy was sprinkled with crunchy blades of yellow grass. Wildlife was scarce. Dead, dried up oak trees surrounding Free Bird were home to a small community of owls, crows, and tiny field mice. Brandy's car crept across Free Bird road beneath a firmament of swirling, cumulus knots. Brandy searched charcoal colored tree trunks. Holes dug near middles of trunks were dotted with glowing, yellow eyes. Brandy gulped.

Luminous bursts of white sprinkled serrated tufts crawling across the atmosphere. Shrieks of maniacal thunderclaps rattled the windows of Brandy's crappy, little car. Brandy drove a 1972 Hanna Civil. It was white. But, the front, left fender was red. The paint was chipped. The body was rusting. Brandy's little car had a flat, pointy front end and tiny tires. It had a back hatch instead of a trunk. The back glass lay flat. The headlights were perfectly round. A pair of chrome side mirrors was sticking out of the front fenders.

The Fountain of Hope mental institution was located at the end of Free Bird Road. The building faced east. It was surrounded by a fence made of square shaped, black bars. The fence

was surrounded by the same twisting oak trees dotting the edges of Free Bird. The mental institution had a cobblestone lot for visitors. The lot consisted of various, oddly shaped stones. They were mahogany, ultramarine, slate, and charcoal. There was a fountain near the middle of the visitor's lot. It was surrounded by a waist high wall. The wall was made of jagged, grey, rectangular stones.

A bronze statue stood in the middle of the fountain. It was sprinkled with corrosion and mildew. The statue resembled a woman in a strapless gown. Her hair flowed around her shoulders. The bottom of her gown pooled around her feet. Her hands were raised. Her palms faced the cloudy sky. Murky, brown water sprayed from her fingertips. The woman's face was painted with a creepy smile. Her eyebrows pointed down the bridge of her nose. They looked angry. Her lips looked like they were smirking rather than smiling. The left corner of her lips was curled. The right corner was not. There was a crease in the statue's left cheek but not her right.

The Fountain of Hope mental institution was a three story building. It was covered with crooked, red bricks. The windows were bordered with warped, faded wood. Thick, steel bars lay across the windows. A brick arch hovered above the entrance. It was supported by two columns of bricks. A pair of thick, wooden doors covered the entrance. The main roof sloped towards the front and rear of the building. It was tiled with shiny, black shingles. There were three perpendicular peaks. They resided above the entrance and the north and south ends of the building. Brandy parked on a group of colorful cobblestones near the doors covering the entrance. She hopped out and wandered inside.

The first area Brandy came to was the visitor's area. It had a high ceiling covered with rectangles of sheet rock. The sheet rock tiles were dotted with bean shaped holes. The walls

were covered with dull cinder blocks. The floor was tiled diagonally. The tiles were cream and indigo. So, the floor was covered with cream and indigo diamonds. There was a counter near the front entrance. It was chest height. It was trimmed with rough, dented, wooden paneling. The counter formed a rectangle near the entrance of the building.

There were two ladies behind the counter. They sat beside the end of the counter facing the front doors. Their arms were folded on top. A black, rotary telephone lay beside the right arm of the lady sitting on the south side of the counter. A black, rotary telephone lay beside the left arm of the lady sitting on the north side of the counter. The lady on the south side of the counter was blonde. The lady on the north side of the counter was a brunette. They both wore nurse's uniforms. They consisted of white, button up blouses with short sleeves, white, knee length skirts, white stockings, white, high heeled shoes, and white hats resting near the middles of their heads. Their hats and the left breasts of their blouses were stamped with red plus signs. Rows of foldout tables were arranged behind the front desk. There were three rows of four tables. Six steel foldout chairs bordered each table. A pair of slick, steel doors lay along the west wall. They had no windows.

Brandy wandered to the eastern edge of the counter. That was the edge facing the entrance. For most people, the counter was chest height. The top of the counter was even with the bottom of Brandy's chin. Brandy stopped beside the counter and peeked over the top. She spotted a nametag above the blonde lady's right breast. It read "Dixie." The brunette lady's nametag read "Lenore." Violet flashed through barred windows along the eastern wall of the building. It lit pale, dull faces stretched across the front of Dixie and Lenore's skulls. Their eyes were dreary and faded. Their lips were the color of tangerines. Dixie blinked slowly. Fluffy strands of cream colored locks draped the edges of her silky, white cheeks. Dixie's lips peeled



off rows of glowing pearls. Thunder rolled across sheet rock rectangles dotting the ceiling.

"Hi..." Dixie sighed. She plopped her elbow near the edge of the counter. She slipped her chin into her palm and stared into Brandy's eyes. Lenore curled a row of pale, ghostly fingers over the edge of the counter. Her face floated towards the end of the counter and stopped. Pale, enchanting irises near the middle of her face pierced Brandy's pupils. Brandy felt like someone slipped a pair of pins into her eyes. Lenore's head slowly tilted.

"Can we *he-eelp* you with something?" she moaned. Lenore's voice was deep and solemn. Her speech was slow and creepy. It sounded like a cello. Brandy looked into Lenore's eyes. She faced Dixie. Dixie was chewing gum. A bright pink bubble erupted from her vivid, glowing lips. It popped.

"Um..." Brandy groaned. She swallowed. "D-Did Detective Phillips call you?" Brandy faced Lenore. "I'm here to see Daisy Hill." Lenore had dark, droopy eyelids. They opened a little. Her eyebrows lifted.

"Daisy *Hi-iill*?" Lenore requisitioned. Brandy gazed into her Lenore's cold, dead face. Brandy's head weaved up and down. Lenore's head tilted. "So... *Yo-ooou're* Brandy?"

Brandy slid her tongue across the back of her teeth. "Uh... yes."

Dixie's palms dropped on her side of the counter. "*My God...*" she hummed. Brandy's head twisted to the left. She looked into Dixie's pale, grey eyes. Dixie stared back. She looked like a zombie. The fingers of her right hand lifted off the counter. They turned and rolled up. Her index finger unraveled and straightened. It pointed between Brandy's dark, glittery eyes. "*Brandy...*" Dixie rasped. "*Brandy Scott...*" Brandy gazed into Dixie's faint, blurry irises. She exhaled through her nostrils.

"Yeah."

"We *wo-oondered* what happened to her," Lenore grimly hummed. Her voice was deep and melodic. It was like listening to an orchestra of stringed instruments. Lenore's face floated to the edge of the counter again. "Didn't *yo-ooou* do that to her?" Brandy looked at the floor. She glanced at Lenore from the tops of her eye sockets. She licked her lips.

"*What DID you do to her, anyway?*" Dixie groaned. Brandy gritted her teeth. She looked up.

"Well, she put a..." Brandy spread her fingers in front of her face. She pointed them towards her lips. Her eyes drifted to the right. They focused on Lenore's luminescent lips. Brandy lowered her hands and swallowed. "I didn't come here to talk about that." She faced Dixie. "Can I just see her, please?" Lenore peered into Brandy's dark, cryptic eyes. Brandy felt a pair of daggers twisting into her brain. Lenore's head tilted slowly.

"You can have a seat, Ms. Scott," she sang. Her eyelids collapsed then drifted apart. "Ms. Hill will be with you *sho-oortly*." Brandy looked at Lenore's pupils. Brandy's irises glided across her face. They met Dixie's pupils.

"Th-Thanks," Brandy squeezed out. She stared at cream and indigo tiles covering the floor. She inched around a corner of jagged, dented wood blanketing the corner of the counter. Her deep, dark irises wandered to the left corners of her eyes. She thought she could see Dixie and Lenore's faces turning. She felt like they were watching her walk towards tables arranged behind the counter. When Brandy reached the end of the counter, she turned her head a little. She peeked over her shoulder, surreptitiously. She thought she could still see Lenore and Dixie's faces staring her down. It was like their heads spun all the way around. But, Brandy wasn't sure. She didn't want to look up and find out, either. She hugged her belly and returned her eyes to the floor instead.

Brandy curled her fingers around cold, steel round stock. It bordered the backs of steel chairs scattered around tables behind the counter. The chair Brandy grabbed was painted blue. She looked around. Some of the chairs were blue. Some were tan. They were all covered with long, skinny scrapes. Brandy examined the tops of the tables. The edges were dotted with ripped up veneer. The middles of the tables were dingy and yellow. Brandy dragged the blue chair out. It sounded like fingernails scratching a chalk board. Long, languid screeches echoed along cold, cinder blocks bordering the room. Brandy's eyes darted about. She didn't dare look behind her, though. She figured Dixie and Lenore's faces would be staring her down.

Brandy slithered onto a flat, icy seat. Frost from the chair seeped through the thighs of Brandy's indigo jeans. It made hair along Brandy's arms and the back of her neck stand on end. Brandy's teeth chattered. A pillow of heat dropped on Brandy's head. She looked up. A circular, stainless steel vent hovered above Brandy's head. It dangled from the end of a tin shaft. Brandy felt waves of heat falling from the vent. Yet somehow, the room still felt frigid. It *wanted* to be cold. A buzzer barked. It sounded like a chicken squawking. It sliced the chilly air in two. The soles of Brandy's tan loafers grabbed a hold of diamond shaped tiles. Brandy's butt lifted off the chair. The chair scooted away and turned. Brandy's fingers curled in front of her face. Her eyes darted around.

The slick, steel doors along the west wall peeled apart. The one on Brandy's left wandered towards her. The one on Brandy's right wandered away. Brandy stared at the doors in a state of frozen terror. Her heart thumped in her throat. Hummingbirds flapped their wings in her ears. Brandy swallowed. She parted her lips and exhaled a slow breath. Her fingers slipped over the back of her chair. Brandy lowered a shaky butt and a wobbly pair of thighs. She returned them to the icy, slick surface of the steel chair. Brandy stared between the open doors,

impatiently. She couldn't wait to get out of the mental hospital. She planned on talking to Daisy quickly then driving as far away as possible. Two minutes passed. Brandy curled rows of shaky, cornflower fingernails around cold, flat edges bordering the bottom of her seat. She drummed the toes of her loafers against the tips of cream and indigo tiles.

*"Come on..."* Brandy whispered. *"You're killing me."* Brandy heard squeaks echoing down a long hallway. She heard soft rubber gliding along chilly tiles. *"We have wheels..."* Brandy rasped. She eased back, folded her arms over her chest, and crossed her knees. She tapped her shin with the heel of her loafer. An old, cruddy wheelchair rolled around the edge of the left door. It had two big wheels near the back and two tiny wheels out front. The edges of the wheels were wrapped with old, faded rubber. The wheels were made of jagged, rusty spokes. They squeaked when they turned. Old, rusty arm rests hovered above the big wheels. Wadded tufts of foam wrapped the tops of the arm rests. They'd been picked to pieces by mental patients unable to control their fingers. Dingy, faded cloth draped across the seat and the backrest. A pair of rusty, steel pedestals lay between the tiny wheels near the front of the chair.

Daisy Hill was plastered to the chair. She looked like a vegetable. She was dressed in a slick, white blouse dotted with tiny, teal diamonds. Squishy, teal lines bordered the edges of Daisy's blouse. The line cut across the front of the blouse. A pair of white slacks wrapped Daisy's legs. Leather medical restraints were strapped around Daisy's wrists, ankles, and neck. Brandy assumed the neck restraint held her head up. Daisy's skin was white as a ghost. Tufts of long, blonde hair drooped to her shoulders and framed her face. Her eyes were turquoise. They lit up the room. But, they were dull and lifeless. They stared into space, unaware of their surroundings. A nurse wheeled Daisy through rows of tables. Brandy figured the nurse was in her late forties. Her hair was shoulder length. It was full of bouncy, red coils. Most of it was

wrapped into a bun near the back of her head. The rest dangled down her cheeks. The nurse was a little pudgy. Her face was mapped with creases. It was solemn and stern.

Her eyes looked angry. They hid behind a pair of thin, octagonal lenses wrapped with chrome rods. The nurse's eyes were cloudy and blue. Her lips were long, puffy, and mashed together. Her chin stuck out of the bottom of her face like a softball. She wore the same outfit as the girls behind the counter. White, high heels collided with cream and indigo tiles. They were followed inevitably by domineering crashes from the tips of the nurse's shoes. The nurse wheeled Daisy beside Brandy's seat and stopped. Brandy glanced at the nurse's nametag. It read "Helen." Helen stared at Brandy through glints scattered across the lenses of her glasses. A pair of red eyebrows collapsed near the middle of her forehead. Wrinkles stacked across her forehead. The corners of her lips stretched down the edges of her chin.

"You've got five minutes," she grumbled. Helen slid out a steel chair. Highly unpleasant squeals from chair legs scooting across tiles filled the frosty air. Helen plopped down on the opposite side of the table. She crossed a pair of chubby thighs and fluttered the bottom of her skirt around her knees. She raised her palm in front of her lips. She looked at the tips of her nails. Helen had long, well groomed fingernails with white, square tips. The red plus sign on the left breast of Helen's blouse was stitched on top of a pocket. Helen retrieved an emery board from the pocket. She laid the edge of the emery board along the backs of her fingernails. She slid the emery board back and forth. Brandy looked at Daisy. She smelled like shit. Brandy figured Daisy was sitting on a bedpan. She figured she was unable to control her bowels or her bladder.

Brandy noticed an IV. It hung from a chrome rod above Daisy's right shoulder. Brandy assumed Fountain of Hope was giving Daisy saline to keep her hydrated. Brandy glanced at

Daisy's fingers. Chunks of crimson nail polish still dotted her nails. Brandy looked into Daisy's eyes. Rather, she looked *at* her eyes. Daisy stared at a spot on the floor behind Brandy. A line of saliva ran from the corner of Daisy's lips to the bottom of her chin. Brandy noticed lines of bloody mucus dribbling from Daisy's nostrils to her lips. Brandy swallowed. She turned Daisy's chair so it was facing the table. Then, Brandy scooted her chair beside her and looked up. She laid her palm on Daisy's shoulder. She stared at the side of her head. She felt terrible.

*"Hi, Daisy..."* she groaned. She cleared her throat. *"Do you remember me?"* Daisy stared at cinder blocks near the floor across the room. She didn't budge. Brandy wiggled Daisy's hand. *"I'm right here,"* she remarked. *"See?"* Daisy's eyelids fluttered closed. Her head tilted back.

*"Mmm..."* she grumbled. A tiny snort erupted from her nostrils. *"Mem..."* Brandy looked at Helen. Helen looked up. She sighed impatiently and shook her head. She extended her pinkie. She began sanding it with her emery board. Brandy swallowed. She patted Daisy's arm.

*"Daisy, I need your help,"* she continued. Her eyebrows sagged towards the outer corners of her eyes. *"Daisy? Can you hear me?"*

Daisy's lips parted. *"Um..."* she groaned. Her head toppled to the side. Drool began dribbling out of the corner of her lips. It pooled down the side of her gown.

*"Bleh..."* Helen moaned. She removed a handkerchief from the pocket of her blouse. She reached across the table and swabbed Daisy's cheek. Brandy looked at Helen. She turned and stared at Daisy's temple. She sobbed.

*"Oh, God..."* she groaned. She curled her fingers around Daisy's biceps. She laid her cheek on her arm. *"Daisy, I'm so sorry..."* she gasped. She buried her eyes in the sleeve of Daisy's gown. Helen looked Brandy over.

"She a friend of yours?" she barked.

Brandy looked up. "*No...*" she sobbed. She wiped her eyes and sniffled. "No. She tried to kill me." Helen's eyebrows slid up her forehead. Her forehead folded in five different places. Brandy stared at the side of Daisy's head. "Daisy, I don't understand," she continued. "About the sets... and the integrals..." Daisy's lips peeled apart. Her eyelids raised a little.

"*Quajetic...*" she mumbled. "*Quadratic sets...*" Her eyelids fluttered. Her head tilted forward. Drool began dribbling from her lips. It pooled along the left breast of Daisy's blouse. Brandy looked down. She could see Daisy's nipple through her sopping wet shirt. Brandy looked up. She stared at the sides of Daisy's flashy, blue irises in disbelief. Helen laid the tips of her fingers against Daisy's forehead. She flipped her head back and tilted it to the side. She wiped drool from Daisy's lips. Then, she glared into Brandy's glittery, dark eyes.

"Are we done here? She does much better when she's lying on her back." Brandy collapsed in her chair. She laid her fingers on her thighs and stared at the floor. She nodded, slowly. Helen tucked her emery board into the pocket of her blouse. "Thank God," she belched. She scooted her chair back. Teeth shattering squalls echoed off the walls. Helen clacked her ivory heels around the table, grabbed a hold of a pair of handles sticking out of the back of Daisy's wheelchair, and rolled Daisy towards the west end of the room. She looked over her shoulder when she made it to the doors. "Lenore!" she called. "You left the doors open again!" There was a sound like a chicken squawking. Brandy scrambled out of her seat and hopped to her feet. She stumbled right out of her shoes. Her tan loafers bounced under the table like basketballs.

Helen and Daisy receded. The slick, steel doors across the room closed behind them. Brandy sighed. She noticed the lenses of her glasses were near the tip of her nose. Brandy laid

the end of her finger against a chrome rod connecting her lenses. She slid her glasses up the bridge of her nose and looked over her shoulder. She saw the backs of Dixie and Lenore's heads. She didn't see their faces like she thought she would. Brandy inhaled a fresh breath through her nostrils and exhaled through her lips. She faced forward and glanced under the table. She slipped her feet back into her shoes and skedaddled.



## Chapter 5: "Seven O'Clock"

The chapel at the Gillian Memorial Cemetery was surrounded by large panes of stained glass. They were filled with intricate artwork. The panels were fifteen feet tall. They were separated by two foot sections of vomit colored stucco. A pair of tall, heavy doors stood along the east wall of the building. The rest of the east wall was divided into two panels of stained glass. They were stacked with prisms of glass fragments. The stained glass panel spanning the south end of the wall was decorated with an image of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

He was visible from head to toe. He was looking towards the doors covering the entrance. The rest of his body faced forward. The image of Jesus had sparkly, blue eyes. Parallelograms, trapezoids, triangles, and random rhombuses of brown glass swirled from the top of his head. They draped past a pair of broad, strong shoulders. A thick, brown beard surrounded his lips and chin. A giant, golden orb surrounded his head. Glowing strands of white and red fabric draped his body. His hands rested at his sides. His palms faced forward. The image of Jesus was surrounded by shards of turquoise, indigo, and white glass. The window was a replacement for one Jeff and Chuck crashed through several months prior. It was nearly identical to the original.

The stained glass window along the north side of the wall was decorated with an image of the Virgin Mary. She wore a white robe. A cornflower blue shawl bordered with gold was wrapped around her shoulders. Mary's face was soft and pale. It faced the sky. Her eyes were closed. A white hood was drawn around her face. A strip of umber colored hair was showing below the rim of the hood. Mary held a little, white lamb in her arms. The lamb's face and arms were royal blue. Its body was made of jagged, white shards. Mary's fingers were tiny and pale. They were tucked under the lamb's belly. The bottom of Mary's robe was wrapped around a pair

of pale feet. Black and indigo crystals surrounded Mary and the lamb. They were dotted with tiny, white diamonds of glass. A diamond near the upper, right corner of the window stood out. It was much larger than the others.

Two sections of pews lay across the floor of the chapel. They faced west. A floor made of thick, golden wood lay across the west end of the chapel. A matching podium stood near the middle. It was between both sections of pews. The wood floor on the west end of the chapel was a foot higher than the rest. The remaining floor was covered with white, grey, and tan stones. They were pentagonal, but they were oddly shaped. The pews were made of slick, umber colored oak. Long, plush mats lay across the seats. They were wrapped with red velvet. Bat shit stood on the north side of the podium. He faced the pews. Bat Shit was Jamaican. He stood six, three. He weighed two hundred pounds. His eyes were deep and dark. His skin was the color of tar. Rows of thick, puffy dread locks framed his face. They drooped to Bat Shit's lower back from the tip of his scalp.

Bat Shit wore a black, sleeveless undershirt. A pair of bulging, coal colored biceps erupted from stretchy, cotton straps surrounding his neck. Bat Shit's skin was oily and slick. It didn't matter how cool or dry the air around him was. His skin stayed slippery. It was like a fish slathered with dish detergent. A pair of charcoal jeans was wadded around thick, rigid limbs threaded into his waist. Frank stood on the south side of the podium. He looked like a wise guy. He was in his early thirties. His hair was thick, black, and slicked back. A pair of shaggy, raven colored eyebrows rested above Frank's eyes. His irises were the color of maple syrup. Frank's face was painted with passive solemnity. His body was draped with a black, wool blazer, a crisp, black shirt, a black neck tie, and black, wool trousers. His feet were stuffed into a pair of shiny, black shoes.

Frank looked across the top of the podium. He was staring at the side of Bat Shit's head. Frank reached inside his blazer. A pair of buttons kept it wrapped around his belly. Frank slipped his fingers above the top button, dropped them into a pocket inside his jacket, and curled them around an icy, steel handle. The handle was trimmed on both sides with slick chunks of wood.

"I think we should let 'em have it as soon as they walk in," Frank grumbled. He retrieved his hand from his blazer. His fingers were wrapped around a shiny, black, 9MM automatic. A chrome colored cylinder was threaded onto the end. It was as big around as a can of beans. It was slick and shiny like a mirror. Frank aimed the pistol towards the east end of the chapel. He pointed it towards the doors and closed his left eye. "Everyone except the girl." Frank's bushy eyebrows lowered in the middle. The left corner of his lips curled towards his forehead. "Then, we grab her and make like the wind." Bat Shit's head twisted to the right. Rows of dread locks drooping from his head swirled around his shoulders. Bat Shit glared at the side of Frank's head.

"Frank, mon!" he shouted. "Put dat thing away before you hurt somebody!"

Frank looked across the top of the podium. "You're one to talk, Mr. A-K." Bat Shit switched a pair of thick, soft lips to the left side of his face. He leaned back and looked behind the podium. He bent over and snatched something off the floor. He came up with an AK-47 lying across his palms. It was mostly black. But, it was trimmed with wood near the front, on the sides of the grip, and around the shoulder stock. A banana clip was sticking out of the bottom near the middle. It held fifty rounds. A chrome augments was threaded onto the end of the AK as well. It was as big around as a roll of paper towels. It was made of shiny steel just like Frank's. Bat Shit looked at Frank.

"Yeah, but at least I'm not waving it around, mon!" He motioned towards the east end of

the chapel with his head. His dread locks flopped around like wind chimes in a downdraft.

"Acting like I'm gwan try to shoot someone!" Jeff and Lisa sat on a pair of steel chairs. Jeff's was covered with slick, tan paint. Lisa's chair was blue. Jeff and Lisa's hands lay between Jeff's left thigh and Lisa's right. Their fingers were woven together. Lisa's head lay on Jeff's shoulder. Her eyes were closed. Thick strands of auburn hair dangled from the tip of her scalp and curled around Jeff's elbow. Jeff stared at the back of Frank and Bat Shit's heads. His free hand floated across his lap. His fingers rested on the face of a wrist watch. The watch was wrapped around Jeff's left wrist. The body of the watch was made of shiny chrome. Jeff laid his first and second fingers on a pair of buttons near the bottom of the watch face. He pressed down. There was a pair of beeps.

Frank and Bat Shit's heads jerked back. Their eyelids peeled away. Their teeth mashed together. Their firearms dropped from their fingers. Frank and Bat Shit's heads began wiggling. Their arms began jiggling. Their legs got all wobbly and unstable. Jeff lifted his fingers and tilted his head.

"Why don't you *both* put your fucking guns down before I kill you?" he requisitioned. Frank and Bat Shit looked at each other and shivered. They peeked over their shoulders. Lisa's eyelids peeled apart. Lisa lifted her head and looked around.

"What I miss?" Flashes from a thousand rainbows burst through glass shards surrounding the chapel. Thunder rolled down the windows like rocks tumbling down a hill. Rows of cherry red tiles lay above the windows. The roof of the chapel was made of trapezoids. One trapezoid lay above each wall. The trapezoids angled towards the middle of the building. The center of the roof was a four sided pyramid. Triangles surrounding the pyramid were less steep than trapezoids below.

Buckets of rain scattered across tiles dotting the roof. It poured down the surface of colored glass covering the walls. It flowed to the ground like a raging river. It bounced off thick, jade colored grass blades surrounding the chapel. A stone path curled across the grass. It was made of flat, grey stones. The stones lay at the bottom of a one inch pool of rain water. The stone path led from the thick, heavy doors on the east wall of the chapel to a lot along the north side. The north lot was covered with crooked, red bricks. They were also under a pool of water. Some spots were six inches deep. Others were barely wet.

Clark Street ran beside the brick lot. It was a narrow, two lane road. It was a short, neighborhood street near the middle of New Jack City. A gathering of weeping willows lay along the opposite side of the street from the chapel. They'd been there hundreds of years. The weeping willows on the north side of Clark Street were three blocks long. They consisted of droopy leaves dangling from tips of thin, scraggly branches. Light, lazy foliage dragged the tops of long, narrow grass blades. The shaggy, overgrown congregation was a haven for moths and mosquitoes. It was also sprinkled with one inch balls of orange light. The vivid speckles were the glow of lightning bugs swirling along the edges of willow branches. It was raining cats and dogs outside the weeping willows. But below the canopy, the rain was hardly noticeable.

Chuck's pickup came creeping down Clark Street. It slithered down the road from the east. A pair of round, scratched up headlights surrounding the radiator projected dim beams through sheets of rain. Chuck's truck was an old, junky piece of crap. It was a seventies model. The hood, tailgate, bed, and right, front fender were touched with faded, yellow paint. The front, left fender was cherry red. The doors were covered with grey primer. The top of the truck was painted with rust. The rear fenders were white. The headlights switched off one block from the chapel. Icy beads slinging across Chuck's pickup reflected a network of white squiggles

scorching the sky. A long, jagged growl rolled across pavement blanketing Clark Street.

Chuck's truck inched off the north side of the road. It crept under weeping willow leaves and stopped. The brakes squealed like feedback from a microphone.

The driver's side door opened with a crunch. The hinges groaned until the door stopped opening. Chuck hopped out and looked towards the south side of the road. He spotted a cruddy, white van parked on the crooked, brick parking lot beside the Gillian Memorial Cemetery chapel. The van's paint was faded and peeling. Rust was showing in places. The van only had three windows. There was a windshield, a driver's side window, and a front, passenger window. Two doors surrounded the cab of the van. Twin doors covered the back. A long, sliding door lay across the passenger's side of the van. Chuck looked over his shoulder. L.I.N. was sliding across old, ratty fabric covering the seat of his truck. Chuck's pickup had no back seat. The front seat was a long, bench seat. It was trimmed with old material that felt like a burlap sack.

Chuck looked past L.I.N. Hal was getting out on the other side. He dropped onto a carpet of thin, soggy grass. Then, he turned and tapped the edge of the passenger side door. The door groaned like an old staircase. It inched towards the body of the pickup and bounced off the door frame. It rolled away from the body and rattled on its hinges. Hal sighed. He laid his fingers on the edge of the door and shoved it towards the body of the pickup. The door slammed shut like a safe. L.I.N. slipped her calves over the end of the seat. Chuck looked down. His girlfriend wasn't wearing anything on her feet. The nails of her left foot were painted yellow. The nails of her right foot were magenta. Chuck looked up. He narrowed his eyes.

"What happened to your shoes?" he inquired. L.I.N. looked up. The outer corners of her eyebrows sagged. L.I.N. squashed her neck with her shoulders and threw her hands out at her sides.

"I can't remember." She hopped off the edge of the seat. Chilly, soaking wet grass squashed below the soles of her feet. Icy rain water pooled around her heels and toes. It was oddly comforting. The bottom rim of L.I.N.'s tangerine skirt floated down her thighs and swirled around her knees. L.I.N. searched the shoulders of her grey hoodie with the tips of her fingers. She found the rim of her hood. She slipped her hood over the top of her head and looked up. Her eyes met Chuck's. Chuck smirked. L.I.N.'s legs turned into noodles. Her heart thumped in her ears. At least... she thought it did. L.I.N. wasn't sure she even *had* a heart. Her cheeks felt flush. She looked at the ground and swallowed. She sifted through thoughts. She remembered a question she thought up earlier. She wondered if Chuck was in love with her. But, that was silly. As soon as she remembered thinking that, she felt queasy. She worried she might throw up. She had to say something. It was driving her crazy.

"L.I.N.?" Chuck inquired. He reached beside L.I.N. and smacked the door of his truck. It brushed past L.I.N.'s arm with a groan. It smashed into the body of the truck. L.I.N. gasped. She hopped away and nearly lost her balance. She laid the tips of her fingers against the body of Chuck's pickup to steady herself. Chuck fought back a smile. He cupped his fingers over his lips and showed L.I.N. his palm. "Oh, I'm sorry!" he shouted. "Are you alright?" L.I.N. stared at frosty rain water pooled across her insteps. Her mouth felt like it was stuffed with peanut butter. She swallowed as best she could and looked up. She felt her hands jiggling.

"Um, um, um..." she grumbled. She tried to lick her lips. Her tongue felt like a piece of rubber. Licking her lips did no good. L.I.N. returned her tongue to her mouth and tried to swallow. "Uh... Chuck?"

Chuck inhaled through his lips. "Oh, L.I.N..." he hummed. He patted L.I.N.'s elbow. "You look *really* nervous." L.I.N. exhaled a shaky laugh. She dropped her eyes in her palms

and tried to relax. Chuck folded his arms over his chest. Hal stood on the other side of the pickup, watching. He folded his arms on the roof of Chuck's pickup. He laid his chin on top. "Are you okay?" Chuck asked. L.I.N. looked up. She lowered her hands. Chuck noticed them wiggling. He could tell something was on L.I.N.'s mind. But, he wasn't sure what.

"*Chuck...*" L.I.N. sighed. She sloshed as much saliva as she could towards the back of her tongue and swallowed. "Y-You remember earlier. Right?"

Chuck furrowed his brow. "Huh?" L.I.N. sighed, impatiently. She dropped her forehead in her palms and shook her head. She rolled her rubbery tongue across her lips and looked up. She lowered the outer corners of her eyebrows.

"You said... you were in love with somebody else. Remember?" Chuck raised his eyebrows. He gasped.

"Oh." Now, Chuck knew what was going on. He couldn't believe it. He nodded. "Right." He extended his index finger and wobbled his hand. "I'm not in love with Brandy." Chuck lowered his hand. "I'm in love with someone else." L.I.N. heard hummingbirds in her ears. She lowered her head and pinched her eyes shut. She fought off as much nervousness as she could and looked up. She took a breath and stepped towards Chuck.

"Is it *me*?"

Chuck exhaled through a smile. "Oh, L.I.N..." He took a step forward. His face and L.I.N.'s were within inches of each other. Chuck looked down. L.I.N. looked up. L.I.N. and Chuck gazed into each other's eyes. Chuck slipped his fingers inside the rim of L.I.N.'s hood. He slid his fingers through sapphire strands along the back of L.I.N.'s head. The hood of L.I.N.'s jacket slid down her hair and wadded around her shoulders. "Yes," Chuck replied. "Yes, I'm in love with *you*." He swallowed. "We were... together." Chuck crinkled his eyes. "Before this



happened." Chuck bobbed his eyeballs around. "Before you lost your memories." L.I.N. sobbed. She curled her fingers over her lips and tried to swallow. Her mouth felt wet again.

"Really?" she asked. Chuck smiled. He grabbed a hold of L.I.N.'s fingers and peeled them away from her face. Then, he laid his lips on hers. L.I.N. didn't know how to kiss anymore. Chuck could tell. He fought back laughter and parted his lips. L.I.N. copied him. Chuck wrapped his lips around L.I.N.'s bottom lip. L.I.N. wrapped hers around Chuck's top lip. They kissed each other, separated their faces, and gazed into each other's eyes. L.I.N. couldn't believe what just happened. She was filled with emotions. Chuck was used to it. He laid his fingers on L.I.N.'s cheek and smiled.

"Yes. Really."

"Oh... you guys!" Brandy exclaimed. Chuck looked to his left. L.I.N. and Hal looked to their right. Brandy was standing in front of Chuck's truck. She was also hiding under the weeping willows. She dashed across soggy blades of grass and threw her arms around Chuck and L.I.N.'s waists. Hal chuckled. So did Chuck. L.I.N. didn't know *what* to do. She looked at Chuck, timidly. Chuck smiled. He grabbed a hold of L.I.N.'s fingers and threw them over Brandy's head. He and L.I.N. wrapped their arms around Brandy's shoulders.

"Hi, Brandy," Chuck remarked. He looked over the top of Brandy's head. He spotted her Civil. It was parked half a block away. Chuck figured it was there the whole time. He just missed it. He laid his cheek on the top of Brandy's head. "I didn't know if I'd ever *see* you again." Chuck slid his fingers along the back of Brandy's squiggly hair. "Are you okay, now?"

Brandy shook her head. "*No...*" She let go and backed away. She looked at Chuck and sniffled. "But, I can't get through this." She looked at L.I.N. "Not without *you* guys." Brandy laid her palms on her lower back. She looked at Chuck. "I see L.I.N. got her memories back."

Chuck shook his head. "No." Brandy squinted. She looked at L.I.N.

"You still don't have your memories back?" L.I.N. stared through the lenses of Brandy's glasses. She shook her head. Brandy pointed at L.I.N.'s chest.

"You mean, you two..." She looked at Chuck. She inhaled through her lips. "Oh, my God! Really?"

Chuck snickered. "Yes, Brandy." L.I.N. looked into Chuck's eyes. She smiled. Chuck smiled back. He offered his hands. L.I.N. laid her fingers in his palms. Chuck tugged her towards him and snaked his arm around her waist. He and L.I.N. faced Brandy. "She thought me and *you* were together."

L.I.N. fought off a smile. "Shut-up," she remarked. Brandy looked into L.I.N.'s eyes. She took a breath.

"Oh no, L.I.N..." She pointed between L.I.N. and Chuck. "It's *you* two. You've *always* been together." Brandy pointed her fingertips towards her chest. "*I'm* the lonely freak with all the problems. Not you." Brandy looked down. She slipped her fingers through her hair and scratched the back of her head. "*Stupid hair...*" she whispered. L.I.N. looked at Chuck. Chuck faced her. He took a breath.

"*It's complicated,*" he whispered. He looked over his shoulder. He heard a car approaching. Icarus' car appeared beside Chuck's truck. The headlights were off. Icarus was driving around in a four door, eighties model car. It had a flat body with straight edges. It was dabbed with faded, grey paint. The driver's side door was caved in. A network of squiggles connected the dent in the door to the driver's side tail light. The driver's side door and the passenger's side door swung open. Icarus hopped out of the driver's side. A white, wool jacket was wrapped around his upper body. The jacket's hood was drawn around Icarus' face. Rows of

cameras spiraled around the sleeves, trunk, and hood of the jacket. The cameras had shutters that looked like human irises. They were different colors. Some were blue. Some were green. Some were brown. And, some were hazel. Clear, plastic domes covered the cameras.

Icarus had long, black hair that stood on end. His eyes were different colors. The left one was blue like the sky. It was always half shut. Icarus' right eye was tan. It stayed wide and alert. Icarus' face was thin and bony. It was dabbled with long, slender scars. A pair of wires dangled from his lips. They connected Icarus' tongue to cameras spotting his jacket. The collar of an olive polo was showing above a zipper along the front of his jacket. A pair of gold colored khakis was wrapped around his legs. A pair of white, snake skin boots was wrapped around his feet. A red umbrella with white bands poked out of the passenger side of the cab. It popped open and tilted back. Detective Phillips hopped out and stood underneath.

She had shoulder length, blonde hair. It was straight, but it curled at the ends. A pair of bright blue eyes lay across the middle of her face. They brightened up the dark, murky space below the weeping willows. Detective Phillips wore a white trench coat, a turtleneck with rainbow colored bands, black trousers, and brown boots. Chuck faced the side of L.I.N.'s head.

*"Forgot something,"* he whispered. He wandered beside his truck, yanked open the driver's side door, and flipped the back of the seat forward. Detective Phillips and Icarus closed the doors of Icarus' car. They stomped across wet, squishy grass and joined the others. L.I.N. turned around and faced them. Brandy stared into Phillips' glowing, blue eyes.

"Hi, Laura," she remarked. She turned to Icarus. "Icky." Icarus narrowed his right eye. His left eye was *already* narrow. Brandy folded her arms over her chest. "So, what's this 'plan' you were telling me about?" Chuck shut the door to his pickup. He stood beside L.I.N. and faced Icarus and Phillips. L.I.N. looked down. A black umbrella with a wooden, hook shaped

handle was dangling from the fingers of Chuck's right hand. Detective Phillips looked into Chuck's shiny, golden eyes. She shrugged.

"Why didn't you tell her about the plan?"

Chuck shrugged. "Why didn't *you*?" Detective Phillips narrowed her eyes. A pair of thin, blonde eyebrows pointed down the bridge of her nose. Chuck looked over his shoulder. "Jeff wants *you*," he explained. Brandy scrunched up her face. She threw her hands out at her sides. "That's what this whole thing's been about." Brandy stared into Chuck's eyes. She retrieved her arms and folded them over her chest.

"Is *that* what you came to tell me?" She bobbed her eyeballs around. "At the pharmacy?"

Chuck nodded. "Yes."

Brandy nodded. "So... what's the plan?" Chuck faced forward. He stared into Phillips' pale face. He looked down. He spotted L.I.N.'s hand. He switched the umbrella to his other hand. Then, he curled his fingers around L.I.N.'s. He looked up.

"Forget the plan," he replied.

Detective Phillips turned her head without looking away. "What?" L.I.N. turned her head. She stared at Chuck's temple. Chuck faced her. He smiled. L.I.N. smiled back. Chuck faced Detective Phillips. He popped his umbrella open. He raised it above his and L.I.N.'s heads.

"Follow my lead," he instructed. L.I.N. looked Icarus over. She studied multicolored shutters dotting his coat. She looked into his eyes.

"Your jacket looks weird," she remarked.

Icarus shrugged. "So does your hair."

Jeff and Lisa sat in their chairs. Bat Shit and Frank stood near the podium awaiting their "guests." The fingers of Jeff's left hand and the fingers of Lisa's right hand were tied in a knot. Jeff twirled a shiny, black flash disk between the thumb and index finger of his right hand. He held the disk in front of the lenses of his glasses. He studied its slick, plastic case. It reflected colorful speckles of glass surrounding the chapel. The tall, heavy doors across the room popped open. The sound of rain battering thick blades of grass bounced off the backs of pews. Thunder rattled stained glass windows. Jeff slipped the flash drive into the front, right pocket of his tan corduroys. He looked down a path of stones between rows of pews. Chuck Parker, L.I.N., Brandy Scott, Hal Damon, Detective Laura Phillips, and Icarus Ulrich wandered in. The doors swung closed behind them. The chapel walls shook when they closed. Chuck and Detective Phillips deposited their umbrellas beside the doors.

Detective Phillips' fingers were wrapped around the grip of a 9MM automatic. Detective Phillips flattened against the stained glass window on the north side of the doors. The back of her head lay against the Virgin Mary's belly. Phillips laid the backs of her thumbs over her heart. The hammer of her pistol rested against her sternum. Icarus whirled towards the other side of the doors. He landed on all fours below the stained glass image of Jesus along the south side of the wall. His hood was drawn. A pair of wires dangled from his lips. Hal stood beside him. He folded a pair of golden arms over his chest and stared across the chapel. Chuck, L.I.N., and Brandy approached the front of the chapel. L.I.N. and Chuck led the way. Jeff looked between them. They were holding hands. Jeff stared at knots made from L.I.N. and Chuck's fingers. He tilted his head.

"Interesting," he mused. Lisa looked to her right. She was staring at a fountain of fiery hair sprouting from Jeff's temple. Jeff uncurled his fingers. He hopped to his feet. He wandered

to the end of the thick, wood floor near the front of the chapel. He stared past the tips of Chuck and L.I.N.'s shoulders. He peered between the lenses of Brandy's spectacles. Brandy looked back, nervously. Her legs wobbled like stacks of cottage cheese. "Well, well, well," Jeff remarked. Frank reached inside his jacket. He wadded his fingers around the 9MM he was showing off earlier. "Just the girl I wanted to see," Jeff continued. Chuck and L.I.N. stopped near the podium. Brandy stopped behind Chuck. She laid the tips of her fingers on his back and peeked over his shoulder. Chuck smirked.

"It's okay, Brandy. Don't worry."

Jeff grinned. "I was hoping you'd deliver the goods." Jeff shoved his fingers into the front, right pocket of his corduroys. "And, you didn't disappoint." Jeff took out the flash drive he was playing with earlier. He dangled it in front of Chuck's eyes. Chuck parted his lips. He took a breath.

"No, Jeff." He exhaled. "You don't understand." Chuck let go of L.I.N.'s hand. He stepped aside, turned, and held out his hand. Brandy gazed into Chuck's bright, brown eyes. She laid a row of shaky fingers in his palm. Chuck led Brandy out front and looked at Jeff. Brandy looked up, nervously. Chuck patted Brandy's shoulder. "You see, Jeff?" Chuck requisitioned. "Do you see my friend Brandy, standing here?" Jeff stared into Chuck's eyes. He tilted his head.

"I see her, Chuck."

Chuck nodded, confidently. "Well..." he hummed. "Go ahead. Take a good, long look." Jeff looked to his right. He gazed into Brandy's root beer colored eyes. Brandy shook like a leaf. She stared back, cautiously. Her throat felt like it was tied in a knot. Jeff's eyes followed wavy strips of chocolate colored hair sprouting from Brandy's scalp. They wandered down creases woven into olive colored cotton surrounding Brandy's neck. They stopped near the tips

of Brandy's tiny breasts. Jeff smirked. He looked at Chuck.

"I like where this is going."

"No, go ahead," Chuck continued. "Take a photograph, if you'd like." Lisa wandered up. She stood beside Jeff and folded her arms over her chest. She narrowed her eyes and stared at Chuck's face.

"If I go up front and use the restroom," she inquired, "will I be back by the time you're making your point?" Chuck stared through his ex-girlfriend's fiery, blue eyes. They glowed like they were filled with light emitting diodes.

"I'm not trading Brandy for L.I.N.'s memories," Chuck replied. "*That's* the point I'm trying to make." He looked at Jeff. "Get a good look at Brandy, Jeff." He laid his fingers on Brandy's shoulders. "Because this is as close as you're going to get to her." Brandy's lips quivered. She slipped her arms around Chuck's waist and relaxed against his chest. She laid her cheek on his shoulder and looked into Jeff's eyes. L.I.N. wandered towards them. She threw her arms around Chuck and Brandy's waists. She peeked over Brandy's shoulder. Jeff squinted. He was not amused. He threw his arms out at his sides.

"But, now you have nothing," he replied. "The sex toy doesn't even know who you are, anymore." Jeff looked at Brandy. He grinned. "And, I *know* you're not *this* desperate."

Chuck pressed his lips together. "Mm..." He patted Brandy's shoulders. Brandy let go of Chuck's waist. Chuck stepped behind her. He took L.I.N.'s hand and looked up. "You see. Here's the thing." He snaked his arms around L.I.N.'s waist. He turned and looked into her glittery, jade colored eyes. L.I.N. gazed back. She inhaled a pair of shaky breaths. Chuck laid his lips on hers. L.I.N. closed her eyes and tilted her head. L.I.N. and Chuck sucked each other's lips then pried them apart. They faced Jeff. The ends of L.I.N.'s lips curled towards her

forehead. She laid the side of her head against Chuck's chest and hugged his belly. Chuck gazed into Jeff's sparkly, blue eyes and grinned. Jeff slid his lips to the side of his face. He thought a moment. He folded his arms over his chest.

"You had another copy of L.I.N.'s memories, huh?"

Chuck blinked. "Right. You just keep telling yourself that." The left edge of Jeff's upper lip slipped up his teeth. It wandered towards his nostril and twitched. Jeff pointed between Chuck's eyes.

"Fuck you, Parker." He pointed at L.I.N.'s forehead. "Fuck *you*..." He turned and motioned towards Brandy's chest. "And fuck you *too*, you stupid slut!"

Chuck raised his palms. "Jeff... you lost this one. Just get over it." Jeff slipped his hand into the front, left pocket of his trench coat. He took out his smart phone. He held it near his face and slid his finger across the screen.

"We'll see about that." Jeff tapped the screen a couple of times. Chuck bowed his head. He pinched the bridge of his nose.

"*Jeff...*" he groaned. He looked up. "We installed a firewall, you dipshit." He licked his lips. "And, we changed L.I.N.'s login password." Jeff stared at the screen of his smart phone. He shook his head.

"*You've gotta be kidding me...*" he mumbled under his breath. He raised the phone above his head. He slammed it into golden planks of wood lying across the front of the chapel. Jeff's smart phone shattered like a drinking glass. Electrical diodes, fragments of crystal, and tiny pieces of white plastic scattered along the floor. Lisa looked down. She threw her hands over her head and hopped away.

"Whoa, Jeez!" she shrieked. She glared at the side of her boyfriend's head. Jeff glared at



Chuck. His face was twisted up like he'd bitten into an onion. He shook his head furiously.

"This isn't over, Chuck Parker." L.I.N.'s eyes followed Jeff's right hand. The shiny, black flash stick still dangled from his fingers. L.I.N. watched it very carefully. Her eyes wandered back and forth, studying it. Jeff pointed between Chuck's eyes. "*You* got lucky! That's all that happened here!" L.I.N. yanked Chuck's arms off her waist. She hopped onto the wooden floor, snatched the disk from Jeff's fingers, and dashed behind the podium. Jeff whirled his arms above his head. He flapped his arms and hopped around like a monkey. "Ah! Ah!" he shouted. "Get her!" He pointed towards L.I.N. and looked towards the podium. "Get her, you douche bags!" Chuck looked to his left. He slipped his fingers through shaggy, black hair dangling from his head. He balled his fingers into a pair of fists.

"Run, L.I.N.!" he shouted. L.I.N. scrambled around the outer edge of the first pew on the south side of the chapel. She ducked behind the arm rest. Chuck slipped his hand inside his red, plaid jacket. He yanked out his 44 Special. He nudged Brandy in the side and dashed away. He hopped behind the first pew on the north side of the chapel. Brandy followed him like a puppy. She fell to her knees and crawled behind him. She laid her fingers on Chuck's back and peeked over his shoulder. Jeff motioned towards the pew Chuck and Brandy hid behind.

"God damn it!" he shouted. "Epic fail!" Detective Phillips aimed her pistol between Jeff's eyes. She thumbed back the hammer.

"Freeze, Forrester!" she shouted. "We've got the building surrounded!" Frank stared across the chapel. He narrowed his eyes.

"No, you don't." He reached behind the podium. He lifted a black, rectangular box. It was made of sturdy plastic. A long, black antenna was sticking out of the top. Detective Phillips figured it was a police scanner. She slid her lips to the side of her face.

"Damn it..." She lowered her weapon and looked at Icarus. "That *never* works." Brandy breathed on the tip of Chuck's left ear. She was panting like a dog. Chuck felt her heart beating. Brandy's heart pounded through the tips of her fingers. It wobbled Chuck's ribs like teeter totters. Chuck looked over his shoulder. He tilted his head back, closed his eyes, and inhaled through his nostrils.

*"Take a couple of deep breaths through your nose,"* he whispered. Brandy inhaled through her nostrils. She filled her lungs and exhaled through her lips. She swallowed.

*"If L.I.N. gets her memories off that thing, will she remember all this?"*

Chuck nodded. *"She'll remember everything that happened today, plus everything that happened before."*

Brandy nodded. *"Does she know what to do?"*

Chuck pressed his lips together. *"I showed her how to do that, earlier."* He looked towards the southern end of the chapel. *"I wrote a script to make it easier for her. But, I don't know if she'll remember how to run it."* Frank yanked out his pistol. He aimed it at the outer end of the first pew on his right.

"I say we blow her away, Jeff."

Jeff kicked the podium. "Shut-up, Frank." L.I.N. stared at the fingers of her left hand. They jiggled like a handful of night crawlers. L.I.N. fought to catch her breath.

*"Oh, God..."* she rasped. The tip of L.I.N.'s thumb folded back. A USB port was hiding underneath. *"God help me..."* L.I.N. popped a cap off the end of Jeff's flash drive. She slipped the end of the flash stick into the end of her thumb. A black arrow with a white border danced across her vision field. It clicked an icon near the lower, left corner. A terminal opened. There was a whisper. It sounded like a zipper ripping open. A 9MM slug danced across the top of the

pew. L.I.N. felt it whiz over the top of her head. She lowered her head a little. She exhaled a shaky breath. `"/update"` appeared near the top of the terminal window L.I.N. opened. L.I.N. issued the value for a return key. A script Chuck left in L.I.N.'s home folder mounted Jeff's flash drive. It entered the top directory of the drive and entered a command, `"lin -u."`

L.I.N.'s eyelids closed halfway. They froze. L.I.N. stared into space for eight seconds. Then, her eyelids fluttered. She shook her head and looked around. She entered `"cd /lin"` into the terminal window. She followed that with `"unmt /mnt/flash."` That unmounted Jeff's flash drive. L.I.N. yanked the flash stick out of her thumb. She closed the terminal window and looked across the chapel. She spotted Chuck and Brandy. Chuck peeked around the edge of the pew. A 9MM sized hole appeared in the side of the pew. Chuck gritted his teeth and backed away. L.I.N. sighed. She returned the cap to Jeff's flash drive. She tossed it over the back of the pew between her and the front of the chapel. It toppled through the air. It landed in front of the tips of Jeff's saddle shoes. Jeff looked down. He tilted his head.

"Very funny." He looked to his right. Bat Shit's head turned. His dread locks flopped around his shoulders. He looked into Jeff's eyes and bobbed his head. "Lift it," Jeff instructed. Bat Shit looked towards the outer end of the pew L.I.N. hid behind. He raised his hand and spread his fingers. He began whispering Jamaican. The edge of the pew drifted off the floor. It wandered two feet and stopped. It stood at a slant. The north end of the pew stayed attached to the floor. Detective Phillips studied the bench, carefully. Her bright blue eyes wandered back and forth.

"Um..." L.I.N. was on her knees. She sat on her heels and glanced around, nervously.

"Uh-oh."

Chuck and Brandy stared across the aisle. *"Oh, my..."* Chuck hummed. Frank aimed his

pistol between L.I.N.'s breasts. He grinned.

"Hi, there." Phillips shook her head. She aimed her 9MM at the side of Frank's head and pulled the trigger. A hollow point slug whirled out of the end of her pistol. When it met the air, it exploded. Tiny fragments of brass spattered Detective Phillips' knuckles and forearms.

"Ah!" Phillips shouted. Her pistol dropped from her fingertips. It bounced along pentagonal stones arranged along the floor. Phillips slung her hands around like a pair of wet rags. "Shit." She looked towards the front of the chapel. She studied Bat Shit very carefully. "What the hell?"

"You might as well be firing blanks, Phillips," Jeff remarked. He pointed underneath the bench Bat Shit lifted. "Grab her, Frank." Frank hopped off the floor near the front of the chapel. L.I.N. hopped up. She scampered behind the next pew on the south end of the room. She fell to her knees, bowed her head, and wrapped her fingers around the back of her neck. Her knees and the tops of her feet dug into rows of icy stones. Jeff looked at Bat Shit. Bat Shit stared back. Jeff pointed towards the end of the second pew. Bat Shit pointed at it with the fingers of his right hand. He whispered more incantations. The end of the second pew floated off the floor. L.I.N. felt a gush of cool air washing across her body. She lowered her fingers and looked up. Icarus sprang to life. He swirled off the floor and tumbled through the air. He flipped backwards four times. He landed on the end of the last pew on the south side of the chapel. He hung off the back of the pew from the tips of his white, snake skin boots. Frank froze. He looked across the chapel.

"What the hell?" He aimed his pistol between Icarus' eyes... the two on his face. Frank looked over his shoulder. "Jeff, who *is* this guy?"

"Plug him," Jeff instructed. Frank faced forward. He winked his left eye closed. Icarus

flipped to the side. He landed on the tips of his fingers. The toes of his boots were replaced by two 9MM holes. Splinters of wood danced along Icarus' knuckles. Shutters along his back focused on the end of Frank's silencer. Hal wasn't far from Icarus. He dropped to the floor and scampered behind the pew Icarus was dangling from. He laid his back against the back of the pew and looked up.

*"Nice going, Dr. Ulrich!"* he whispered. *"Draw their fire!"* Icarus nodded. Detective Phillips plopped down beside Hal. She looked into her boyfriend's mismatched eyes.

*"How's he doing that, Icky?"* she rasped.

"Aye!" Icarus shouted. He lifted his right hand. It was replaced by a shower of splinters. Icarus stood on one hand. He looked into his girlfriend's eyes. "It's a trick," he replied. "I can see how he's doing it. It's not as complicated as you might think." Icarus' arm collapsed. He shoved himself away from the back of the pew with both arms. His fingers were replaced by two additional rounds.

"Son of a bitch!" Frank snarled. A magazine dropped from the grip of his pistol. It landed in Frank's fingers. He dropped the magazine in a pocket on the left side of his jacket. He yanked out another, rammed it into the grip of his pistol, and pulled back the slide. Chuck and Brandy sat side by side. Their backs rested against the back of the first pew on the north side of the chapel. Chuck gripped his 44 Special with both hands. He bowed his head and laid the top of the barrel against his forehead. He closed his eyes and exhaled a heavy breath. Brandy looked him over. Chuck hopped up, whirled around, and fired four rounds. He fired the first two at Lisa's head. He fired the second two at Jeff's. The rounds shattered like glass. They flew apart and spattered Chuck's knuckles, cheeks, and hair.

"Damn!" Chuck shouted. He dropped beside Brandy. He laid the back of his head

against the back of the pew. Lisa flattened her palms on top of her ears. She scrunched up her face and looked towards the pew Brandy and Chuck hid behind. Jeff stuffed his pinkies in his ears. He wiggled them.

"Damn it, Chuck!" Jeff cupped his fingers around his lips and faced the pew Chuck and Brandy hid behind. "What did I just say?! Are you deaf?!" Lisa flapped her eyelids. She looked at the side of Jeff's head.

"He is *now*." Icarus' left hand and the toe of his right boot clung to the top of the second pew from the end. He swatted at the air with his free hand. He snatched at something. Then, Icarus yanked his fist towards his chest. He looked towards the pew Chuck and Brandy hid behind.

"Try it now, Chuck!" he shouted. Frank aimed his pistol at Icarus' left kidney. He pulled the trigger. Icarus flopped off the edge of the pew. He dropped behind a two foot section of wall between two stained glass windows.

"Arrrrrggg!" Frank grumbled. Chuck's revolver appeared above the back of the first pew on the north side of the chapel. Jeff shoved Lisa's shoulder.

"Cheese it!" he shouted. Chuck pulled the trigger of his 44. Jeff and Lisa dropped to the floor. A forty-four caliber hole replaced Jeff's saddle shoes. Chuck laid the back of his head against the back of the pew he and Brandy hid behind. He looked to his left. He met Brandy's dark, murky eyes. He smirked.

"Ha." L.I.N. hopped up. She scampered down the south wall. Icarus' arm appeared. Icarus spotted L.I.N. He noticed Frank aiming his pistol at the back of L.I.N.'s head. Icarus whirled out and did a series of somersaults. Frank wasted three more rounds trying to shoot him. Icarus landed on all fours. He dangled from the back of the sixth pew from the end. L.I.N. came

flying by.

"Thanks, Icky!" she shouted.

Icarus shrugged. "Meh." L.I.N. slipped behind a pew two rows away and dropped to her knees. Icarus swatted at the air. He curled his fingers around something and yanked. The two pews near the front of the southern row dropped to the floor. Bat Shit stopped chanting. He lowered his fingers and looked up.

"Damn it, boy!" he shouted. He pointed between Icarus' eyes. "You are messin' round with the Voodoo magic, mon! How you be doin' that?" Frank fired two rounds at Icarus' face. Icarus ducked. Then, he sprang through the air and did a series of backwards flips. He landed behind a pew two rows closer to the front. The pew concealing Chuck and Brandy flew out of the way. Chuck and Brandy whirled around.

"Grrrrraah!" Jeff shouted. He charged and snagged Chuck around the waist. They slammed into the next pew down. It toppled into the pew behind *that*. The remaining pews followed. They rolled to the floor like a series of dominoes. The final round in Chuck's 44 Special fired. It disappeared into the ceiling of the chapel. Brandy hopped to her feet and stepped away. She curled her fingers over her lips.

"Holy crap!" she shrieked. Lisa came up from behind. She wrapped her arms around Brandy's throat. Brandy tensed up. She grabbed a hold of Lisa's arms. Lisa laid her chin on Brandy's shoulder.

"Nice glasses, geek!" she shrieked. Brandy tilted her head back. She pinched her eyes shut and gritted her teeth.

"Gah..." she rasped. *"Doesn't... Jeff have... glasses?"*

Lisa squeezed Brandy's neck between her bicep and forearm. "I'm gonna snap your

fuckin' neck, you freak!" Brandy's head twisted to the side. She looked at Lisa out of the corner of her eye. She dropped the heel of her loafer on the instep of Lisa's boot. "Agft!" Lisa grunted. Her arms went limp. Brandy slammed her elbow against the bottom of Lisa's breastbone. Lisa exhaled every ounce of air in her lungs. She yanked her arms away from Brandy's throat and stepped back. Brandy balled her fingers into a fist. She swirled around and smashed her knuckles against Lisa's windpipe. Lisa wrapped her fingers around her throat. She spread her jaws and tried to shriek. Nothing came out. Her Achilles tendons collided with the wood floor near the front of the chapel. Lisa dropped like a stone. Her butt and the back of her head bounced off slick panels of wood.

Jeff straddled Chuck's waist. He wrapped his fingers around his wrists. He leaned forward and glared into his eyes. A sadistic grin twisted across his freckly face. Bright, fiery eyebrows pointed down the bridge of his nose. Tufts of flame colored hair swirled along the sides of his face. The lenses of his glasses dangled from the end of his nose.

"Chuckie!" he shouted. He smashed the bones of Chuck's hand against the seat of the pew behind them. Chuck's 44 Special dropped from his fingers. Chuck watched it tumble to the floor. It bounced off pentagonal stones.

"Oh, crap," he mused. Brandy swirled around. Jeff's butt was right in her face. It was wrapped in a pair of tan corduroys. Brandy swung her leg like a golf club. Her foot slipped between Jeff's legs. The tip of her tan loafer caught Jeff right in the balls. Jeff's fingers dropped off Chuck's wrists. His head snapped back. His eyelids mashed together. He grabbed his nuts and peeled his lips apart.

"Aaaaah!" he shouted. Chuck popped Jeff in the nose. Jeff's legs slipped away from Chuck's waist. Jeff slithered to the floor and scrambled away. Brandy kicked at his face. Jeff



flipped his head back. He wrapped his fingers around Brandy's foot and yanked. Brandy's loafer slipped off her foot. Jeff tossed it across the room. He snagged a hold of Brandy's ankle and dragged her to the floor.

"Shit!" Brandy shrieked. She collapsed in a tangled heap. Her shoulder blades collided with pentagonal rocks. Jeff dragged Brandy across his lap. He twisted his fingers through her bouncy hair and curled them into fists. He lowered his head and stared into her eyes.

"I need what's in your head!" Jeff shouted into Brandy's face. He shook her like a sack of potatoes. "Give it to me!"

Brandy gritted her teeth. "Stop it!" she shouted. She wadded Jeff's argyle shirt in her fingers. "Leave... me... alone!" Jeff smashed his pale, freckly forehead into Brandy's smooth, silky forehead. Brandy flipped her head back and pinched her eyes shut. Jeff swatted Brandy's cheek with his palm. He wadded the neck of Brandy's sweater in his fingers. He lifted Brandy's head off the floor and jiggled it.

"I need her memories!" Jeff shouted. "Daisy's memories!" Brandy's eyes popped open. She swirled her head around and stared into Jeff's vivid, furious eyes. Brandy's cheek felt like someone punched it with a fistful of straight pins.

"W-What?" Brandy demanded. She swallowed. "What are you saying?" Chuck scrambled along the edges of pew seats. He snatched his revolver off the floor.

"Daisy... Hill!" Jeff shouted. He gritted his teeth. "I need the equation she was working on!" Brandy looked through the lenses of Jeff's glasses. She sucked in a pair of panicked breaths.

"Sh-She's at Fountain of Hope," Brandy managed to get out. She swallowed. "You know... that mental institution." Jeff stared between Brandy's eyes. He tilted his head.

"Oh?" Chuck popped up beside Jeff. He placed the tip of his revolver against Jeff's temple. He thumbed back the hammer.

"Get off." Jeff turned his head. He looked into Chuck's eyes.

"I just did." Jeff smirked. Brandy's sweater dropped from his fingertips. He shoved himself to his feet and strapped his arms around Chuck's midsection. He charged down the aisle between the northern and southern pews. "Aaaaah!" Jeff shrieked. Detective Phillips' head appeared above the back of the last pew on the south side of the chapel. She noticed Jeff approaching. Her eyes popped open.

"Holy crap!" She fired her pistol at Jeff's head. A slug popped out of the end and burst. Tiny, brass fragments spattered her knuckles. Phillips shook her head. Jeff charged by. Chuck tightened his fingers around the back of Jeff's argyle shirt.

"I'm gonna kill you, Jeff!" he shouted. Jeff and Chuck crashed through the stained glass window along the north side of the back wall. The top of Jeff's head collided with the Virgin Mary's crotch. The back of Chuck's skull crashed into a space between her breasts. The window turned into a kaleidoscope. It showered Chuck and Jeff with rainbows of glass. Multicolored shards sprinkled down the collar of Chuck's red, plaid jacket. Carrot colored, carotene strands swirling from Jeff's scalp swallowed them up. Jeff and Chuck collapsed on knots of soggy grass and broken glass. L.I.N.'s head popped up. It appeared above the back of a pew four rows from the end. L.I.N. looked towards the window Jeff and Chuck crashed through.

"*Chuck...*" she groaned. Bat Shit's head and shoulders appeared above the podium near the front of the chapel. The AK-47 lay across his palms. Bat Shit aimed the assault rifle at Icarus' face. He rested the stock against his shoulder. He yanked back a bolt along the side near the top. A thin, freaky, twisted grin swirled along the bottom of Icarus' face.

"Woo! Hoo! Hoo! Hoo!" he hollered. Bat Shit squeezed the trigger of the AK. A round ejected from the end of the rifle. The economy sized augments threaded into the end of the barrel compressed any firing noises into a whisper. They sounded more like a match igniting than a compression coming from an assault rifle. The rifle's stock slammed against Bat Shit's shoulder. That caused the rifle to recoil. It bounced forward. The trigger crashed into Bat Shit's index finger. So, the rifle fired continuously. Frank began firing as well. Icarus swirled through the air. After a series of somersaults, he landed on a pew one row closer to the front. He turned and sprinted down the back of the pew on the balls of his feet. Bat Shit and Frank dotted the top of the pew with rows of large caliber holes. Their firearms sounded like nothing more than moths flying into bug zappers.

Icarus dove off the end of the pew. He snatched something out of the air on his way to the floor. He rolled behind a pew on the north side of the room. It was one of the pews Jeff and Chuck knocked over earlier. Bat Shit and Frank stopped firing. They turned their heads and stared into each other's eyes.

"Damn it, mon!" Bat Shit bellowed. "Who *is* dat guy?!"

Frank shrugged. "A pain in the ass! That's who!" Icarus peeked around the edge of the pew he fell behind. He looked towards the back of the chapel.

"Now, Laura!" he shouted. "Waste 'em!" Detective Phillips popped up. She aimed her pistol above the back of the last pew on the south side of the room. She sighted a space between Frank's eyes and pulled the trigger. A corner burst near the rear, left side of Frank's skull. It opened like a Jack in the box. Frank's brain stem swam through his cerebellum. The wadded mess swirled through the left side of his cerebral cortex. Half the matter in his brain gushed through the hole in the back of his skull. A cup full of blood followed knots of cortex and

cerebellum. It looked like a water balloon filled with blood exploded near the back of Frank's skull. Chunks of brain and droplets of blood splattered the tan, steel chair Jeff sat on earlier. Frank's arms swirled together like strands of rope. His legs turned into noodles. His spinal cord flopped like a fish out of water. His pistol dropped from his fingers.

Frank's left cheek collided with the seat of the steel chair. The tip of the seat folded over. Nuggets of brain and beads of blood sprinkled Frank's dark, greasy hair. Bat Shit looked down. He stared into Frank's eyes. They were dark and lifeless. Bat Shit's AK-47 laid across his palms. Tufts of white smoke wafted from the chrome augments threaded into the barrel.

"Shit, mon!" Bat Shit grumbled. Detective Phillips lined up the back of Bat Shit's head with sights along the top of her pistol. She squeezed the trigger. Bat Shit's brains gushed from his right eye and the back of his skull. The top of his face looked like a baby spitting up. His thick, floppy dread locks looked like they were painted with crimson oatmeal. Bat Shit's nose collided with the slick, blue seat Lisa sat on. It squashed flat. Bat Shit's AK-47 bounced off slats of wood lying across the floor. Detective Phillips lowered her 9MM. She looked across the chapel. Icarus looked up from the floor. He made a circle with his index finger and thumb. Lisa was lying on her back. Her head popped up.

Brandy sat on rows of stones three feet away. Her head was pounding from Jeff smashing her forehead with *his*. Brandy dug into her temples with the tips of her fingers. She stared at the toes of her right foot. Her nails were painted lime green. Brandy spotted her loafer. It was lying across the room. The tip of her shoe rested against the bottom of a stained glass window. Brandy lowered her fingers. She looked to her left. She noticed Lisa sitting up. L.I.N. pointed towards the front of the chapel.

"Laura!" she shouted. "Get her!" Detective Phillips aimed her pistol between Lisa's

glowing, blue eyes.

"Freeze!" she shouted. "Don't you move!" Lisa glared at Detective Phillips. She narrowed her eyes.

"Bite me, pig!" Lisa raised her fist above her head. She dropped something beside her legs. It was filled with thick, black liquid. A fountain of glass shards spewed beside Lisa's legs. The glass shards left behind a shiny, black pool. Brandy wrinkled her nose. The stench of nail polish filled the front of the chapel. Lisa looked into Brandy's dark brown eyes. She smirked. "Sleep tight." Lisa lay down. She rolled into the puddle of nail polish. She dropped through the floor. The nail polish went with her. Brandy scrunched up her face. She threw her arms out at her sides.

"What..." She looked towards the other end of the chapel. She met Detective Phillips' bright, cheery eyes. "Where did she go?!" she demanded. She looked at L.I.N. L.I.N. licked her lips.

"Must've been a wormhole." Detective Phillips lowered her pistol. She stared at sapphire strands wrapping the back of L.I.N.'s head.

"I see you've got your memories back," Detective Phillips remarked. L.I.N.'s head swirled around. Shiny, sea colored threads swished around the back of her neck. Emerald colored irises below her forehead focused on Phillips' face.

"I need to talk to Chuck," L.I.N. replied. She smacked her hip. "Right now." Phillips nodded. Hal's shiny, brass colored head appeared next to Phillips. White, plastic webcams near the top of Hal's face swirled around. They focused on brain matter scattered along steel chairs near the front of the room.

"Oh, my..." Hal remarked. Jeff curled his fingers through soggy, black strands dangling

from Chuck's scalp. He squashed his fingers into fists.

"You're empty," he remarked. Chuck aimed his 44 Special between Jeff's eyes. He pulled the trigger. The hammer of his pistol fell forward. It smacked a firing pin. Nothing happened. Jeff grinned. His lips slid away from his teeth. Rows of pearly, white teeth appeared. Chuck crinkled his eyes.

"You got what you wanted... right?"

Jeff tilted his head. "What?"

Chuck tossed his pistol aside. "I heard you and Brandy talking." He swallowed. Ice cold sheets of rain dribbled across his face. "She told you where Daisy was." Chuck licked his lips. "So that's it, right?" Chuck rolled his eyes. "For now, anyway." Jeff stared into Chuck's eyes. He shrugged.

"For now, I guess." Jeff took out a pocket knife. It had a long, wooden handle. Jeff mashed a chrome button near the middle of the handle. A four inch blade swung out. Chuck gritted his teeth. He was sorry he asked. Jeff jammed the knife into soaking wet dirt beside Chuck's face. Chuck jerked his head away. Jeff carved a circle in the dirt. It was three feet wide. He laid the tip of the blade against the tip of Chuck's nose. Chuck felt soggy grains of dirt squashing between thin flesh near the tip of his nose and icy steel along the tip of Jeff's knife. "I'll see you around, Chuck," Jeff remarked. Chuck glared into Jeff's sky colored eyes. Chuck's eyebrows pointed down the bridge of his nose. Jeff hopped up. He stepped aside and hopped towards the center of the circle. He disappeared into squishy tufts of jade colored grass. Chuck watched Jeff sink into the ground. He sighed and shook his head.

*"This is getting old..."* he grumbled. A pair of feet appeared beside the circle. Chuck stared at them. The nails of the person's left foot were yellow. The nails of the person's right

foot were magenta. Chuck smiled. His eyes followed pale, silky shins attached to the feet. His eyes wrapped a pair of lens shaped knee caps attached to the shins. They wandered along the tops of white thighs attached to the knee caps. They traced curves of a tangerine colored skirt surrounding the tops of the thighs. Chuck's eyes wandered across wads of grey cotton above the skirt. They climbed a ladder of steel teeth near the middle of the grey fabric. They stopped on a pair of tiny mounds surrounding the top of the steel teeth. L.I.N. held Chuck's black umbrella above her head. She watched Chuck's eyes. She smirked.

"Chuck, stop staring at my boobs," she remarked. Chuck looked up. He focused below a row of sapphire bangs lying across L.I.N.'s forehead. He stared into L.I.N.'s glittery, olive colored eyes. He squinted.

"You wanna play chess?" he inquired.

L.I.N. scrunched up her face. "Bleh!" she shouted. "I *hate* playing chess with you!" Chuck popped up. He snagged a hold of L.I.N.'s ankle and dragged her to the grass. L.I.N. shrieked. Chuck's umbrella dropped from her fingertips. It twirled through the air and landed five feet away. Chuck dragged L.I.N. across his lap. L.I.N. was already sopping wet. It was raining cats and dogs. L.I.N. tilted her head back. She slung soggy strands of sapphire away from her face and giggled. She looked into Chuck's eyes. Chuck wrapped his arms around L.I.N.'s shoulders. He lowered his head and laid his lips on hers. L.I.N. knew how to kiss again. She laid one on Chuck and pulled her lips away. L.I.N. and Chuck gazed into each other's eyes. L.I.N. grabbed the sides of her grey hoodie. She took a breath.

"This is my favorite jacket, you know!"

Chuck smirked. "Yes, I know."

L.I.N. pressed her lips together. "I have... something I need to tell you."

Chuck nodded. "We know you're pregnant." Chuck slopped soggy tufts of hair away from L.I.N.'s face. "Hal found the test strips under your bed." L.I.N. nodded. Detective Phillips and Icarus appeared beside her. Detective Phillips held her red and white umbrella above their heads. L.I.N. looked up.

"What are you going to name him?" Phillips inquired.

"*Her*," Chuck corrected. He looked up. Phillips crinkled her eyes.

"Huh?"

L.I.N. stared into space. "Emily..." she remarked. She looked up. "Emily Parker." Chuck stared at the side of L.I.N.'s head. He curled his fingers around hers. L.I.N. lowered her head and licked her lips. She faced Chuck. She gazed into his eyes and blinked. "Isn't that right, Hal?" L.I.N. looked over her shoulder. Hal and Brandy were standing in the doorway of the chapel. Hal stared through sheets of rain. He looked L.I.N. over as best he could.

"How do you know that?"

L.I.N. shrugged. "Omega told me." She faced Chuck. She smiled. "At least... I *think* that's what he was trying to tell me." She rolled her eyes. "He couldn't just *tell* me that. He had to lure me onto an alternate timeline, take me into the future, and *show* me." Detective Phillips studied L.I.N. and Chuck carefully. She shrugged.

"What in the world are you guys talking about?"

Brandy looked around. "What happened to Jeff?" she inquired. Chuck looked up. He motioned towards the circle Jeff drew in the dirt with his head.

"He disappeared," Chuck replied. Brandy dropped her forehead in her palm. Chuck squinted. "Lisa?" Brandy looked up. She shook her head.

"She's gone. She dropped into a puddle of nail polish and vanished."



Detective Phillips's eyebrows pointed down the bridge of her nose. "So, we've got nothing!" She looked at Chuck. "We've got two dead bodies and nothing to show for it." Chuck slid his lips to the side of his face. He motioned towards the chapel parking area with his head.

"We've got Jeff's van." Chuck recovered his umbrella. He held it above L.I.N. and Brandy's heads. Hal and Icarus walked below Phillips' umbrella. Jeff's van was still parked near the front of the brick lot along the north side of the chapel. Everyone stopped beside the van and stared. It was covered with faded, white paint. It was peeling and dotted with rust. Phillips followed the body of the van with her bright blue eyes. She shrugged.

"Well, I guess that's better than nothing." The van sank into the bricks and disappeared. Detective Phillips flipped her head back and sighed. "You've gotta be kidding me!" Hal stared at rows of crooked bricks lying across the ground. He folded his arms over his chest. The process sounded like a pair of car doors slamming.

"Jeff can't know about this," Hal remarked. Everyone faced him. He looked up. "L.I.N.'s pregnancy, I mean." Hal extended his pointer finger. He showed it around. "He can never know. Does everybody understand that?"

Phillips shrugged. "Well, why not?" Hal tried to lick his lips. Nothing happened.

"Not to worry, dear," he replied. "You're about to find out."

## Chapter 6: "Things Stay the Same"

L.I.N.'s bedroom was pitch black. Multicolored panes of glass along the southern wall were speckled with tiny dots of light. They were stars. Other spots were dull from shadows cast by old, scraggly tree limbs. Dim, five pointed lights dotted the ceiling and L.I.N.'s ceiling fan. They glowed pink, teal, yellow, and white. Chuck lay in L.I.N.'s bed. L.I.N. lay in his arms. Her cheek lay on Chuck's chest. Her eyelids were glued shut. Chuck's eyelids were pried open. His fingers lay along L.I.N.'s bicep. L.I.N.'s tie dye blanket lay on top of them. Chuck's eyes focused on L.I.N.'s kitty clock. The cat's big, cartoon eyes slid back and forth. Its long, black tail swung below the clock at the same speed. It was shaped like a hook. The cat's tummy was a white circle. It was bordered by black, Roman numerals. A short, black pointer lay between "I" and "II." A long, black pointer lay beside "VI."

Chuck exhaled through his nostrils. L.I.N.'s eyelids fluttered apart. A pair of emerald colored irises floated to the tops of her eyes. The corners of L.I.N.'s lips curled towards her forehead. She laid the tips of her fingers along Chuck's shoulders. She slid up his chest and laid her lips on the side of his neck. She kissed it. Chuck smiled. He laid his fingers on L.I.N.'s.

*"I'm sorry, sweetie,"* he whispered. *"Did I wake you up?"* L.I.N. laid her forehead against Chuck's cheek and closed her eyes. She inhaled through her nose.

*"You kissed me,"* she rasped. Chuck turned his head and looked down. He squinted.

*"What?"* L.I.N. snickered. She slid her fingers away from Chuck's. She wrapped her arms around his neck.

*"I asked you if you were in love with me."* She licked her lips. *"And, you kissed me."* Chuck smiled. He kissed L.I.N.'s forehead. He slid his fingers through sapphire strands along the back of her head.

*"That was very brave of you,"* Chuck whispered back. *"Asking me that."*

L.I.N. nodded. *"I had to know."* She shrugged. *"Of course, now I remember."* L.I.N. looked into Chuck's honey colored eyes. *"Why aren't you sleeping?"*

Chuck pressed his lips together. *"I heard a noise,"* he rasped.

Chuck arrived at the bottom of the stairs. He stood on checkered, black and white tiles lying across the floor. He wore blue, flannel pants and a white t-shirt. A yellow smiley face was brushed across the middle of Chuck's t-shirt. Its eyes were a couple of black dots. Its mouth was a long, thin parenthesis lying along the bottom of its face. Chuck looked to his left. There was a pair of rooms between the northern wall of the house and the stairs. They were tucked into the northwest corner of the house. Two walls spanned the rooms from checkered tiles along the floor to the ceiling. There was a shiny, oak door on each wall. There were lines of light across the bottom of each door. Chuck stared at the lines of light. His lips slipped to the side of his face.

"Hmph," he remarked. Chuck slipped through the door along the northern wall. He stopped and looked to his left. A box of tissues dangled from the fingers of his right hand. He was standing in Hal's chemistry lab. A grid of white tiles lay across the floor. Two foldout tables lay across the middle of the room. Beakers, flasks, test tubes, and glass slides were scattered on top. There were also two microscopes and two Bunsen burners. There was a giant refrigerator along the northern wall. It was stainless steel. It had two vertical doors. A plastic replica of a human skeleton stood beside that. Wire shelves lay along the walls. Things suspended in jars, plants under U.V. lamps, puzzle cubes, and chess sets with missing pieces were stacked along the shelves. There were other things as well.

Most of the walls were trimmed with slats of wood. The west wall was tiled with chalk

boards. Chuck spotted Brandy near the bottoms of the chalk boards. She wore a black t-shirt. It was decorated with shapes made of white lines and white, capital letters. The image along the front of her shirt was a representation of the formula for sucrose. Brandy borrowed the t-shirt from L.I.N. A pair of black, flannel pants wrapped Brandy's legs. Brandy sat on her heels. The fingers of both her hands were wrapped around chunks of chalk. The chalk in Brandy's left hand was yellow. The chalk in her right hand was white. Brandy had withered them down to nubs.

She scribbled incomprehensible gibberish along the bottom of the lower chalk boards. Chuck couldn't read it. It was nothing but swirls and squiggles. Chuck studied Brandy's hands. Her fingers were jiggling like globs of gelatin dessert. Chuck heard her panting like a dog. She was mumbling to herself. And, she was whimpering like she was in pain. Chuck's eyes climbed the chalk boards. The entire west wall of Hal's chemistry lab was covered with them. They were filled with differential equations, integration, summation series, sets in curly braces, graphs of curves, physics, and quantum mechanics. It was baffling and insane. The writing at the tops of the chalk boards was easier to read. Brandy had terrible handwriting. But, it was usually legible. Towards the middles of the chalk boards, Brandy's writing became frantic and scary. The bottoms of the chalk boards were slathered with interweaving scribbles.

Chuck heard Brandy's fingernails digging into the chalk boards. He figured she ran out of chalk. He watched her fingers. They continued to write in a frantic, swirling panic. But, nothing appeared. Chuck closed his eyes. He stared at the backs of his eyelids and swallowed. He licked his lips and opened his eyes.

"Brandy," he remarked. Brandy shrieked. She swirled around and gasped for breath. Her face was a bloody mess. Blood leaked from her nostrils and dribbled down her chin. L.I.N.'s t-shirt was soaked with Brandy's blood and sweat. Brandy slipped her fingers through

wavy clusters of hair dangling from her head. She dug her fingernails into her scalp. She gritted her teeth and lowered her head. Her spectacles fell from the end of her nose. They dropped to the floor and slid across white tiles. Chuck heard Brandy sob. He wrinkled his eyes. *"Oh, man..."* he whispered. He hurried across the lab. He dropped in front of Brandy and threw his arms around her shoulders. He laid his cheek on the back of Brandy's head. "It's okay, Brandy," he told her. "I'm right here." Brandy exhaled a whiny breath. She grabbed a hold of Chuck's waist and relaxed. She laid the side of her head against Chuck's chest.

*"I'm sorry..."* Brandy gasped. She panted like a dog. She squeezed bursts of air into her lungs. Chuck figured he'd better let go. Brandy needed to catch her breath. He let go of Brandy's shoulders and backed away. He snatched her spectacles off the floor. He folded the ear pieces and dropped them in his pocket. Brandy sat on her calves and looked at the floor. She inhaled a series of panicked breaths. "I'm sorry..." she repeated. She swallowed and closed her eyes. She wove her fingers behind the back of her head. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry." Brandy's eyes popped open. She scrunched up her face and glared at the floor. "I'm sorry!" she shouted. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" Chuck wrinkled his nose. He laid his fingers on Brandy's shoulder.

"Brandy!" he shouted. "Stop!" Brandy stared into Chuck's eyes. She laid her palms on her thighs and rocked back and forth.

*"I'm sorry..."* she whispered. *"I'm sorry... I'm sorry... I'm sorry... I'm sorry..."* Chuck narrowed his eyes. He licked his lips and shook his head.

"It's okay, Brandy," he repeated. "It's alright." Chuck dropped the box of tissues beside Brandy's knees. "I forgive you, okay?" He plucked a couple of tissues out of the box. He curled his fingers along the back of Brandy's neck. He laid the tissues across her lips and pressed down.

"Whatever it is, I forgive you." Chuck sat beside Brandy. He swirled the tips of his fingers across the back of Brandy's neck. He flipped the tissues over and wiped her nostrils. Brandy stopped chanting. She closed her eyes and licked her lips. Chuck patted her shoulder. "What, Brandy?" he inquired. "What is it you're so sorry about?" Brandy sniffled. Her lips drifted apart. She bowed her head and laid her fingers over her eyes.

"E-e-e-e-h..." she whined. She swallowed. "I can't... remember!" Brandy raised her hand beside her face. She curled her fingers into a fist. "G-A-H!" she shouted. She smashed her knuckles into a slick, white tile. "God - damn it!" Chuck pressed his lips together. He stared at Brandy's hand. It wobbled like towers of canned cheese. Blood trickled from Brandy's knuckles. It wandered down her fingers. It dripped from the ends. Chuck squeezed the top of Brandy's hand. He looked at the side of her face.

"You feel better, now?" Brandy shook all over. Her shivers traveled through Chuck's fingers and made his arms quiver. Brandy bowed her head and closed her eyes. Chuck exhaled through his nostrils. He dropped a wad of bloody tissues on the floor. "Hey..." he hummed. He curled his fingers below Brandy's chin. He turned her head. "Look at me." Brandy swallowed. She lifted her head and opened her eyes. Chuck smiled. He brushed chocolate brown strands away from Brandy's face. He took a breath. "We're gonna figure this out. Okay?" Chuck laid his fingers on Brandy's shoulder. "I promise." Brandy swallowed. She pried her lips apart.

"What if we can't, huh?" Brandy inhaled a shaky breath. "What if we *can't* figure this out, Chuck?!" Chuck narrowed his eyes. He looked away and thought.

"Then, we'll find somebody who can." Chuck grabbed two more tissues and laid them across Brandy's lips. Brandy lowered her head. She took the tissues from Chuck's fingers and nodded.

"Okay..." she whispered. Chuck reached up. He brushed disheveled strands of hair behind Brandy's ear. He stroked them into a neater shape. He licked his lips.

"Did you take the antidepressants Dr. Merle prescribed?" Brandy looked up. She turned her eyes and thought.

"Oh, yeah. I forgot about those."

Chuck patted Brandy's shoulder. "Try them," he instructed. "I *know* they'll help." Brandy looked at Chuck. She closed her eyes and nodded.

"Okay," she replied. Chuck slid his fingers along Brandy's cheek. He smiled.

"Let's go take them right now, alright?" Brandy smiled. She opened her eyes. Chuck motioned towards the stairs with his head. "And then, you can sleep with me and L.I.N. again." Brandy exhaled a terrified laugh. She laid her forehead in her palm and shook her head.

"No, Chuck." She looked up. "I can't keep doing that."

Chuck curled his fingers around Brandy's. "Come on," he replied. "It'll be like a slumber party. Remember?" Brandy pinched her eyes shut. She lowered her head.

"Shut-up!" she shouted. She curled her fingers over her lips. A pair of bloody tissues dangled from the fingers of her left hand. Chuck smiled.

"Come on, Brandy. Let us take care of you." Brandy lowered her fingers. She looked into Chuck's eyes. She sighed.

"Um... alright." She grabbed a hold of Chuck's hand. She squeezed his fingers. "Thanks, Chuck."

Chuck tilted his head. "You're welcome." He snatched up Brandy's used tissues and the rest of the box. He hopped up and dragged Brandy to her feet. He snaked his arm around her shoulders and helped her towards the door. "And by the way," Chuck remarked, "I don't think

you're a lonely freak." He flipped a switch beside the doorway he entered earlier. He led Brandy through and shut the door. "I don't think you've got very many problems, either." Brandy stood on the balls of her feet. She kissed the side of Chuck's neck. She stared at his temple

"I forgot I said all that." Brandy laid her cheek against Chuck's chest. She wrapped her arms around his waist. Chuck led her towards the stairs. "I didn't mean all that stuff," Brandy explained. "I was just trying to make L.I.N. feel better."

Chuck smirked. "*Right...*" he whispered.

Daisy Hill's room was decrepit and hideous. It smelled like urine and runny feces. It was the size of a closet. The walls were painted yellow. The paint faded over the years to the color of cream. Giant chunks of paint were missing in places. Where there wasn't faded, cream colored paint, jagged sheetrock was showing. A grid of cracks lay across the sheetrock. An old, yellow light bulb dangled from the middle of the ceiling. It was suspended from a narrow, black wire. The floor was covered with thin, linoleum tiles. They were dark brown. Some of the corners were peeling up. Some corners were broken off. Crumbly, black primer was showing where chunks of tiles were missing. A tiny bed lay in the middle of the room. It was the size of a child's bed. It barely fit in the room.

The bed had a rusty, steel frame. It stood on four, skinny legs. The legs connected across the ends of the bed. An old, squishy mattress was slopped across the surface of the bed. It was wrapped with a ratty, white sheet. The sheet was soiled with dried urine stains. There was one tall, skinny window. It stood behind the head of Daisy's bed. Thick, steel bars lay across the outside of the glass. Daisy Hill was glued to the mattress. She didn't move. She didn't speak. She didn't smile. She didn't think. A white blouse with teal diamonds and a teal border was wrapped around her trunk. A pair of white slacks was wadded around her legs.



The soles of Daisy's feet were squashed against the bar connecting the legs at the foot of her bed. A pair of rusty, iron shackles was fastened around her ankles. Long, rusty chains connected the shackles to the bar across the end of the bed. Daisy's arms were knotted behind her head. Her wrists were shackled to the bar across the head of the bed. Her head lay across the bottoms of her forearms. It was rolled over, lazily. Her face was pointing at the wall on her right. The bed was so small, Daisy's knees were buckled. They were six inches above the mattress. Daisy breathed slowly and quietly. Her bright, cheery eyes stared into space. They didn't move. Her eyelids flapped once every thirty seconds.

The air ripped apart. A seam appeared between the left side of Daisy's bed and the wall. It split near the ceiling and dropped to the floor. The seam pulled apart near the middle. It turned into a diamond shaped hole. Jeff Forrester was standing on the other side. He was in his basement. He had all the lights turned off. The ancient, yellow light bulb near the middle of Daisy's room illuminated glass cubes lying across the floor of Jeff's basement. They were red, yellow, green, and blue. Jeff stepped through the hole. He flattened his palms together behind his back. The hole closed. Jeff looked down. He stared at the side of Daisy's head. Long, blonde hair cascaded the left side of Daisy's face. It rolled down her neck like a waterfall. Jeff smiled a little.

He knelt beside Daisy's bed. He laid the tips of his fingers along cream colored strands lying across Daisy's throat. He brushed Daisy's hair aside. Soft, glowing, white skin was hiding underneath. Jeff lowered his head. He laid his lips along the side of Daisy's neck and closed his eyes. He kissed her warm, silky flesh. Then, he lifted his head and looked towards her eyes. Daisy didn't move. She didn't even know Jeff was in the room. She didn't know anything. Jeff watched her eyes. They jiggled a little. But, it was nothing astounding. Jeff tilted his head.

*"Daisy..."* he whispered. He laid his fingers along blonde strands wrapping Daisy's cheeks. He brushed the edge of Daisy's hair like a breeze. He swirled his fingers along her hair and eased it behind her ear. Jeff bowed his head. His lips were half an inch above Daisy's ear. *"Daisyhill..."* Jeff sang quietly. He lifted his head a little and licked his lips. Daisy's eyelids pinched shut. The bridge of her nose crinkled.

*"Nmuhgt..."* Daisy squeezed out. She pressed her lips together, lifted her chin a little, and swallowed. *"Zzzzzjjjjttt..."* Jeff lowered his head. He pursed his lips and exhaled. He brushed tips along the edges of Daisy's ear with tufts of air wafting from his lips. He smirked.

*"A gentle breeze wafts across the hill of daisies..."* he rasped. Hair along the back of Daisy's neck stood on end. Her eyelids peeled apart. Her head jiggled. Her teeth chattered.

*"J-J-J-J..."* she managed to get out. *"Zzzzz-eff?"* Daisy clamped her teeth together. She forced saliva down her throat. It was the closest thing to frustration she could convey. Jeff patted the side of Daisy's head. He laid his fingers along rusty slats of iron wrapping her wrists.

*"Yeah, Daisy,"* Jeff whispered. *"It's me."* Daisy's eyes closed. The bridge of her nose relaxed. Daisy inhaled through her nostrils. She exhaled a slow, heavy breath through her lips. It almost sounded like a moan. Jeff slid the tips of his fingers along shackles around Daisy's wrists. *"Don't worry, sweetheart,"* Jeff rasped. *"I'm gonna get you out of here."*