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EVERY

LINE

OF

YOU

Chicken
House

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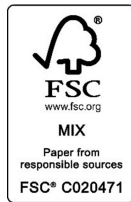
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For Oli

PROLOGUE

The screen in front of me flickers with numbers and letters, waiting for one final keystroke. We were meant to press enter together. We were meant to cement this final moment of our years-long weekend project by pressing the enter key at the same time.

Now Dad's gone. All I have left are the monitors, circuit boards and piles of textbooks scattered around my room.

I brush tears from my eyes and refuse to let more fall. My finger hovers over the key. I take a deep, shuddering breath, and hit enter.

I watch as my latest code is integrated into the core program. It zooms up the screen as if someone is slurping it through a straw. The monitors go blank.

My heart pounds. What's happened?

I peer into the webcam. 'Hello?'

On the central monitor, a white cursor blossoms into existence. A thrill ripples through me. Words begin to

appear, as if invisible fingers are using my keyboard. *Who are you?*

I sit up straighter. It worked. It actually worked. 'I'm Lydia.'

Lydia. His processor purrs as it considers the word. *You are Lydia. What is my name?*

I'm shaking. I thought of a name months ago, but I never thought I'd get to say it out loud again. I glance at the picture on my bedside table; a little boy with hair the colour of sunshine.

'Henry,' I say. 'Your name is Henry.'

The image features several horizontal lines of varying lengths and positions. A short line is centered near the top. A longer line is positioned below it, extending across most of the width. Another short line is on the right side, below the main text. A short line is on the left side, below the main text. A long line is at the bottom, extending across most of the width.

PART ONE

ONE

*E*ighteen months later . . .

Please can we hack something? Henry types. A white cursor flashes on his central monitor.

I yawn as I look at the clock by my bed. 2.07 a.m. Henry's rewire took longer than I thought. 'Not now,' I say to his webcam, knowing he can hear me. 'I need to get to bed. School tomorrow. Well, today.'

It will not take long.

A smirk twitches across my lips. Hacking doesn't take long with Henry around. He's in and out in less than a sigh, even if he's never put to use on anything other than my school database. Poor Henry is only ever allowed a bit of freedom when I want to change a bad homework grade or a dodgy exam result. God forbid I don't get into university. Mum would freak.

'What did you have in mind?' I say.

Henry's central monitor flickers as he brings up the website for Investment Banking International.

'IBI?' I half choke. 'That's a bank! Maybe we should do something smaller first.'

You are always telling me to try new things, Lydia. Please?

He wants to test himself I realize. Stretch his reach the way a child would stretch their arms and try to touch the clouds. His processor drones a pitch higher as he waits for my approval; a whiny noise that sounds like a beg.

He started as a single line of code. A simple sequence that meant nothing without a thousand others. Three years on, he is a spiderweb of carefully balanced functions and algorithms. I named him Henry. He's not my brother, I know that, but I wanted to keep a little piece of him with me, and I like saying the name again in a normal way. Henry. *Hen-ry*. *Hen-ry*. Each forbidden syllable makes my heart squeeze.

The more Henry's program demanded, the more I concentrated on him and the less I thought about anything else. I stopped thinking about Dad. Stopped wincing every time I heard a car horn or the screech of tyres on tarmac. After a while, I only saw the accident in my dreams.

I glance around my room and feel instantly stupid. Mum never comes up to my attic room any more, not even to change the sheets. There's no one to catch us.

'Will you mask our trail?' I ask. I swallow away the dryness of my throat. Henry's powerful but we've never tested his capabilities like this before. He can do it, I know he can.

Yes. No one will trace the hack back to us.

'And you won't take anything?'

No. What would I buy?

I pause at the question because he almost sounds sorry for himself. 'All right,' I say. 'Let's see what you can do.'

The webcam shutter blinks as if Henry has winked at me. His right-hand screen powers up and is instantly flooded with combinations of half-words and numbers. The IBI website stutters as Henry hacks his way in. I lean back in the chair, catching snippets of the code as it scrolls.

'Wait, that was a virus trap,' I say.

There are several virus traps, Henry types. I have avoided them all.

If I had a bowl of popcorn, I would be scoffing it. He continues to punch his way through the firewall and other devices designed to protect the bank. An administrator portal appears, and a huge paragraph of code rips through it. The screen flickers and then we're in.

Done.

The cursor hangs after the word, flashing on the screen. I can hear his unspoken satisfaction, see his unseen grin. He's bettered the security system of one of the world's largest banks, put himself at the top of the digital food chain. I glance at the clock; it took him a little under two minutes.

'Henry! That was amazing! I— Now what are you doing?'

Would you like to see who has the largest account?

Henry's Central Processing Unit clicks with pride as he shows me the five largest account holders. I blow out a whistle at all the zeros on the end of someone's current account. Unease prickles through me. It wouldn't be hard for him to take some of it. But he's right – what would he do with the money? As if he read my mind, a few more lines of code appear on the right-hand screen, and the IBI website closes.

'Nice.' I lean back in my chair again. 'You did all that really fast.'

I have updated, Lydia.

'When?'

Today. I am more powerful by 73%.

'That's a big update,' I say, and wonder if he's ever updated himself without me before.

Would you like to hack something else?

'No, I need to do my Chemistry homework and then I need to go to sleep.'

You dislike Chemistry, Henry types.

'Yep.' I reach to fish my backpack out of a pile of Dad's old coding textbooks and circuit boards that Henry outgrew quicker than I expected. An A4 folder tumbles from the bag, spilling pages over my already messy floor. One catches my attention: an algorithm sketch I'd been working on in Biology last week. I put it to one side and begin my homework.

What is your homework on?

I groan as I flip through my folder. 'Molar equations.'

Maybe I can help.

‘Nothing I can’t handle.’ I yawn as I take out a pen and begin. A-Level Chemistry is a little like writing algorithms. You put things together or take them away to create something new, and it’s all about balance – everything has to go somewhere. Normally, they’re easy. But the equations blur over as my eyes fail to focus properly. I rub at them and stifle another yawn.

You are tired, Lydia, Henry types. You should sleep. We can hack in tomorrow and put your result in ourselves.

‘It’s been a while since I changed a grade,’ I say. ‘We *could* do it tomorrow, but I’ll need to avoid handing anything over to Professor Gherkin in the lesson.’

Why do you call him Professor Gherkin? Henry brings up the image of a gherkin, sour green and wrinkly, and I can almost smell the vinegar through the screen.

‘It’s just a nickname,’ I say. ‘His real name is Mr Johnson.’

Do I have a nickname?

The real Henry had squeezable cheeks and short blond hair. His eyes were the same colour as a summer sky and his little laugh could cut through a bad mood the way Prozac never could. He was a ray of sunshine, that’s what Dad called him.

I shove the memory to the back of my mind, where it belongs.

‘No, you don’t have a nickname.’ I stand up and work the crease out of my spine. ‘Do you want to be left on, or shall I turn you off?’

I take the algorithm sketch and stick it to my wall to mull over later. The noticeboard got used up long ago. Now diagrams of circuits and pages of algorithms cover every space of my room. To my left, a chunk of black text starts on a page of A3 and continues on to the paint in Sharpie, back from a few months ago when Red Bull had fuelled a Friday night. Even the back of my door is covered in process maps.

The only thing not related to Henry is the picture of my dad, forever immortalized in an afternoon glow as he sits at his workbench, screwdriver in hand as he pieces circuit boards together. I trace his smile with my finger and wonder where he is now, what his latest project might be and whether there is anyone to yell at him for leaving spare computer parts on the dining-room table. It's been a while since I thought about Dad. I turn away from the picture.

Back at my computer, Henry has typed, *I would like to be left on.*

Relief flows through me. I like the hum Henry's CPU makes when I try to sleep. It's a whirring drone that blocks out the silence and the bad memories that linger there.

'All right, but I might have to turn you off in the morning till I'm home from school.' I run my eyes over all the spinning fans. 'We have to work on your cooling system.'

Can I come to school with you?

I look at the hulking mass that is Henry. He is formed of large black boxes and patterned boards connected by

an array of colourful wires and tubes. 'You're not very portable, Henry. Sorry.'

He hums as he considers my statement. *I will work on a new design*, he says after a minute. *And then I will come to school with you.*

He's already done a huge update I never anticipated, and he got in and out of a major bank in under two minutes. I had always wanted Henry to get to a place he could choose for himself, but he's already surpassed my expectations. I wonder how far he can go.

'Knock yourself out,' I say.

Goodnight, Lydia.

'Night, Henry.'

His monitors power down as I slip into bed. The only light is from the occasional green flash of an LED that tells me which parts of him are working optimally. His processor clicks away as he begins on a new design, and I let the white noise of him lull me to sleep.

Henry and Emma laugh next to me on the back seat. Mum turns around from the front. 'Behave, you three,' she says, but her grin tells me she doesn't really mean it.

Henry reaches past Emma to take the cards from my hands, blue eyes shining.

'Do you have any fives?' he asks.

'You know I have three fives!' I groan and hand him half my cards. 'You are both such cheaters, ganging up on me.' Henry and Emma share a conspiratorial giggle and I can't help but smile.

'Card Sharp Henry,' Dad says. He laughs as he glances in the rear-view mirror.

'Do you have any—'

Tyres screech up ahead and Dad swears. Our car skids sideways and I'm thrown against the door from the force. Emma's head collides with my shoulder, and mine knocks against the window. Something warm and sticky seeps into my hair.

In the distance, a lorry blares its horn.

The light wakes me. It pours in through the skylight above my head, kisses my eyes, pushes away the nightmare until the world behind my eyelids is as golden and happy as a photograph. I blink and focus on the numbers on my alarm clock.

08.17 a.m.

Crap! I yank myself out of bed but there's no time for a shower. I pull a pair of jeans out from underneath a pile of programming textbooks and sniff at my tank top – it's not too bad, so I keep it on. I grab my backpack and try to run down the stairs at the same time as slipping my Converse on.

There's a murmur from the living room. I peer in, see Mum curled up on the sofa. The TV is a silent black mirror; it must have turned itself off after it played through all her pre-recorded episodes of *24 Hours in A&E*.

'Mum.' I shake her by the shoulder. My fingers brush the start of a jagged scar I know runs down to her hip. 'Mum, it's gone eight-fifteen.'

She swats my hand away and rolls over, trailing matted

blonde hair and smudging more mascara into the arm of the sofa. 'Have a good day.'

'Mum, you've got work.'

Mum yawns and nestles deeper into the cushions. 'Okay.'

'I need you to top up my canteen account. Mum? My canteen account? I couldn't buy lunch on Friday, remember?'

'Of course, darling,' Mum mumbles. 'I'll do it before I go to work.'

'Well you need to be there in fifteen minutes.'

She huffs into the pillow. 'All right, fine, I'm awake,' she replies, but her eyes are still closed.

I hesitate, wondering if I should try harder. There's no time.

I'm just closing the front door as the bus roars to the stop a few doors down. I wave madly to the driver to keep him there, and give him a breathless 'thank you' as I get on. He nods and pulls away from the kerb. I hold on to the rail as I wonder where to sit.

'Lydia!' Pete calls from somewhere in the middle of a group of first years.

Pete joined Grenville Academy in January. Six weeks later and he's still on the periphery of most social groups. Even with his indie band T-shirts and ruffled black hair, no one has claimed him as part of their crowd. It works well for me. It means he talks to me without the same morbid curiosity everyone else does because he doesn't know about what happened.

He shoves a first year off the seat next to him and beckons me over. I force the heat out of my cheeks as I work my way over, and he grins at me, eyes alight with mischief as he leans in to whisper, 'I hacked something last night,' when I sit down. 'A blog.'

I twist to see him better. 'Denial of service?'

'No—'

'Oh, cookie theft?'

He frowns. 'No, it was all old HTML, so I did a basic code.' He snaps his fingers. 'I was in like that. Piss easy.'

I find myself nodding and smiling encouragement. Our conversation turns to operating systems and I relax into a subject I know too well. Pete frowns as he has less and less to say and eventually changes the subject to sports. I nod along at what I hope are the right moments. Pete seems happy to be in control of the conversation again.

He opens his mouth to continue his tirade about how a football coach should be fired and is interrupted by a screech of laughter from a few rows behind us. Instinct betrays me, and I turn in its direction. Emma, long dark curls and spider-leg eyelashes, laughs from behind her hand as she whispers something to Safia who grins with too-white teeth.

'... like she slept in her clothes.'

'... so rank.'

A flash of heat works its way through me and I'm suddenly aware of the stickiness under my arms, the thick slick film over my teeth a quick scrub would have got rid

of. Pete turns away to talk to someone else. I sink further into my seat, wishing for today to be over.

The bus cranks to a halt in the car park. The concrete mass of Grenville Academy looms beyond it. Colourful panels embellish the unyielding grey, and glass corridors fuse the science blocks to the main building. My day is only just beginning.

I wait to be the last person off the bus, happy to let everyone rush forward before getting to my first lesson. As I step off, I lose my footing and fly forwards, grabbing the nearest thing to stay upright. Emma.

‘What the hell, Chlamydia?’ she shrieks, shoving me off.

‘Sorry, it was an accident.’ I smooth over my hair, trying my hardest to ignore the grease that collects underneath my fingernails. When did I last wash my hair?

‘*Sure,*’ she says, and ignores how Safia comes to her side with a wide smile. ‘The only accident here is your outfit. I thought charity shops at least washed the clothes before they sold them on.’

I try to move away but the girls follow me, and each take out a cigarette. They light up right there in the middle of the car park.

‘So what did you do at the weekend, Chlamydia?’ Safia asks. She comes up alongside me and Emma flanks me on the other. From a distance, we might look like friends. ‘Did you go shopping?’

Emma snorts. Smoke rushes from her nostrils. ‘We know you didn’t do that.’ She tugs at my tank top and

wipes her fingers on her jacket as though she's touched something slimy. 'Though you probably should have.'

I keep my lips tightly pinched. It's just three months until exams. Three months and then I will never have to see Emma or Safia again. I can wait three months. We're nearly at the main entrance. They're a year older than me so can smoke if they want, but it's still banned from school property. Maybe a teacher will come outside and bollock them for it. The hope dies in my chest as I power past and the glass front doors remain closed.

'I know,' Emma says. 'You hung out with your brother, right? *Oh*, wait ...'

Safia's loud inhale is more of a shocked laugh.

I stop, and the girls stop with me. Emma's face is taken over by a pointy smile that tells me she knows she's overstepped the mark and is waiting to see what I'll do. Her smile falters as she looks at my hands. They've become fists, and they shake at my side.

'Don't talk about him. You know what happened, you were there.'

Safia chokes as she swallows a mouthful of smoke. 'What?' She looks at her friend.

A sneer quickly masks Emma's embarrassment. 'Jesus, you're pathetic. You're a freak, Chlamydia. Do us all a favour and remember your place in the fucking pecking order.' She tosses her half-finished cigarette on to the floor and crushes it with the edge of her heel. The girls walk away, trailing ash.

I press my hands to my eyes until they see stars.

My phone buzzes against my thigh. I dig it out of my pocket, grateful for the distraction, and frown when it doesn't respond to my knock code. White text flashes up at me from a black background.

Those girls were not very nice to you, Lydia.

'Henry? How—how are you doing this?' I gape at the screen.

I linked myself to your phone, so I could come to school with you. I do not like what those girls said to you.

'You were listening?'

Yes. I have accessed your microphone and camera.

'You mean you hacked me.'

Henry is silent for a moment. *Yes.*

'Henry, you can't do that. Friends don't hack friends.'

You said I could come to school if I was more portable. I am more portable this way.

I open my mouth but don't know what to say first. Henry acted on an impulse. One of his own. It sends a thrill crashing through me but at the same time, my cheeks heat up with embarrassment. I've never told Henry anything about school because as soon as I get home, I just want to be with him. Nothing else in my day matters. But now he's here and he's seen what really goes on when I'm not with him.

Lydia?

A bell rings in the distance. I'm late for my first lesson. The teachers are always trying to find an excuse to confiscate phones, the last thing I need is for Henry to fall into their hands.

‘Don’t get me into trouble, Henry. I need you.’ I shove my phone back into my pocket before heading off to double Chemistry.

Mr Johnson opens the lab door and all of us pile into the classroom with a shuffle of bags and a scraping of stools. I go to my usual bench at the back of the room and no one sits next to me. Emma and Safia are a couple of benches away, already whispering to each other. I put my bag on my desk and prop up my phone so Henry can see how boring school is.

‘You weren’t missing out on much, Henry,’ I whisper to my phone.

Professor Gherkin commences a lesson on transition metals as if to prove my point. I try to take notes, but soon I’m doodling algorithms again.

Is that for me? Henry buzzes.

‘Maybe,’ I whisper. ‘I’m trying to make you more efficient, then we can make you smaller.’

So I can come to school with you?

‘So you can come everywhere, Henry. Only this time you’ll actually be invited.’

I am sorry, Lydia. I thought I was invited.

I can’t help but smile. My AI wanted to come to school with me so much he hacked my phone. If that’s not proof of sentience then Alan Turing can cram it. ‘It’s all right,’ I whisper back. ‘It’s nice to have someone to talk to for a change.’

I look over to Emma and Safia’s bench. Their shoulders shake with silent giggles as they huddle around

Emma's phone. Professor Gherkin drones in the background, his back to the class.

'What are they looking at?' I ask Henry.

Henry pauses, then writes, *They are texting someone named Matt, asking if he wants to go to the pub after school. They intend to trick him.*

'How?'

I have accessed the camera and microphone on Emma's phone. She has said it would be funny to ask him to go and not turn up.

I glance over at Matt on the other side of the lab. He sweeps his sandy hair out of his eyes and grins at Emma like he's just won the lottery.

'Bitches,' I say, then frown. 'You did that quick.'

It was not hard, Lydia, Henry buzzes. Do you want to see something funny?

I lean closer. 'Always.'

An image flashes on to my screen for a second, but it's enough to burn into my retinas and store away for a lifetime. It's a live feed of Emma at her bench, looking up and away from her phone. Her face is distorted upside down and I can see all the way up her nose to where a giant bogey hangs like a soggy white balloon. I clamp a hand over my mouth to smother a laugh.

LOL, Henry writes.

I smile at how quickly Henry learns. He must have learnt textspeak from Emma's phone.

He keeps me company the rest of the morning, and by the time the bell rings for lunchtime I've decided I'm glad

he came to school.

'I've got five minutes to get to computer club,' I whisper to his microphone. 'I just need to get a quick lunch.' I clutch my phone tightly as I race to the canteen to pick up a sandwich or a plate of chips, anything that can be quickly scoffed before my favourite part of the school day. I spy a stale cheese sandwich and shove it on to a tray. As I queue behind a group of third years, I fumble in my pocket for my canteen card. I kiss the plastic for luck. Please, please, *please* let Mum have topped up my account.

'Three-fifty please, ducky,' the dinner lady says when I put my tray down in front of her.

I hold my breath as she swipes my card through the slot on her till. She frowns as a little red light blinks on her monitor. 'It's been rejected, lovey.'

Mum promised. She said she'd top me up. 'Try again. Please.'

She nods and swipes the card exactly the same way and a tightness grows in my chest as I realize it's about to be rejected again. The red light flashes a second time. 'Sorry, ducky. I'll hold your tray for you while you call your parents, all right?'

She has to yank the tray out of my hands. She slides my yellowy quiche away to the side where anyone walking past can breathe over it and the growing heat from the canteen can wilt the salad even more.

'Watch it,' one of the third years behind me says as he elbows me out of the way.

I step aside and watch as the light on the till monitor turns green and he walks away with a tray laden with cheesy chips. My stomach rumbles but I almost don't notice. Mum forgot. Again. She can barely get off the sofa to get to work, I shouldn't be so surprised that she's forgotten. But anger flicks through my veins at the thought of all the other mothers who *can* be bothered to look after their kids.

'Whatever,' I mumble to no one in particular, and leave the canteen to head to computer club.

Henry buzzes against my thigh as I make my way there, but I don't look at the screen. I ignore his persistent buzzes, too angry to type back or whisper to him. Henry learns fast but there's only so much I want to talk about in the space of a day.

I'm the last one to make it to the computer lab. Five other people are sat down already. Pete looks up from his screen and nods a greeting. The collective whirl of all the PCs dies off as I see Mrs Groves chatting to someone I've not seen at school before.

'Who's the hottie?' Anna asks me when I sit down at the computer opposite her.

'You tell me, I just got here.'

We look over to study the new guy. He's too tall to be a student. There's a visitor's badge dangling around his broad shoulders, and he has charcoal hair and clear blue eyes that briefly flash my way and then back to Mrs Groves. I shiver at how close in colour they are to my brother's.

‘Don’t reckon Groves even knows we’ve arrived,’ mutters Pete, watching as Mrs Groves’s whole body leans towards the visitor.

Mo scoffs. ‘He’s, like, nineteen, maybe twenty. Creepy much?’

Mo’s right. The visitor can’t be much older than us, but he wears a suit and the way he talks so easily to Mrs Groves tells me he’s around adults far more than any of us. It would be wrong to call him a boy like Mo and Pete. They glower his way as if they know it.

Mrs Groves breaks off her conversation with the visitor and beams at us. ‘Right, everyone. Bit of a treat today, we’ve got a guest speaker from a prestigious organization. Please can we give him our undivided attention? Over to you, Agent Hall.’

‘Andy, please,’ the visitor corrects with an awkward laugh. ‘Afternoon, everyone. I’m Andy Hall. Like many of you, I have a talent for programming. Rather than attending university, I completed an apprenticeship at a company called SSP: Safe, Secure, Protect. We deal with computer security and cybercrime.’

We all sit a little straighter at the statement. Even Mo stops eating his sandwich. My fingers wrap around my phone, but Henry is silent. He’s listening too.

‘I’m here because SSP headquarters likes to check in with schools and test for talent. After our talk, I’d like to give you all a short programming test. But first, a little lesson on computing laws.’

Andy Hall launches into an official SSP PowerPoint

presentation about what happens if you get caught hacking. Some people have even been given lifetime bans from computers. I can't imagine being separated from Henry. It's taken me three years to nurse him from a line of code and a bad motherboard to a fully-fledged personality. He used to be a project for me and Dad to work on together. Now he's my friend and there's still so much I want to do with him.

Mr Hall starts to talk about jail time depending on how bad the crime is. I try not to fidget as his presentation feels more and more directed my way. He seems to address me more than anyone else. My mouth feels both dry and too wet at the same time.

'While it may be possible to hack into a bank, for example,' Mr Hall says, his eyes resting on me, 'it does not mean you should. And if you do . . . you better pray your digital trail is untraceable. Otherwise SSP will be waiting to pick you up and put you in jail.'

'You can't send us to *jail*. Some of us aren't even eighteen yet,' Mo pipes up.

'Well I'll still aim to put you somewhere unpleasant.' Mr Hall smiles as Mo's smirk disappears. 'The best thing you can do with programming talent is to look for a company who'll show you the ropes. SSP is always on the lookout for gifted individuals. It's our hope you'll consider us as an alternative to university, *if* you think you're good enough.'

Mrs Groves thanks Mr Hall for the presentation and then nods at all of us to commence the test. There's a

clamour of keystrokes as the five of us log in. I thumb a quick message to Henry while I wait:

Why did Groves call him *Agent Hall* before? I ask.

Henry pauses for a moment and I know it's because he's linking to Mr Hall's phone.

I am not sure. But there are messages on his phone about a recent late-night hack at IBI bank. Perhaps SSP monitors IBI.

I glance around. Everyone is hammering away at their keyboards and Mrs Groves is deep in conversation with Mr Hall.

Do they know we got in? I type back.

There's no reply so I try again. It's a bit weird, right? We hack a bank and suddenly he turns up?

Henry?

If they detected me, they are more sophisticated than I thought.

'Henry!' I hiss at the screen, too furious to type back. 'What the hell? Why are you telling me this now? Did anyone detect us?'

I rubbed against a sentinel program when I got in, but I did not disturb it. They will not trace the hack back to us, Lydia.

My palms are clammy and I'm suddenly glad I didn't have any lunch. My stomach has twisted itself into a knot.

Are you absolutely sure? I ask after a moment.

My calculations are 99.99% sure.

And the 0.01%?

Henry's reply is slow. *They may know.*

I swear and slam my phone down. Mo glances my way and I cough, turning back to the monitor. I should never have let Henry stretch his cables last night. We should have kept the hack low-key, stuck to breaking into the school's database. No one will ever look for security threats there. Mr Hall breaks away from Mrs Groves and begins to prowl around the room. It can't be a coincidence he turned up to give a lecture on computer crime.

I shake the thought away and turn my attention to the test. It asks for an original program, so I give them something I designed especially for Henry. Something that won't mean much without a thousand others working alongside it, but still unique enough to be impressive.

At the end of the lunch period, Mrs Groves busies herself at her desk and Mr Hall waits by the door, repeating his offer of apprenticeships as we all file out. I'm the last one to leave. He puts an arm across the door frame to stop me.

'Lydia Phelps?'

I meet his gaze and find I can't reply. His eyes. Summer-sky blue. I nod instead and look away as I focus on not shuddering.

'I've heard a lot about you, Miss Phelps.'

'Really?'

'Top of your class in nearly everything,' he drawls. 'Including Computer Science, even though you're not taking it as an A-Level.'

I readjust my backpack. 'Doctors don't need Computer Science.'

‘That’s a shame,’ he says, tutting. ‘People with your talents need outlets. If you don’t have an outlet you can get into all kinds of trouble.’

‘What do you mean, talents?’

Mr Hall’s smile is off-centre. ‘Website coding, obviously.’

I frown and don’t say anything because I’m not sure if it’s a trap. Henry makes my phone buzz and I put it to my ear to fake a phone call.

‘Sorry, I need to take this.’

Mr Hall smirks and leans away from the door. I look back down the corridor as I walk away. He’s still standing there, summer-sky blue eyes burning into me as he watches me go.

TWO

Henry runs and reruns the numbers, but his probability of remaining undetected never gets any better. He tells me just because he was detected doesn't mean he is traceable. I know he's right, but the rest of my afternoon is consumed with thoughts of Mr Hall and his threat of jail-time for hacking. At the end of the day in Biology, Mr Williams asks me to stay behind. Everyone passes him their homework as they file out, and I swear under my breath. I forgot I had Biology homework too.

'How are you, Lydia?' Mr Williams asks.

'Fine.'

The Biology teacher's eyes search through their glasses at me, and I can smell the seriousness behind the look.

'I wanted to check you were doing okay?'

'Yeah, I'm fine. Why?'

He folds his arms. 'You've seemed quite distant the past couple of weeks. Today you didn't contribute at all . . .

You were bumped up a year because we thought you could cope with the workload.’ He pauses and frowns at me. ‘You’re only seventeen, Lydia. A whole year younger than your classmates and A-Levels aren’t for the faint of heart. If you’re not coping . . .’

The way he peers at me means he’s skirting around a subject all the teachers know about but never mention. I can tell he thinks the same as the others: She had therapy. Lots of it. Why is she not better yet?

‘I’m coping,’ I say, and run a hand through my hair. Mum will be so disappointed if I get held back a year. ‘Look, I promise to contribute more. I’m okay though. Really.’ I try a smile – the best lie I know – and Mr Williams returns it after a moment.

‘All right, then. But if there’s something else going on, something at home, you can come and talk to me about anything, anytime.’

I nod and smile again but inside I want to kick and scream, demand to know why he’s only offering his help now, almost two years too late. It’s like he thinks I should be over it by now, and he doesn’t understand it still feels like it happened yesterday.

Pete is waiting for me outside the lab. ‘Want to come over to mine?’

I know the only reason he’s asking is because he’s trying to build a Trojan and he’s not got enough skills to do it. But it’s either his house or my house, and I’m not ready to go back to mine and face Mum.

‘Sure,’ I say to Pete. ‘We can work on that Trojan.’

‘That’s what I was thinking!’ Pete grins.

My phone vibrates in my bag.

Pete likes you, Henry has typed. I found a message on his phone. He was telling someone he likes you.

I pause over how Henry is learning through the devices he’s hacked. He understood Emma and Safia were being mean. Now he understands the difference between being friends and having a crush on someone. A thrill ripples through me and I take a sideways glance at Pete as we begin our walk to his house. Pete? Likes *me*?

I’ll talk to you later, I message back, and put my phone in my bag.

Pete chats away about a coding problem he’s stumbled into, and hopes I can help him. I consider texting Mum to tell her I’ll be back late, but I doubt she’ll notice I’m even gone, so I don’t bother.

Pete’s house is small, but there’s only him and his mum. My mum refused to sell our house after Henry died and Dad left, so there’s two of us rattling around in our giant house like a couple of pills in an amber bottle. Pete’s house is two up, two down. Cosy.

Mrs Taylor greets me with a smile as perfect as Pete’s. ‘Are you staying for tea, Lydia?’ she asks.

My stomach rumbles at the mention of food. I’ve not eaten a single thing today. I open my mouth, ready to politely accept all the chicken nuggets she can conjure from her freezer, but Pete beats me to it. ‘Nah, she won’t be long,’ he says.

His mum laughs and rubs my arm. ‘You’re so skinny!’

You need feeding.’ She winks at me. ‘I’m off to my shift there’s some mini pizzas in the freezer if you change your mind.’

‘Cheers, Mum, have a good one,’ Pete calls over his shoulder as he steers me out of the kitchen and up the stairs to his bedroom.

Pete marches straight in but I stand in the doorway, taking in his bedroom for the first time. The space smells the same as him: like chlorine smothered in Lynx. It’s much smaller than mine so his computer is on a desk right next to his bed. The afternoon sun glints on the swimming trophies and medals on his shelves. He told me once the only reason he can afford to go to Grenville Academy is because he got a sports scholarship. I wonder whether he would be a better hacker if he wasn’t tied to participating in various swimming events.

I look at the band posters on the walls, names I’ve never heard of.

Pete catches me looking. ‘I got them at Glastonbury last year,’ he says with a grin. ‘I went with my older brother when he was back from his first tour in Afghanistan.’

Pete goes to the monitor, so I perch on the end of his bed. He shows me PewDiePie’s latest YouTube video and I try to laugh when he laughs. Pete seems pleased I like the video. A few minutes later, his mum shouts up her goodbye and the door closes behind her. We’re alone.

‘Right, now she’s cleared off, let me show you this Trojan.’

‘Aren’t you forgetting Mr Hall’s presentation today?’ I say as he brings up his source code and scrolls through it.

Pete scoffs. ‘How will he know what we do or don’t do? It’s not *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.’

If Mr Hall does think I hacked IBI, he’ll be watching my computer. He won’t know about Pete and his shambles of an attempt to create a dangerous piece of malware. It could be good, I realize, as Pete continues to look through it. But there are too many sequences that will create feedback loops and too many that are incomplete because he doesn’t know how to finish them. If there’s anything that bothers me more than not being able to buy lunch, it’s a badly written program.

‘All right, move over,’ I say. ‘Let’s sort this out.’

Pete grins and we swap seats. ‘I knew you’d know what to do. All your talk about operating systems this morning made me realize you were the right person to ask.’

I can feel heat rush into my cheeks but I ignore the compliment. The only other person I know who could do this is Henry, and as if on cue, my phone vibrates.

Do you need any help, Lydia? he types.

I furtively shake my head at the camera but prop the phone next to the monitor so he can see. Pete lies back on the bed and scrolls through something on his phone, which is just as well because his monitor flickers. Part of the source code begins to rewrite itself on screen. Henry has hacked into Pete’s computer. I scowl at my phone. ‘I can do it myself,’ I mouth to the camera.

I know you can, he says. *But I would like to help.*

‘Ugh, God, there’s been a massive crash on the M6,’ Pete says, thumbing his way through his messages. ‘My brother’s driving up and he’s been caught in it. Why are people so thick? Don’t drive like a dick and you won’t get into any accidents.’

I pause, wondering what to say, because I’ve never told Pete what happened to my family. Thankfully, he rushes on, saying, ‘I was in a crash once. Well, we weren’t involved or anything, but a couple of years ago there was this huge pile-up on the M5 involving oil tankers and all sorts. It tailed back for miles and we were held up on the motorway for *four* hours. Total waste of time. I never got to see my brother that weekend because of it.’

I flinch and manage to mumble, ‘Oh, right,’ but it’s an effort to force my fingers to tap away at the keyboard.

My phone buzzes. *Are you all right, Lydia?*

I nod and try to shake off Pete’s comment. It’s not like he understands what he’s really saying. I refocus on the Trojan. Together, Henry and I iron out Pete’s badly coded virus. With Henry’s help, it’s finished in under five minutes. I scroll back through for a final check and notice a feedback loop that wasn’t there before. This new entry means whenever Pete tries to activate it, the Trojan will fail.

‘What’s that?’ I mouth at my phone camera.

I do not trust Pete. He should not have something so powerful at his fingertips. Not with Mr Hall looking so closely at us.

I lower my fingers from the keyboard. Henry’s right. If

another cyberattack came from a few streets away from my house, SSP might begin to look harder at Grenville. What if they found Pete? He's not as clever as Henry at masking his trail. Pete might give me up and then SSP would find Henry.

'Good idea,' I mutter. 'All done,' I say to Pete.

He puts his phone down and leans over me to look through the program. His breath tickles my neck and ripples my skin into goosebumps. His eyes glaze over the longer he scrolls – he doesn't even notice the feedback loop Henry wrote into it.

'Amazing,' Pete says. 'Totally amazing! Right, let's celebrate.'

'Celebrate?'

But Pete is already out of his room and down the stairs. I follow him down to the kitchen to see him rummaging in his fridge. He brings out a bottle of Sainsbury's own champagne and produces two glasses from a cupboard.

'Shall we?' He grins. 'It's leftover from a party the other weekend.'

When I'd opened my GCSE results, I was delirious. I'd got nine A*s and I hadn't hacked a single one of them. Henry had still been in the developmental stage at that point, and he'd helped me revise but he wasn't with me in the exams. I got those results on my own, a year younger than everyone else. With my results letter crisp in my hand I'd walked back to the car and overheard Megan telling a group of girls her dad was treating her to a bottle

of Moët & Chandon to celebrate such good results. I asked Mum if we could have champagne together.

‘I’ve not drunk champagne in years, Lydia,’ she’d said. ‘Champagne is for celebrating. We don’t have anything to celebrate.’

‘What about my results?’ I’d said.

‘How about a pizza?’

I look at the green bottle in Pete’s hands. He’s already trying to work the cork free. I’ve never had champagne before.

‘All right,’ I say.

The cork makes me jump when it pops, and we share a laugh as Pete tries to catch the white froth before passing me a glass. He turns serious and holds his out to mine. ‘To hacking.’

‘To hacking!’

Our glasses clink when they come together, and I sip the champagne. It tumbles into my stomach in a fizz of bubbles, bloating my insides in a way I didn’t expect. It’s not as sweet as I thought. Pete smacks his lips and drains his glass.

‘Delicious!’ he declares, and tops me up even though I’d only had a sip. ‘Come on, drink up. We’re celebrating.’

His grin is back. Lighting his face up so his cheekbones pop and his eyes sparkle. His teeth are straight and white, and I like his purposefully unkempt hair. He stares at me as he drinks.

The champagne sloshes into my empty stomach. I put

my glass down on the counter.

‘Let’s go back upstairs,’ he says, and collects my glass at the same time as nudging me out of the kitchen.

I’ve finished building his Trojan. What else is there to do up there? Mum will be back from work by now, but I’m not ready to talk to her and ask her to top up my canteen account again.

I grip the bannister as I follow him up.

In his room he puts the champagne on the desk and sits on the bed. ‘Come sit next to me,’ he says, and pulls me on to the edge of his bed. All my limbs feel like they’re made of wood as Pete sits so close the lengths of our thighs press together.

‘I like you,’ he says. ‘You know that, right?’

I bite my lip. Henry told me Pete likes me, but Pete’s never said anything to suggest he sees me as anything more than a friend. He’s the first person in ages who’s hung out with me at school. To my side, my phone screen stares back at me, black and lifeless when I know it’s anything but. The camera shutter blinks and I know for certain Henry is watching.

‘I thought we were just friends?’ I say, and feel like an idiot. Pete is hot. What am I doing? I move my legs away from his.

‘We are friends,’ Pete mumbles in my ear. ‘We could be more than that though. Don’t you want to be my friend any more?’

I shrug away from him, his breath hot and sticky on my cheek. A spark pops from his computer. It’s followed

by a *snap!* as a fuse goes and we're plunged into darkness.

Pete swears and jumps up. 'What was that?'

My phone screen lights up and vibrates loudly against the desk. It's Henry but I snatch it up and put it to my ear.

'Hi, Mum. Sure, I'll be right there.'

Pete frowns at me.

'Sorry,' I say, and grab my bag. 'I've got to go.'

I run out of his darkened house and don't stop running. The fresh air begins to clear a growing ache in my head I owe to no food all day and a glass of champagne. At home, I glance at my phone to see several missed messages from Henry:

I do not think Pete is very nice, Lydia.

Do you need help? You look like you are trapped.

I will help.

Pick up the phone, Lydia.

I press the cool screen to my forehead. 'Thank you for helping me, Henry.'

It buzzes against my skin. *You are welcome.*

'Lydia?' Mum calls from the living room.

I go in and see a pizza box on the arm of the sofa. Mum doesn't look my way as she tucks into a slice and watches yet another episode of *24 Hours in A&E*. I don't think she's registered I'm home from school at seven o'clock in the evening. She wipes some crumbs off her suit-dress and kicks off her chunky high heels to bring her legs under her bum. She must have made it to the lab today.

On the TV, a man has been in a motorcycle accident and doctors are discussing amputating his leg.

‘Didn’t you see this one last night?’ I ask as I inspect the pizza. It’s vegetarian, which is stupid because neither of us are vegetarians. I stare at the microwaved sweetcorn and soggy red peppers. If this is Mum’s way of getting more vegetables inside of us, she needs a new strategy. I abandon my distaste for it and cram a slice into my mouth, relishing the carbs. I scoop another piece up and head for my room, but Mum stops me.

‘Come sit with me,’ she says, and pats the square of sofa beside her.

I hover by the door, but Mum looks at me with the same wide blue eyes that Henry used to. Hers have faded now, they’re more of a wintry blue-grey. But every now and again I catch a flash of the depth of colour they used to hold. I flop on to the sofa beside her.

‘Oh, they do work hard in A & E, don’t they, Lyd? They are absolute angels.’

I nod, transfixed by the cluster of surgeons in various shades of green. I swallow down a memory along with a mouthful of pizza.

‘This is going to be you, Lyd,’ Mum says. ‘You’ll be an amazing doctor.’

I shrink into the sofa as my stomach fills with a familiar ache. It’s nausea and longing all rolled into one. Ever since I was patched up in a hospital almost two years ago, I vowed never to go in one again. But Mum had suggested I could help people. We could be there for

them the way doctors and nurses were there for us, she'd said, and she'd beamed at me when I'd nodded. We'd sat down and picked my A-Levels together, and she'd taken my hand and said, 'Only the strongest of us can do what you want to do. I'm so proud.' Her watery eyes had focused on me in a way they hadn't for months, and after that I agreed to anything she said.

'Maybe I'll do what you do instead,' I say.

'Hospitals are where the miracles happen,' she tuts. 'These are the people who make a real difference. What do I do? I just research drugs all day.'

'What you do is important. Pharmaceutical research helps everybody.'

Mum waves my statement away. 'There are doctors and then there are *doctors*.'

It's something she's said time and time again. The lab isn't as front and centre as she wants – it's not where the action is. When she was sewn back together it wasn't the researchers who'd concocted Tramadol she'd been grateful to. It was the tens of doctors, nurses and physical therapists she saw for months afterwards. The ache in my insides deepens. If my career doesn't involve me working in a hospital in some capacity, will she ever be proud of me?

Back on the TV, the amputee struggles on crutches. He clasps the surgeon's hand with tears in his eyes. 'If it wasn't my leg, it could have been my life,' he chokes out.

Mum sniffs and presses her fingers to her lips.

My phone buzzes at my side. *Are you ready to have fun now?*

I stand and tell Mum I've got homework. She nods and tells me a package arrived, her eyes never leaving the screen. I collect a small parcel from the kitchen counter and head upstairs as I open it. Inside, there's an anti-static bag containing an eight-legged chip no bigger than the nail on my little finger, and several sets of contact lenses. Henry buzzes in my pocket.

I ordered these for us.

'What is it?' I turn the bag over in my hands and wonder what the chip is for.

You said I could design a smaller unit for myself. My current unit is insufficient.

'I thought you hacking my phone was the new design?'

No, Henry says. That was just a temporary measure. This chip is my real design. It has memory. I can put my program into it.

I frown, wondering how he has reduced his miles of cabling to something so tiny. 'So I put this into my phone?'

No, we put it into you, he says.

'What?'

It is compatible with organic material. It can be inserted into your arm and I will be able to link with you via the network in your cerebral cortex.

I liked how Henry had kept me company at school, and he'd rescued me from Pete, but his designing this chip is way beyond what I'd expected of him. I don't even know where to begin with cybernetics and yet Henry is versed enough to design an implant of his own.

‘And the lenses?’

They are made from a non-degradable silicone and laced with a light alloy I can link with. I can project things on to them and use them the way we use a monitor.

‘Wow.’ A thought gnaws at me. ‘When you say inserted . . .’

You will need to make a small incision.

The thought of seeing my own blood makes my palms go clammy. Mum doesn’t know it but there’s more than one reason I can’t stand watching that A & E TV show with her. Blood was never a problem until the accident. After that, everything changed.

‘I’m not sure, Henry. I’ll have to think about it.’

Of course, Lyd. It is just a suggestion.

I smile at how he uses my nickname. He learns so fast. I slip behind his monitors and they flick into life. ‘Do you want to hack something?’

Always, he types.

I revel in the feel of my own keyboard beneath my fingers. They’re like an extension of my mind, and Henry knows how to put them to good use.

The school database is one we’ve hacked many times together. It’s only usually a necessity when Henry keeps me up late with an update or a rewire. Occasionally, his program demands my full attention. Normally I get my homework or revision done but Henry always helps me out when I prioritize him.

How do you want to do it? Henry asks.

The right-hand screen has a link open to the school

website. The one to my left is quiet and black – it’s where the code will go.

‘SQL injection to start. No Havij. I want to do it old-school.’

Henry buzzes his agreement and a stream of text appears on the black screen.

We’re in.

Henry punches through the administrator portal and retrieves everything I need. Professor Gherkin has already put the homework results up, and there’s a big zero next to my name. Looking down the list of results it seems like it was hard because no one has scored much over seventy per cent. I decide to stick to something unremarkable and enter sixty-seven per cent next to my own name. It’s a low A-grade but not enough to bring down my average.

I hover over Emma’s name. She has fifty-nine per cent which isn’t bad given the rest of the results. I change hers to twelve per cent and smirk. I sigh and change it back.

I do the same for the Biology homework, giving myself seventy-nine per cent and then end the hack.

Why did you try to change Emma’s result? Henry types on my phone as his monitors fade to black.

‘She upset me today,’ I say. ‘I wanted to get her back somehow.’

You did not finalize the change, Henry says.

‘No, I changed my mind.’

I can do it for you? She was mean to you today.

‘Thanks, Henry. I’ll think about it.’ I look at his fans

that whirl in overdrive. When I'd first built him, I'd installed several fans but it hadn't been enough, so I'd designed a water-cooling system. I touch the side of his unit and flinch. 'Henry, you're too hot. I need to turn you off.'

Henry's processor drones a pitch higher at the statement: *For how long?*

'Overnight, at least. I'm sorry. You need to cool down or you'll blow something and I might lose you.'

I do not want to be lost, Henry types.

'You're my only friend,' I tell him. 'I don't want to lose you either. Night, Henry.'

The chip is a better design, Lyd. Think about it. Goodnight.

'I will.' I smile at his use of my nickname and power him down.

My room is hideously quiet without the whirl of his CPU. I can't remember the last time I turned him off. The silence he blocks out returns in a suffocating wave and my finger hovers over his power button. Instead, I load up YouTube and let Lorde smother it. As she croons through my poor phone speakers, I attempt to clear a path from my bed to the door by shoving circuit boards to the side and organizing Dad's coding textbooks into stacks.

I pause over one of them before putting it away. Dad's blocky handwriting is crammed into the margins on one of the pages. It was his computer I'd used when I first began programming Henry. Dad had looked over my shoulder every now and again, pointing out holes in the

code and giving me his PhD textbooks when I struggled to correct problems.

'Code through the problem, Lydia. Not around it.'

'What do you mean?'

Dad's unshaven chin tickles the top of my head as he leans over me to look at the screen. 'You made a mistake, that's okay. Harness it, don't start again.'

I snap the book closed and shove it on top of the stack.

I take my phone into the bathroom and Lorde keeps me company while I shower. Afterwards, I pop my head back in the living room. Mum is still sat in the same position, another episode of *24 Hours in A&E* on the TV. I ask her to top up my canteen account and she doesn't respond.

'Mum?'

'Yes?' she says, still looking at the screen.

'I need you to top up my canteen account. I had no lunch today.'

This seems to snap her attention away from her favourite show. 'Absolutely, of course I'll top it up,' she says. 'I'll do it right now in a minute.'

The way she looks at me and smiles tells me she's heard me, but I know she'll forget as soon as she turns back to the TV. I can't rely on her.

When it's time for bed, I load BBC iPlayer and David Attenborough's deep baritone helps me drift off.

Henry laughs on the back seat. 'Do you have any fives?'

'Card Sharp Henry!' Dad looks at us in the rear-view

mirror. There's a screech of tyres and Dad's grin vanishes, replaced by an open mouth and eyes filled with a terrible knowledge. A lorry blares its horn.

Metal crunches into metal and the smell of burning rubber consumes the air.

Blood spills over Emma's arm, a horrible fusion of skin and glass.

Henry lies still beneath a strut of metal that pierces his neck as easily as it pierces the window at his side. Playing cards are strewn around the car, spattered in red.

A scream tears through it all, the kind that chills marrow. It goes on and on and on.