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EVERY

LINE

OF

YOU

Chicken
House

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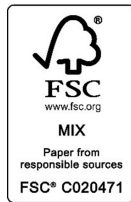
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For Oli

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 telling 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 round 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 to the front 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, and 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 piece of quiche 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 whir 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.