

A Blemish on the Curve
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Chapter 1

“Now, Mr. McMann, if you could,” said Lucas Mineur, leaning back slightly in his black leather chair, “what programming languages are you familiar with?”

“Well, I’m proficient in Java, JavaScript, and C++,” came the immediate response from the job applicant.

“All three of them?” asked Lucas, arching his eyebrow as he cocked his head slightly to the side. “That’s quite impressive...definitely something we’re looking for here.”

“Yes, in my previous job, I was mainly working with JavaScript to structure applications, if you will, that were able to function across multiple platforms.” It was clear that Max McMann had done his homework on this open position. Lucas had already asked a host of questions, and each time, the Manager of the Braden, Inc Software Engineer Division had been impressed with the applicant’s answers. Lucas was starting to feel like filling this vacant entry-level position was going to be harder than he thought. Already, two other applicants had impressed him considerably, and now Max McMann was increasingly etching his name onto the list as well. And there were still two applicants to go.

“Excellent, excellent,” muttered Lucas, putting check marks beside his most recent question in his notes. He looked across at the interviewee, who was dressed to a “t” in a suit, with short, well-combed brown hair; he just looked fresh and ready to go.

“And how about you explain to me, just as a final question,” said Lucas, “How you might go about locating bugs or other irregularities in your applications and software.”

Max McMann seemed to almost be answering the question before Lucas finished, and the young applicant was nodding his head enthusiastically as he spoke.

“Oh, sure, sure!” he began. “Well the way I do it is, every time I complete the coding process of a new program or application, I use GDB...you know...a GNU debugger...?”

“Oh I know what GDB means,” laughed Lucas, not quite able to keep a little haughtiness out of his voice. What did this young guy think — that he wouldn’t know what that meant? Privately, he made a note that perhaps Mr. McMann didn’t quite understand the lay of the land in this office.

“Of course, of course,” said Max, recovering himself and nodding more vigorously. “I just...haha, I’m not used to being around such competent programmers is all.”

“Well, here at Braden you’d get used to it pretty fast,” chuckled Lucas, rocking a bit as he lounged in his stylish chair. “Continue with your answer.” He sure did enjoy these job interviews, especially the ones like this, when he could take a sharp little spark plug like this

young man and knock him down a little to size. He made another mental note that it might be preferable to hire someone younger like this, who he could professionally mold to his particular brand of corporate culture. Lucas could tolerate innovation and exploration, as long as it went through him first — he was the one in charge...of this branch, at least. There were plenty of higher-ups, but he liked to keep as tight a hold on his own office fiefdom as he could.

“So...yes, I use GBD to help me locate any bugs that might exist in the programs or applications,” continued Max, eager to retain his momentum, “and also to see if there are any vulnerabilities that might exist, which may, in the future, prove susceptible to other bugs that might not initially be present.”

“Ah yes, very good, very good, glad you mentioned that last part” said Lucas, underlining Max’s name a couple more times. This young man had a thing or two to learn about office culture, for sure, but Lucas had to give it to him — he definitely knew his stuff.

“And if you locate a bug?” Lucas asked, leaning forward in his chair and folding his hands together on his desk.

“Well, once I find one, it’s fairly simple,” replied Max. “I carefully go through each line of code to pinpoint the problems, and then I just take it from there. And then, once I think I have everything fixed, I go ahead and run GBD again, just to make sure I haven’t inadvertently created new bugs while I was in the process of actually fixing the initial coding errors.”

Lucas nodded his head silently a few times, not able to suppress a grin.

“Well, Mr. McMann,” he said, reaching his hand out across his desk, “It’s clear that you’re more than qualified to take on this position.”

“Thank you sir!” said Max, enthusiastically shaking Lucas’s hand.

“Now, of course, it’ll be a few more days to process all the applicants,” said Lucas, leaning back again in his chair and putting the points of his fingers together. He always loved this part: keeping the bright young people waiting.

“And I have to say, we’ve had an unusual amount of highly-qualified applicants for this single position.”

“Oh yes, I understand,” said Max quickly, nodding and sitting up straight in his chair. His impeccable posture, together with his clear voice, was not lost on Lucas. Maybe this young man was...a little too much? Or maybe he was just young and eager, and would mellow out a little once he started the job and it became clear to him that he was going to function on one of the lower rungs for a while.

“But I’d be remiss if I didn’t let you know that you’re high on the list of applicants,” said Lucas, dropping in the key compliment there at the end for good measure. He certainly didn’t want to scare an applicant like this into applying to too many other rival companies. Max’s beaming smile let Lucas know that he had done his job and led the young man on with exactly the right amount of finesse and dexterity.

The next applicant was no less impressive, at least as far as her qualifications went, and far more impressive to Lucas in terms of her physical assets. The young woman was already fairly tall, but in her high heels, she was nearly as tall as the 6'1 Lucas, as he noticed with a slight degree of trepidation as he stood up to shake her hand. Still, though, her big, bouncy breasts (DD's, Lucas decided in an instant, feeling almost alarmed at how close to his face they were), which stretched the limits of her white blouse top, more than made up for any size issues Lucas had with her being almost as tall as he was. Besides, he could absolutely insist that she not wear heels to work — this was the 21st century, after all! He could use it as an opportunity to cast himself as a modern man, someone who was more concerned with his female employees' comfort than anything else.

“So...this is Valerie Darnoe!” he chuckled, spreading his hands wide at her figure, and making no secret of his attraction.

“This is all me!” she responded, chuckling in kind as she sat down. Of course, she had been prepared for this kind of attention — and she knew exactly how to handle it, and use it to her advantage.

“Well, I'll be damned!” exclaimed Lucas, also taking a seat, “What on earth made someone like you decide to become a software engineer?”

“I like computers!” came Valerie's chipper, matter-of-fact response. “And ever since I took that coding elective class in middle school, I've been totally hooked.”

“Hmmm, ok...ok, yes,” said Lucas, feeling himself get a little hard in his pants as he glanced down at her resume. Her heart-shaped face was framed by blond hair, which was only accentuated by the shining blue sapphires of her striking eyes. Lucas glanced up again at her sitting across from him, and his eyes drifted back down to her breasts. They were so prominent that he could even see how the voluminous flesh underneath seemed to almost stretch her skin. He suddenly wondered whether she had gotten a boob-job, and briefly considered asking her about it point-blank. But he quickly decided against it, figuring that such questions were probably best left to after the actual hiring had taken place.

“Ok...so you graduated Summa from Carnegie Mellon,” he said, looking back down at her resume. “Had your thesis project directed by Dr. Melvin...excellent pedigree there...he wrote high praise in his recommendation letter for you...”

Valerie nodded her head, smiling confidently, as she sat up straight in her chair and looked Lucas straight in the eye. He looked up briefly at her and gave another smile, his eyes traveling shamelessly across her body as his gaze lingered. Just like the other applicants, Valerie was professionally-dressed, with a sharp and spotless white blouse that showed off her upper assets, and an office-friendly, yet revealing black skirt that showed off her lower assets. Combined with her obvious qualifications, this applicant was already Lucas's favorite to hire. But he knew he had to go through the protocol, just to make sure no higher-ups had any reason to jump on his back.

“Worked for two years as an entry-level at Sylvan Systems...solid company...” he continued, going over her resume, and then looking back up at her again. “Well, Ms. Darnoe, your resume

is certainly impressive. And judging by your appearance, you know exactly how we do things around here: smart, snappy, and...dare I say...sexy.”

“Haha, well, the reputation precedes the company, for sure!” laughed Valerie. She was becoming positively flushed with confidence.

“So why don’t you describe for me,” said Lucas, leaning back in his chair like he had done a number of times already that day, “the process that you, Valerie, use for writing a piece of code.”

“From requirements to delivery?” she asked.

“Absolutely,” he responded, already feeling heartened. This girl was gonna knock it out of the park.

“Well, I use the Specification model,” she said, not missing a beat. “It’s always come naturally to me, since I’m totally comfortable with using rigorous mathematical models to help me stay organized.”

“Right...yes...good,” said Lucas, smiling.

“And it’s been my experience,” continued Valerie, smiling right back, “That by far the most successful specifications are created and fleshed out for the primary purpose of understanding and adjusting the applications that already worked, that were already well-developed before.”

“Oh yes, no doubt,” said Lucas, underlining and circling Valerie’s name vigorously over and over.

“But,” continued Valerie, in her same confident tone, “safety-critical programs, applications, and software systems in general, you know, are more often than not minutely specified before any application is developed. And so, of course, it goes without saying that specifications are most crucial for external interfaces that have to stay balanced and grounded...stable.”

Lucas couldn’t help but maintain his grin as he glanced down again at Valerie’s resume. The bodacious young bombshell certainly knew what she was talking about. He glanced up at her again, appreciating how her blue eyes shined in the late-afternoon sun that was spilling in from the tall windows of his corner office. Lucas studied her for a few long moments, this time not focusing so much on her obvious physical assets, and instead trying to get a feel for what her attitude might be like. For an accomplished young woman like her, freshly graduated from one of the “new Ivy League” schools, there was always the danger that she could become a problem in the office culture, whining about discrimination or harassment or this or that or whatever else these other young women were doing in other companies. Lucas knew that “times had changed,” to a certain extent, but he also knew that there wasn’t anything wrong with a little inter-office flirtation.

‘Besides,’ he thought to himself, ‘Look at what she’s wearing! She knows what she’s doing. It’s her way of saying that she understands how things work, and that she’s willing to jump right in. Gotta admire that panache.’

He asked her a few more cursory questions, and then stood up to shake her hand. Once again, he was struck by how she was almost eye-level with him. He didn't much care for it, but there was also something in the back of his brain that didn't really mind it — the added boost from her tasteful black heels only seemed to underline her presence and her confidence.

"It's been a pleasure, Ms. Darnoe," said Lucas warmly, holding her hand for a few extra moments as he squeezed and un-squeezed it a couple times.

"Oh likewise, Mr. Mineur," she said, getting the French-based pronunciation exactly correct.

"It'll be a few days to process all the great applicants we've had," he said, finally releasing her hand, "But, not promising anything here, of course...but I wouldn't be shocked if you were getting a special call here shortly."

"Well I'll look forward to it!" she laughed pleasantly, with fresh energy. A couple moments later she was gone, and Lucas had to take a couple minutes to decompress from that enlivening, stimulating interaction. She was more or less just as qualified as the other applicants, that was for sure, and she had an extra something...and "x factor," so to speak, that Lucas was impressed by. If he was being honest with himself, he knew exactly what this "x factor" was: her double-D breasts, her long, slender legs, and her sexy eyes...plus, a chipper, slightly submissive attitude, like she was up for anything. In his mind, Lucas worked it out to sound slightly more professional, reasoning that his office needed a little more diversity anyway, since there weren't that many women working at Braden, Inc to begin with.

Of course, there was Sophia, but she was basically his age, in her mid-30's...and besides, well...that was past history. They had briefly dated, but she was a little too independent for him, a little too bossy and maybe hardheaded. But now that they weren't involved anymore, there was a mutual level of respect between them: Sophia respected him as an engineer and a manager, and Lucas respected that Sophia wouldn't take any shit from him. It had gotten to the point, even, when Lucas would actually ask Sophia for advice on certain things. Their relationship had become professionally and personally stable.

But this new girl, Valerie...well, Lucas was chomping at the bit to hire her. He knew that Sophia would give him an earful about it, but could she argue with Valerie's credentials? Besides, he could frame it to her like he was doing his part to ensure that more women got jobs in engineering and software companies. He chuckled to himself, anticipating the lightly-indignant, knowing look on Sophia's face when he would try that argument on her.

Lucas was so preoccupied that he nearly forgot that there was one more interviewee waiting outside. He sighed a bit exasperatedly. He already had more than enough top-tier people to choose from. He glanced down at the last resume.

"Brooke Pupoljak"

'Well at least it's another girl,' he thought. 'Maybe she'll be just as hot as Ms. Darnoe.'

He called for this last applicant to come in, and, upon seeing her emerge sheepishly from behind his office door, he quickly decided that, most definitely, this woman was nowhere close to Valerie. The first thing Lucas noticed was her posture. This girl...Brooke Pupoljak...was a

good deal shorter than Valerie, and definitely not nearly as well-dressed. Come to think of it, compared to all the applicants in general, Lucas felt immediately turned-off by this woman's presentation. She was dressed in an odd, cornflower-blue skirt that went down awkwardly a bit past her knees, hovering just high enough to reveal black-stockinged legs that, from the apparent looseness of the stockings, were spindly and underdeveloped. The woman pulled the door to, stumbling a little in her oversized white heels as she did so.

Lucas found himself sighing again. Did he seriously have to do this interview? This woman had had all afternoon to get her appearance right, and she hadn't even had the forethought or the decency to tuck her off-white blouse into her dress: a slight billow of her blouse flared outward from her left hip, looking badly out of place in Lucas's crisp, clean, immaculate office. And when she turned around and faced him, Lucas couldn't help but blink rapidly in irritation. Her entire appearance was way off — her chest was as flat as a board, with absolutely no curves to speak of. Her brunette hair just looked a little...oily...or something. Like maybe she hadn't washed it in a couple days. She had clearly tried to do it up in a kind of makeshift bun, but whatever she had envisioned, it hadn't turned out too well; stray strands of her dark hair stuck out in unseemly isolated strands.

'Unkempt,' thought Lucas sullenly to himself as he regarded her unsmilingly from his chair. 'That's the word.'

His eyebrows were raised in a kind of indictment, as if to say, 'Really? This is all you've got?' He took his time looking down at her resume, making her stand there for a few extra seconds.

"Brooke...Pupojak...Pupoljak? Is that how you pronounce it?" he asked drily.

"Um...that's, uhh...that's close enough," she said nervously, trying to smile at his butchering of her name.

"Hmmm," he intoned, not impressed at all with her attitude. "Well, go ahead and take a seat, Ms.....uh, Ms. Pupojak, Pupoljak...whatever it is. What is that name? Russian?"

"Um...it's Croatian," she said, stumbling up a little to sit in the chair. Now that she was closer, Lucas could get a better look at her face. It seemed to just go along with the rest of her appearance: plain, unremarkable, and even a bit doughy. Her nose was a little too big and her mouth was a little too small, and her large dark eyes...maybe the only redeeming quality in her face...seemed slightly too far apart. What's more, she was sporting a couple sizable brown moles, one that commanded attention near her rounded chin, and another that blemished her right cheek. Lucas knew that he was being unfair to her, comparing her with someone like Valerie, but there was no getting around it in his mind: in such a comparison, Brooke Pupoljak was markedly unattractive. Another few years under her belt, and she would be downright ugly.

"Ok, so," said Lucas, ignoring Brooke's answer, "You graduated from Grenfeld Polytech a year ago...computer science...no academic distinctions, I see."

"Uh, yeah, haha," said Brooke with timid laughter, "I had...some issues when I was at school."

"Issues?" asked Lucas, looking at her and blinking pitilessly.

“Um, y-yeah...you know, uhh...j-just some issues with, uh...motivation and all, you know?”

“Hmm,” he replied shortly, looking back down at her resume. “And when you graduated, it looks like you got an internship...eventually, after four months...not sure what you were doing in between...at Macking Coding. Was it a paid internship?”

“Uh, no...no it was unpaid,” said Brooke. “But I...I still, uh...I still learned a lot, I think!”

“I see,” said Lucas, not even bothering to lean back in his chair this time. He only did that when he was savoring the moment, and right now, he wanted to get this young woman out of there as quickly as possible. The sun was starting to dip below the horizon...it was already past 6.

“So, Brooke,” he said, doing little to disguise the stoniness in his voice, “tell me about the last project you worked on at Macking. I’m assuming, of course, that they actually had you working on projects there?”

“Well...well, uh...y-yes. Yes, they did...in a way,” she said. “Like, uh...I wasn’t...doing anything on my own or anything, but, just...uh...haha, yeah, they let me join in on some things.”

“Ok,” said Lucas, starting to get irritated. “Why don’t you just explain it to me. You don’t have to get all into the details. Just a basic run-through, if you don’t mind.”

“S-sure! Well, uh...so, my manager got together a, umm...a team of people to make an online training...uh...training program, I guess it was...for employees. The program was to make sure that, uh...you know. Employees had proper training and everything, right? So, thye, uh...thaty had me r-research other...other t-training programs f-first, and then...then we used Java to c-code a, uh...a program.”

As she spoke, Brooke’s voice increasingly began to shake as she became more and more nervous. Lucas didn’t have time for this nonsense, but it was at least good to hear that this girl had some experience with coding.

“Oh, so you can use Java?” he asked mildly.

“Y-yeah,” said Brooke. “I m-mean, I’m still learning it, b-but I...I can use it.”

“What about JavaScript or C++?” he asked, knowing the answer before she spoke. He just wanted to see her squirm a little. What was she thinking, coming into his office, thinking he would hire someone like her?

“Um, m-maybe a little JavaScript,” she said in a small voice, “But n-not much really. I don’t have any, uh...any experience with C++.”

“Mmhm,” said Lucas, making it sound like that was really the death-kneel for her chances. “Ok, well...generally — and by “generally” I mean “almost always” — we here at Braden require applicants to be at least partially versed in JavaScript and C++...not to mention, of course, having the necessary academic qualifications.”

“Oh...y-yeah...yeah I understand,” said Brooke, her shoulders slumping a little in embarrassment. For half a second, Lucas felt a little bad for her, and wondered if he was just being a dick for no reason. But an instant later, he brushed it all off. If she wanted to see what it was like in the fast-paced, cut-throat world of the top software engineering firms, well...now she was getting a little taste.

“Alright well, in any case, thanks for coming in,” said Lucas, indicating to the door with an open palm.

“O-ok...ok, thank you,” stammered Brooke, standing up out of her chair too quickly, like she didn’t want to be accused, on top of everything else, of overstaying her welcome.

“Have a nice evening, Ms....uh, Ms...”

“Pupoljak,” she said, laughing nervously as she opened the door.

Lucas waved his hand, nodding his head. “Whatever. Shut the door behind you, if you don’t mind.”

Brooke did so, and Lucas couldn’t help but shake his head and chuckle to himself.

“Was she actually serious?” he said to himself out loud, not even caring if she heard him. His mind quickly shifted to Valerie, and a number of the other applicants, as he closed up his office for the day.

Two nights later, he had submitted his recommendations to the higher-ups for the position. Generally, these recommendations were a mere formality, as Lucas’s bosses more or less went along with what he wanted. It was so informal that he was even able to pretend that he had more power in the process than he actually did. True, he was the manager of the branch, but there were still plenty of people much higher than him, who technically had the ability to overrule him on a whim if they really wanted to. His phone buzzed and he took it out of his pocket, looking down at his messages. One from Dave, one of the higher-ups.

“Bad news, Lucas,” it read. “All your recommendations have already taken positions elsewhere.”

Lucas felt his stomach drop a little. Even Valerie?! He was so sure that he had played her perfectly! It turned out that she had just been playing him. He exhaled in annoyance as he typed back:

“Seriously? All of them?”

“All of them,” Dave replied back. “Anyone else you could hire, just to fill the position?”

Lucas sat there. He had gone through everyone else...only that girl...Brooke-what’s-her-face, remained.

“There was one other applicant,” Lucas typed back, “But she was unqualified, and frankly, not too professional. Not a lot of experience either.”

“Well, Bill told me to tell you that he needs the position filled by the end of the month,” replied Dave rapidly. “And that’s tomorrow, so looks like it’s gotta be her.”

Lucas felt truly irritated now — not only was his true lack of power in the whole company structure painfully obvious at times like this, but also he was being forced to hire someone unattractive and nervous. He wasn’t looking forward to dealing with that every day.

“Well ok,” he said, trying to diplomatically convey his displeasure, “But she really is a novice, Dave. Like, I don’t think she’s a good fit at all.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Dave replied back almost instantly. “Just take her on as a one-month trial employee. If she’s really that bad, fire her in a month. But we really do need that slot filled.”

“Ok, I’m on it,” said Lucas, and that was that. A few minutes later, he was grumpily writing Brooke a quick email telling her that she had the job...for the moment.

Chapter 2

The next day, Lucas was not in the mood for any bullshit. He had woken up earlier than he had intended to, and he had not been able to go back to sleep. Instead, he had tossed and turned in his bed for over an hour, trying and failing to focus his mind on getting back to sleep. The thing was, whenever he had centered his mind enough to approach unconsciousness again, the image of that girl...Brooke...popped into his mind again, causing him to grumble and turn over in his bedsheets, starting the whole process over again.

What had he done wrong with Valerie?! He wasn't really thinking about the other male applicants who had accepted positions elsewhere — they were high-powered guys who could basically get jobs anywhere they wanted. But Valerie...well, yes it was true that she was just as bright and "high-powered" as the guys had been...but...but...

Lucas couldn't bring himself to openly admit to himself that she had played him, rather than the other way around. He was so sure that he had impressed her, with his easy, confident demeanor, his professional questions, and even (he thought) his tactical acknowledgement of her blatantly obvious physical attributes. He had thought, a little smugly, that other interviewers would have just pretended like they couldn't see how hot she was, and that she would see his thinly-veiled innuendo as a welcome and refreshing alternative to the stilted, stiff-upper-lip corporate offices she was probably used to.

Now Lucas saw that he had badly overplayed his hand, and had gotten burned. Or had he? Maybe it was something else about Braden, Inc. that Valerie hadn't liked. Maybe it was just the whole feng shui of the place, so to speak — maybe she didn't like the look of his coworkers... maybe Sophia had looked askance at her, or something...it would be just like Sophia, to intentionally deprive him of a morsel like Valerie. He tossed and turned some more...hell, maybe she didn't like the look of the fucking paint on the wall — who knows? The point was that, for whatever reason, she had chosen another job. She had chosen not to take a job where she would be around him. It was impossible for Lucas not to feel jilted and rejected, but eventually, as he continued to lie restlessly in bed, he got himself to a point mentally where he had convinced himself that her decision to pick another job had nothing whatsoever to do with him personally.

With that conviction firmly chiseled into his mind, Lucas looked over at the clock. 5:43. He usually got up at 6 o'clock. It would be pointless to try and go back to sleep now. Grumbling some more, he lugged himself out of bed and stepped into the shower, trying not to think about how much the incoming work day was going to suck. He had exchanged emails with Brooke the day before, informing her not so much that she had "gotten the job," but rather that she had been selected to work a one-month paid trial period with the company, and that her further employment would be contingent upon her performance, and how well she seemed to "gel" with the rest of the office.

Lucas soaped up his hair in the steamy shower; the scent of "Blue Musk" brand male shampoo began to permeate his bathroom as it mixed with the hot water vapor. He was positive that Brooke wouldn't be staying with Braden any longer than a month. The girl literally had nothing going for her. Even her replying email was fraught with grammar and spelling errors, and even included some errant spaces, almost like she had leaned against the keyboard without realizing it.

‘Is she just, like totally clueless?’ Lucas asked himself as he soaped up his body with a lather. ‘Or maybe she has some kind of weird...I don’t know...disability or something? She’s just obviously not totally there. Air-headed.’

he had already resolved not to think too hard about the fact that the upper management of Dave, Bill, and the like, more or less had total control over what happened in his office, at least in theory. Lucas could continue to manage everything as he saw fit, so long as Dave...and Bill...and others even higher up, approved of his results. And over his career, his results had spoken for themselves so far. He had played an important role in the development of an impressive array of new software technologies. And now, well now...

‘Ah shit,’ he thought to himself sullenly, stepping out of the shower and drying himself off with a clean white towel. ‘I’m gonna have to give this girl a fucking clearance code for the nanobots. Wonderful...just great.’

He couldn’t help but think that it was a pure liability, giving someone like Brooke an actual security clearance to something as under-wraps as the nanobot project. He had considered emailing Dave about his concerns, but had ultimately refrained, since he knew that any email to the contrary of Bill’s relayed orders would be seen as whiny, and perhaps even worse, insubordinate. Lucas looked at the mirror in his bathroom, which had completely fogged over during his shower. He could see the slight outlines of his dark shape toweling itself off, but nothing sharp or defined about his features; he was just a shape in the water vapor stuck to the mirror.

‘She’s not really that bad,’ he thought to himself as he stared indistinctly at his shape, moving his towel back and forth across his back. ‘Clearly unqualified, not a looker by any means... totally clumsy...not confidence...but it’s not like she’s gonna go blabbing out about our development secrets.’

Lucas actually chuckled out loud as he stepped over to the mirror, wiping out a clear oval of clear mirror from the fog, revealing his grinning face. She wasn’t going to do anything to risk the company firing her! She had to just be positively thrilled that she had managed to land the job in the first place! And of course, Lucas knew that she wasn’t going to have trouble showing everyone in the office, over the next month, that she had absolutely none of the qualifications to belong there — the last thing she was going to do was jeopardize her already-precarious position, surely! The girl certainly wasn’t that bright, but at least she had the good sense to be nervous around him!

Lucas could feel himself warming to this task of “training” Brooke the more he thought about it, and as he put on his clothes in his bedroom, he actually managed to trick himself into thinking that it was going to be fun, showing her how unprepared for this job she actually was. Even though he wasn’t going to enjoy looking at her, he could at least enjoy her surprised and humbled reaction when he showed her just how complicated everything was, just how high-powered everyone’s job was at Braden...just how intense and intricate their nanobot development had become. By the time Lucas had strapped in his seat belt and pulled out of the parking garage of his luxury condo complex, he was in a good mood. The first sip of his coffee that he picked up from the drive-thru only served to intensify his anticipation of this “training day.” There was nothing outwardly malevolent about Lucas’s approach — he was just looking

forward to showing this girl what it was like to work in a “real” company. Even though Brooke was completely unattractive to him, she was still a girl...and as such, Lucas could still get a kick out of her humility.

Lucas strode out of the golden elevator on the 42nd floor of the skyscraper, and straight towards Sophia’s desk. She was usually the first one in the office, and even though he had talked himself into a good mood, he still wanted to give her a piece of his mind. At this point, he had convinced himself that she had been the reason why Valerie had chosen not to take the job at Braden. He peered around the open door to her office and saw her diligently typing away, her eyes going left and right rapidly as she looked at her screen. Sophia was around his age, in her mid-30s, and more or less looked her age, even though she was still quite pretty. Her dirty-blond hair was tied up in a half-bun, half-ponytail up on her head, looking slightly disheveled as usual. But there was something of that aesthetic that fit Sophia — she always looked like she had somewhere else to go in a hurry, but whenever she actually locked her light blue eyes on someone, it suddenly seemed like she was exactly where she wanted to be. She always wore essentially the same thing: a white blouse top, opened up down the middle a bit too much, showing more of her C-cup chest than was normal for an office woman (even in these times), and a fairly short black skirt that went down to around her mid-thighs, hugging her shape. Sophia was not particularly curvy, but she was not rail-thin either. In any case, she had well-formed legs that were always aided with the pump of her black 3-inch heels, whose shininess and polish always seemed to contrast with her otherwise haphazard and slightly bedraggled appearance. But Sophia was pretty enough to get away with it, at least as far as Lucas was concerned. Although they were long since finished romantically, he was always reminded, time and time again, of why he had been drawn to her before. It was an odd, confident, slightly hurried, and kinetic presence that she had. There was literally no one like her.

After staring at her for a couple moments, Lucas rapped his knuckles smartly on her door frame.

“What is it, Lucas?” Sophia asked, a little impatiently, without taking her eyes from her screen.

Lucas smiled; she always knew when he was coming, even when he tried to hide himself.

“Oh, you know, nothing really,” he sighed mildly, cocking his head as he examined his finely-trimmed fingernails. “Just thought I would drop in and say that I know you torpedoed that hire I had in the bag.”

Sophia’s eyes kept going left and right rapidly as she finished typing whatever sentence she was in the middle of. Lucas waited there for a few long seconds, feeling that the humor in his comment was quickly dissipating into the ether with each passing moment. Finally, Sophia stopped typing and looked up at him.

“Torpedoed your hire?” she repeated, looking straight at him from over her spectacles. “The fuck are you talking about?”

Lucas chuckled a little, stepping a bit into Sophia’s office as she continued to stare at him intently with those pale blue eyes. She certainly had a way of freezing people with her stare, that was for sure. But Lucas knew that he was on to something with her.

“Oh don’t feed me that, Sophia,” he said warmly. “You know what I’m talking about. That girl who came in a couple days ago...Valerie? You know? The blond bombshell?”

“Oh! Yeah I heard about her,” said Sophia mildly, her yes going back to her screen. “Heard all you guys slobbering to each other about her in the break room. Haha, yeah, it sounds like she dodged a real bullet here, let me tell you.”

“So you DO know about it, huh?” inquired Lucas accusingly, pointing at her with a triumphant grin.

“I heard that, despite your brilliantly-conducted interview, no doubt interspersed with clever insinuations, she got a job somewhere else. Heard all of the candidates got other jobs, in fact.”

Sophia stopped typing and rubbed her chin thoughtfully with her fingers, furrowing her brow in mock-contemplation.

“Hmmm,” she mused, “Gee, I wonder what chased her away?”

“Well it wasn’t my interview, if that’s what you’re implying,” said Lucas, dropping the humor. “It was YOU, wasn’t it? You nabbed her in the hallway, didn’t you? Told her to get a job someplace else?”

“Lucas,” laughed Sophia, once again going back to her screen, “I think it’s hilarious that you just assume that I was the mastermind behind this Ivy-league girl not taking a position here. She probably wanted to go somewhere where the management was a little...let’s just say younger.”

“Younger?” cried Lucas. “I’m 36! That’s still young!”

“Tell that to the 26-year old whiz from California who she got a job with instead,” laughed Sophia, now looking straight at Lucas again, just to enjoy his disappointment.

“What?” he asked, trying and failing to hide his surprise. “She got a job at Rubik’s, across town?”

“Oh yeah,” said Sophia. “She didn’t even bother to leave the city. How’s that for rubbing it in your face, old man?”

Lucas couldn’t help but laugh a little at Sophia’s counter; she certainly did know how to get at him and twist the knife. And he was still in a good mood, from his earlier pep talks with himself. But he couldn’t deny that the fact that Valerie had chosen to take a job at Rubik’s, the up-and-start software company headed by Preston Rubik, the young, brilliant “30-under-30” prodigy, was a blow to his masculinity. Lucas had seen a picture of Preston Rubik in a magazine and... well, he wasn’t just brilliant and ambitious. He was hot too.

“Aww, I go a little too far?” teased Sophia, her eyes dancing a little bit.

“No!” exclaimed Lucas, reddening a little as he smiled bashfully. It was impossible to hide anything from Sophia for too long. He knew she was calling him out, making fun of him, taking him down a peg...reminding him that he maybe wasn’t as much of a hotshot as he thought he

was. It definitely irritated him somewhere inside, but...well, it was also still nice to play these little games with her. They needed each other often, with each attack carrying some real sting of truth, but without the real poison and toxicity that it once conveyed, when they had actually been romantically involved.

“Haha, well, you get some, you lose some,” said Sophia wistfully.

“Oh god, that reminds me,” said Lucas, checking his watch and starting to leave, “Gotta see if the new girl is on time. Spoiler alert: I bet she isn’t.”

“Aw, well, don’t be too hard on her Lucas,” said Sophia, going back to her screen. “I saw her file. Just treat her as a temp who could have a good experience here for a month, you know? Teach her something useful. Don’t drive her like she’s a real employee, ok?”

“But if I don’t push her, how’s she gonna learn?” Lucas shot back, raising his eyebrows as he left.

“Well, you’re Mr. Manager!” Sophia called out, chuckling.

“Oh niiice!” he retorted, and the interaction was over.

Lucas was pleased to realize that his surmise about Brooke had been correct: it was already three minutes after 8, and she had not yet turned up. Lucas put down his briefcase and sank down into his plush black leather chair, sighing as he did so. Maybe she wouldn’t even show up at all — maybe he wouldn’t have to deal with all of her clear inadequacies at all...maybe she would just...float away. And then he could tell Dave that she had been a no-show, and that he didn’t have time to entertain the whims of someone as unqualified and unreliable as she was. Maybe it would even be an opportunity for him to, very gently, tell those above him ‘I told you so.’

Still though, pragmatically speaking, it was going to make for an inconvenient day if he had to rearrange his schedule and send all those emails out. He woke up his computer and started answering emails, which at this point mainly consisted of other people in his department bouncing ideas off each other about their new nanobot technology. Within a couple minutes, Lucas had almost forgotten about Brooke, instead throwing himself headlong into the rich content of their new and promising technology.

There was no question that the nanobots they were developing at Braden were cutting-edge, and there was also no question that Lucas himself had been a key player in the development so far. That was why Sophia’s little stings didn’t really hurt so much — she knew, and he knew, that they were both part of something special, something that had the potential to revolutionize the way humans developed. The nanobots had worked so well in the lab rat hosts the previous year, yielding an array of impressive results: empirically-measured improvements in short-term memory, skin and fur complexion, reflexes, and eyesight. There was even good evidence, though not quite as easy to prove as the other attributes, that the nanobots acted as a mild anti-depressant. The human trials had just begun earlier that year, on informed-consent people who were already suffering from terminal illnesses, and aware of the risks. Unfortunately, the nanobots had nearly always killed their human hosts. There was lots of work that remained.

A few minutes later, Lucas happened to glance up from his computer screen. He saw an asymmetrical shape hovering in the doorway, and he started back in surprise, actually jumping back a little in his chair as it rolled backwards and hit the wall behind him.

“Huh!” exhaled Lucas in sharp surprise, realizing who it was. “Jesus! You...you startled me there!”

“I’m...uh...s-sorry, Mr. Miner,” stammered Brooke. “I...w-wasn’t sure what I was, umm, what I was supposed to do.”

“Well, a little knock would have been nice, for starters,” said Lucas, regathering himself as he pushed his chair back up to his desk. “And let’s make sure we get my name right, mmkay? It’s ‘Mineur,’ alright?”

“M-mineur,” repeated Brooke, blushing with embarrassment as she failed to get the “ur” just right.

“Mineur,” said Lucas, a little more emphatically. His eyes went over Brooke’s whole get-up, and he wasn’t the least bit surprised by what he saw: a baggy, wrinkled pale red blouse, that looked like it had been washed with the “white loads” about twenty times too many...a strange, almost Catholic-school-girl skirt, with dark green and navy stripes...no hips to speak of...and the same baggy black tights hanging on her skinny legs. At least she was wearing high heels, even though they looked about a size and a half too big. Her black hair looked just as unkempt and waxy as it had before.

“Mineur,” said Brooke, finally getting it right.

“Yes. Ok,” said Lucas, taking a deep exasperated breath and folding his hands in front of him on his desk. “Now, Miss...remind me of your last name again, please?”

“Pupoljak,” she said, smiling a little. “Y-you know, the Croatian — ”

“That...that doesn’t matter to me, ok?” said Lucas impatiently, waving his hand. “What I was going to say, Miss Pupoljak, is...I was going to remind you that this position is, for all intents and purposes a temp position. You understand that, don’t you?”

“Y-yes,” she said, staring at him a little blankly and blinking.

‘Wow,’ thought Lucas, ‘She doesn’t even know what “temp” means...or maybe she does... maybe she just looks like that all the time.’

“And, by nature of your contract here, which you have signed, you’ll be an employee at Braden for exactly one month. Your future employment beyond that month will be entirely contingent on your performance that you exhibit for the next thirty days. Does that make sense?”

“Y-yeah...I mean yes it does,” said Brooke, nervously crossing her feet and picking at the tips of her fingers.

“And let me just say, and I’m not meaning for us to get off on the wrong foot here, but again, let me just stress to you that when you show up... 14 minutes late on your first day of work...well, let’s just say that it’s not an ideal way to start.”

“I’m s-sorry, really, I am!” said Brook eagerly, stepping forward awkwardly into Lucas’s office. “It just...uh...it t-took me ages to park, because, um...hehe, you know, I kind of forgot which level Braden employees park on, and — ”

“Well, just look at the signs,” said Lucas, shaking his head slightly as he looked up at this bumbling mess of a girl.

“I—I know, haha! I f-figured it out eventually...b-but then, uh...I left my bag in my car because I was n-nervous, and I had to go back, and uhh...”

“Ok,” said Lucas, holding up his hand, indicating that she should stop. “Whatever it was, Miss Pupo...Popol...oh hell, I’m just gonna call you Brooke, ok? Whatever the problem was this morning, Brooke, I don’t expect it to be repeated again tomorrow. Alright?”

“A-alright, y-yes...yes, sorry,” she said earnestly.

“That’s ok,” said Lucas, almost more to himself to her. “It’s all right. It’s just that...we do things professionally around here. And even though you’re a temporary employee, I still expect you to adhere to our standards. Sound fair?”

“Mmhmm!” nodded Brooke, now almost totally Scarlet. For a moment, Lucas couldn’t help feeling sorry for her. This girl was a real piece of work — how had she managed to hold down an internship for months before? Where had it been? Macking...still though, Macking was respectable. It had been an unpaid internship though...that probably explained it.

“Ok, so...” said Lucas, “I need to finish answering some emails before we start.” He glanced down at the polyester white “briefcase” that Brooke was holding. What on earth was that thing?! It looked tacky as hell!

“I’m assuming you brought your laptop in today?” he inquired, peering up at her.

“Uh y-yes...yes I did,” answered Brooke, nodding her head eagerly.

“Oh alright, good,” said Lucas, feeling genuinely surprised that she had actually managed to plan that far ahead. “Well, I’m assuming that you’ve done some research into the special technology we’re developing here at Braden? Lots of the details are secret, of course, but you do know that we’re in the process of developing nanobot technology at the moment, don’t you?”

“Nano...bot technology?” asked Brooke uncertainly, straining her head forward a bit. The slight blemishes on her face became a little clearer to Lucas as she did so. His observations aside, though, he couldn’t believe that Brooke didn’t even seem to know what nanobots were.

“So...you don’t even know what nanobots are?” he asked, completely deadpan.

“Umm...uhh, no, not really,” said Brooke quietly. “Are they like, uhh...r-robots?”

“Uh...haha, um, yeah,” said Lucas, shaking his head incredulously. “They’re like robots... whooooo boy...ok, you know what, how about this? I answer these emails, and you sit over there in that chair, pull up “nanobots” on wikipedia, and see what you can learn in the next twenty minutes, mmkay?”

“Uh...o-ok,” said Brooke, clearly feeling like a fish out of water as she shuffled awkwardly over to the open chair and sat down. Lucas made wide eyes at his computer screen, as if saying ‘Are you seeing this girl!?’ and then settled back into answering his emails. It was going to be a long day.

Five minutes went by, and Lucas had again almost forgotten that Brooke was sitting in a chair in his office.

“Uhh..Mr. Min...Mineur?” came her timid voice all of a sudden.

“Yes?” asked Lucas, feeling irritated by the mere lack of confidence in her voice alone.

“Wh-what’s...what’s the wifi password?”

Chapter 3

After Lucas had finished answering his morning emails, he sat there in his black leather chair, staring blankly at his screen for a moment, before turning his head slightly to steal a glance at Brooke. It was impossible for him to hold back the hostility of his stare, because he was entirely unable to muster any positive thoughts or energy around her. She was sitting there in the chair, her spindly legs crossed together at an awkward angle, as her body hunched toward her laptop screen.

‘Obviously no one taught this girl how to sit up straight,’ Lucas thought. ‘Jesus, her body looks like it’s doing its best impression of the letter “C.” How is she possibly going to last a month here? Maybe she’ll be so inept that Dave gets involved or something...and solves my problem for me.’

But Lucas knew that all of this was wishful thinking. Dave rarely condescended to micro-manage Lucas’s division, and whenever he had in the past, Lucas had generally not felt well-disposed towards the intervention, since, of course, it reminded him that he did not enjoy as much real power as he sometimes felt he had. It was strange, now, to realize that he had been subconsciously starting to hope for Dave or someone higher up to come rescue him from this unenviable situation.

“Ok, so...learned a thing or two about nanobots?” he asked out loud, trying to keep the antagonism out of his voice.

“I...uhh...I’ve r-read some about them, y-yes,” answered Brook, looking up anxiously from her screen. The pixelated light reflected off the waxiness of her brunette hair, further highlighting its unkempt oiliness.

“Well?” asked Lucas, inhaling through his nose. “Anything to say so far?”

“N-not really,” said Brooke apologetically. She shifted clumsily in her seat, out of sheer nerves, and as a result, her laptop came tumbling down onto the carpeted floor.

“Oooo drat!” she exclaimed, reddening in embarrassment as she bent down to pick it back up again. Lucas watched as she fumbled about, and he noticed that her laptop already had a number of dings and chinks in its exterior — clearly, this was not the first time that Brooke had dropped it.

“Really? Nothing to say?” asked Lucas, even as he asked himself why he was pushing the poor girl. “Ten minutes of reading and...no new information?”

“I...I’m s-sure that I learned something,” said Brooke, stumbling forward a bit as she retrieved her laptop from the floor. “B-but...but I, uh...I mean...it’s kinda...was kind hard for me to...find the right...website resources.”

“Oh yeah?” asked Lucas, raising his eyebrows without empathy. “Well, maybe try and focus yourself today, ok Brooke? This job...er, internship...temp position...whatever...will require you to not only remember large amounts of data and information, but to also process it as well. Surely you had to remember things at your former internship at Macking, right?”

“Uh...y-yes,” said Brooke. “Th-that is...um...I mean...w-we...uh, I...I did a lot of j-just watching others, y-you know?”

“Uh...ok,” said Lucas, looking intently down at a random spot on the floor and opening his eyes wide as he shook his head a little back and forth. “Ok, well...I guess we need to get started.”

Sighing audibly, he stood up, walked around his desk, and toward his office door, where he stopped and turned around expectantly. Brooke was still sitting in the chair, looking up at him confusedly.

“That means both of us, ok?” Lucas said, beckoning her out of her seat with an irritated whirl of his hand.

“Oh! S-sorry!” she said hurriedly, standing up abruptly from her chair and causing her laptop to once again fall to the floor. She bent down and picked it up, oddly holding it under her arm as she walked over toward the office door.

Lucas pinched the bridge of his nose in disbelief, closing his eyes as he tilted his head slightly down. “Just...just leave your laptop in the chair, ok?” said Lucas, pointing. “You’re not gonna need it for what we’re doing.”

“Oh...a-alright,” stammered Brooke, obviously out-of-sorts. She put her laptop down and walked back up to Lucas. He stood there looking down on her for a moment; he felt almost like he was studying a biological anomaly, looking at this girl. She was just so clumsy and...and scatterbrained and out of it...that it was almost interesting. Almost. But as he looked down at the top of her head, which, in her 3-inch heels, was even with his eyes, he felt a wave of distaste in his mouth. For a moment, he really considered calling her out on the disheveled state of her appearance, but something internal stopped him.

‘Eh, she’s already having a hard time speaking, she’s so nervous,’ he thought, not out of pity so much as practicality. ‘If I give her even more reason to be insecure, then it’s just gonna make my day that much harder.’

“Ok, all set?” he asked out loud, arching his eyebrows at her as he tried to make his voice sound pleasant.

“Mmhm,” she said, looking up at him with her big eyes and nodding.

“Alright then, let’s first take you on a little tour of the office, ok? It’s standard protocol for all of our temps, uh, I mean our new employees, to meet everyone. Just to maintain a good sense of community, you know?”

“Ah, yes...yes definitely,” said Brooke automatically, following Lucas out the door, her heels starting to clack loudly on the marble floor behind him.

Lucas proceeded to make the rounds with Brooke, going as quickly as he reasonably could. He knew that it didn’t really matter if anyone really got to know her, since she would be out of there in thirty day’s time, but at the same time he was committed to following Braden’s company

protocol; the last thing he wanted was for Dave, or heaven forbid Bill, to somehow get wind that he was lax in his obligations.

He dropped in on Trent first, knocking on the door frame. As soon as the snappy young engineer looked up from his computer, Lucas had a sinking feeling in his chest. He realized that he was embarrassed to be showing Brooke around like this — what were his co-workers going to think of him!? He silently hoped that somehow Dave had informed everyone that this new position had been filled as a last resort, and would only be temporary. Otherwise, they would definitely look askance at him, and perhaps even begin to question his ability to effectively manage the branch. He hated that he couldn't have a private word with everyone, before exhibiting Brooke. That would all have to wait.

“Hi Trent,” said Lucas, clearing his throat a little as he attempted to speak normally. “Just thought I'd introduce you to our newest...employee here. This is Brooke. Brooke, this is Trent. He's one of our associate software engineers. A real up-and-coming talent.”

Brooke peered shyly around the doorframe, so that Trent could barely see her. In response to Lucas indicating with his hand, she silently stepped forward into the doorway a little more, looking timidly down at the bottom of Trent's desk, where it met the floor.

“Uh...hi Brooke,” said Trent, his mouth twitching slightly into a smile as his brow creased a little.

Brooke didn't answer for a moment; Lucas made eye contact with Trent and raised his eyebrows, silently indicating that he knew exactly what Trent was thinking.

“Uh, Brooke,” muttered Lucas in a low voice, “Say hi.”

“H-hi!” exclaimed Brooke a little too loudly, looking up for a moment at Trent's face but then almost immediately switching her eyes to the wall behind him.

“Brooke is...on a trial period with us for one month,” said Lucas, hoping that Trent would understand what that meant. “She's...conveniently been able to fill the vacant position, so...I'm showing her around today. You know, giving her a taste of what we do here.”

“That's...that's nice,” said Trent, with effort. The young engineer was tall, fit, clean-cut, and brilliant. Lucas had always been a bit worried that one day, Trent would overtake his position. But thus far, he had worked exceedingly well as his “right hand man” in software development, particularly with the nanobots the past year and a half.

“So, she's a temp?” asked Trent, not even bothering to ask Brooke herself.

“Uh...I mean...in a manner of speaking, yes,” said Lucas, wishing that Trent had not picked this moment to grill him about the particulars of the new hire.

“So...she gets a security clearance, then?” persisted Trent, squinting his eyes a little as he cocked his head to the side, unabashedly looking Brooke up and down, from head to toe. The young, confident (and slightly chauvinistic) engineer was not in the habit of hiding his feelings, and now was no exception. Even though he wasn't saying anything out loud, it was clear that

he did not approve of the notion of someone so ruffled and disarrayed having access to Braden's secret technology.

"Uh, yeah...yeah she'll be getting one," said Lucas. "But, I mean...it's not like she's going to be around the stuff all the time. A security clearance for all our employees is standard policy, since, you know...all software engineers need to have access to the lab in order to upload our latest builds to the nanobots."

He felt irritated at Trent — was he seriously going to sit there and cross-examine him about every aspect of Brooke's hiring? Did Trent even realize that he, Lucas, had been basically forced to make this hire at the last minute, at the behest of upper management!? It was all well and good for Trent to sit there in his cozy little associate's office, churning out product after product, but the young hotshot had no idea what it was like...what it took...to run an office.

"O...k," said Trent slowly, moving his eyes back and forth between Lucas and Brooke. His behavior more than confirmed to Lucas that he was puzzled, and disapproving, about the choice to let this new person into their circle. But Trent was aware of how he came across, and he maintained this external show only long enough to get his message across to his boss. A moment later, his face was bright and sunny again.

"Alright then," Trent said, forcing a smile. "Nice to meet you...Brooke. See you around."

Brooke continued smiling toothily at the carpet as Lucas led her out of Trent's office and down the hallway, where he introduced her to Steve, Ryan, and James respectively, all of whom were associate software engineers. Steve and Ryan were more in line with Trent: young, ambitious, and good-looking software engineers who liked to go out on the weekends and spend their handsome earnings on status symbols that they could show off at stylish bars and nightclubs. They both reacted to Brooke more or less the same as Trent had: with puzzlement and confusion, thinly veiled under a friendly facade. They had both eyed Lucas searchingly, trying to get to the bottom of how someone like Brooke could have possibly been hired. Lucas had stared back at them, trying as hard as he could to communicate the fact that his hands were tied. It was a decidedly unpleasant experience for him; Lucas never liked openly admitting that his role as division manager was contingent on the power of upper management, but now, this admission was all he had to save face in front of his employees.

Brooke's introduction to James went slightly differently, since James was rather awkward and insecure himself. James was a bit older, a member of a generation who still had memories of a time before computers. He was an "old fashioned nerd," looking thoroughly the part with his large rectangular glasses, his uncertain, halting gestures, and his wardrobe of tight-fitting office clothes that always seemed to make him look a bit more rotund than he actually was. Upon meeting Brooke, James, as he did while he met anyone new, actually blushed. Brooke actually managed to look up at James and make eye-contact, and the two of them shared a stare for a moment before they both looked away sheepishly.

'Geez,' thought Lucas, 'Maybe these two would actually work as a couple...Nah...James is a dweeb, but he's super smart. He'd get tired of her slowness before too long.'

They were almost to Sophia's office, but first, Lucas made sure they stopped by Olivia's first. He wanted to give Brooke a good look at who exactly she would be compared to. By this point,

he wasn't sure that his new hire even had the capacity to appreciate what she was about to witness, but it didn't stop him from laying it on thick when he stuck his head into the young software engineer's office.

"Olivia?" he inquired pleasantly. "I have a new employee here for you to meet."

"Oh nice!" chirped Olivia, looking up from her computer and pushing her leather chair back from her desk. Olivia liked to work very close to her screen, almost hunched over...such was the strength and intensity of her concentration.

"Let me present...Brooke!" said Lucas, with all the fabricated sincerity of ceremony, as he beckoned Brooke into Olivia's office. The hapless girl stumbled forward a little, and Olivia stood up, taking off her glasses to get a better look at the new hire. Olivia was half-Latino, half-caucasian; she was nearsighted, but that was, as far as Lucas was concerned, her only physical flaw. She stood a taller-than-average 5'8 in her bare feet, but with the 4-inch heels she wore, she was only an inch shorter than Lucas, and a little more than that if the slight lift of his loafers was factored in. But her height was just one of her many striking aspects — Olivia had been a swimmer in college, and had stayed in shape in the four years since she had graduated. Her rigorous exercise routine, combined with a little extra mid-twenties development, made for a decidedly curvy and delicious figure, not heavy set, by any means...just with lean curves and smooth skin. Her hips were wide and appealingly curved, and her ass, which Lucas couldn't help but gawk at daily, was larger than what might have been expected. It bounced and danced after her in the hallways, like some kind of separate organism eager to play with the rest of her body, and connected to powerful thighs that Olivia was not ashamed to show off. Today and always, she wore form-fitting dresses that only came down to her mid-thighs. Her D-cup breasts perhaps weren't as big as Valerie's, but they were quite large nonetheless, and always looked like they were straining the confines of anything she wore.

Not only was Olivia physically blessed far beyond the norm, but she had also developed a swerving, sleek "modern office" fashion that suited her short, spiky blond pixie cut perfectly. Today, her tight dress was blood-red, with red fingernails to match (cut short, of course, since she spent all day typing). Lucas actually felt himself hardening a little as he drew his eyes up her body, as if he was unwrapping her. She looked even hotter than usual today, and she knew it — her subtle eye shadow framed two hazel eyes, which were glancing at Lucas with incisive humor as she strode up to Brooke, offering her hand.

"Pleased to meet you, Brooke!" said Olivia, looking genuinely down at the timid girl.

Lucas felt like he had never seen such a lopsided comparison between two girls in his entire life. Here was Olivia, looking like a pixie vampire in her stylish haircut, standing six feet tall and proud, with her shoulders back, and her thick, curvy figure seemingly about to burst out of her red dress, her big breasts right about even with Brooke's hunched shoulders. Lucas could even see Olivia's nipples poking through her red dress, and her bra underneath. He had never seen Olivia's naked breasts, but he had long fantasized about how big her nipples must have been, to be that prominent. And it wasn't just her nipples that drew his (and everyone else's) attention — her dresses fit her in such a way as to reveal the maximum amount of cleavage permissible in a corporate office environment. The chasm between her twin mammaries left little to the imagination, showing off the bulging burgeons of taut breast flesh on either side. And what's more, Olivia always wore a necklace with a small medallion on the end of it, which invariably got

stuck deep in her cleavage over and over throughout the day. She would fish it out absently as she worked, only to have it inevitably fall back in. Olivia was a hard worker, and was not intent on overly manipulating anyone. But she knew what she was doing.

And then there was Brooke...standing with her knees slightly bent, with a curved back and her neck thrust slightly forward (Lucas suddenly realized that she had an overbite...of course she did), loose black tights on her skinny legs, oversized heels, blemished skin, and oily, unkempt hair. Lucas suddenly had a strange moment, as Olivia and Brooke shook hands, where he felt...almost turned on by the crazy extent of the comparison between the two of them. He didn't really understand this odd flash of erotic energy that flared up in him, and he didn't like it...and so he distracted himself by chattering away at Olivia.

"Brooke will be with us for 30 days as our new...t-, uhh..our new employee," he finished a bit lamely.

"Oh really?" asked Olivia, releasing Brooke's hand as she turned her piercing eyes to Lucas. He saw her subtly wipe her hand off on the back of her dress; Brooke's hand was wet with nervous sweat. "So she's not full-time?"

"Well...that, uh, remains to be seen," said Lucas, glancing doubtfully down at Brooke. "I think she's...got a thing or two to learn before we can take her on permanently, you know?"

"Now don't forget," said Olivia, looking down at Brooke, even as she continued talking to Lucas, "That I was a nervous wreck when you guys hired me."

"Yeah, but...you aced one of our test scenarios...using Python," said Lucas, referring to the high-level programming language.

"Yeah, yeah," said Olivia flippantly, waving her hand (even though Lucas knew she enjoyed the memory of that interview). "Point is, Brooke, everyone starts somewhere, right?"

"Y-yes...yes, right," said Brooke, completely missing Olivia's subtle and unintentional put-down. Lucas didn't miss it, however — and it also wasn't lost on him that Olivia was several years younger than Brooke. He watched Olivia sit down, looking a bit too long; she caught him, as she often did, and gave him a knowing smirk.

"Well go on," she said to him, playfully shooing them out of her office. "Nice to meet you Brooke, but if I'm not careful, I'll have Lucas ogling over me. Should I mention to Chase that you've been staring at me, Lucas?"

"Haha, you'll do no such thing," chuckled Lucas. Chase was Olivia's fiance, a crossfit instructor and entrepreneur who was friendly with everyone else in the office, Lucas included. Even though Olivia's threat was mostly jocular, Lucas didn't want to think about antagonizing Chase. At 6'5, and a solid 240 pounds, Chase was a beast; Lucas often found himself imagining how intense their sex must have been.

They stopped by Sophia's office last. Lucas had intentionally structured the tour this way, so that he could get all the other employees out of the way first — he more or less knew what

Sophia's reaction would be to Brooke. Besides, more than the other employees, she understood the situation with the new hire.

"Aw, hello!" said Sophia brightly to Brooke, upon Lucas's introduction. Unlike everyone else, Sophia actually bothered to get up out of her chair, walk over, and extend her hand to Brooke, who shook it limply. Sophia was about an inch taller than Brooke, and for a moment, she peered earnestly into Brooke's face, trying to get a read on the new girl. Brooke nervously made eye contact with Sophia, and then smiled a little and looked away.

"Well, pleased to meet you, Brooke," said Sophia, letting her hand go as she stepped back a bit to get a full profile. Just as the other men had done, Sophia looked Brooke up and down, but instead of puzzlement and confusion, a look of kindness and pity came over her face.

"So Lucas here is giving you the run-down, huh?" she asked, smiling wryly in his direction. "Showing you all the company secrets?"

Lucas was giving Sophia a hard look, like he was daring her to try and pull something on him.

Brooke nodded in confused affirmation.

"I just met..." she began, but Lucas interrupted her.

"Trent, Steve, Ryan, James, Olivia" said Lucas robotically.

"Y-yeah, those people! I can only remember a few of their names right now..." admitted Brooke quietly.

"Aw, that's ok honey," said Sophia warmly. "It'll get easier as time passes." As she spoke, Sophia looked over at Lucas challengingly, who had begun to shake his head.

"I mean," continued Sophia, still looking straight at Lucas, "After a few weeks or so, you'll have everyone's name down pat. And a couple months from now you'll be doing what Lucas is doing right now: giving some new employee the same tour that you're being taken on now. That's how it all works, Brooke. Don't worry — I know it's kinda scary now...new job, new place, all new people...but it'll seem like home before you know it."

As Sophia was talking, a smile had grown on her face, exacerbated by the slashing motion Lucas was performing on his throat with his finger. Brooke looked up at Sophia briefly, and saw her making eyes at Lucas. But very quickly, Sophia felt Brooke's eyes and looked back at her, smiling. Brooke returned the smile as best she could.

"R-really?" she managed to say in response. "Y-you think...you think I can fit in here?"

"Absolutely," said Sophia immediately, looking back to Lucas. "It's all about the support you get from your co-workers. And I'm not worried about that; this is a fine place to work. But Brooke?"

"Y-yeah?"

"You can come by my office any time if you need help with anything, ok? Don't be afraid."

“O-ok,” said Brooke.

“Ok, alright,” said Lucas, cutting the interaction between the two women short. “So that’s everyone, Brooke. Let’s go to my office and discuss compensation, before we go and get your security clearance.”

Turning to leave, Lucas heard a sudden thump behind him. He turned around and saw that Brooke had tripped over her oversized heels, falling down to the ground on all fours as she made a surprised, exhaling sound. Almost as soon as she hit the floor, Sophia had swooped in and was picking her back up again.

“Aw, I’m sorry honey! Easy, eeeeassy up...there we go. Looks like you tripped on those heels, haha! You ok?”

“I’m...f-fine,” said Brooke, blushing all over again. It was obvious she had gotten used to falling down.

“We’ve gotta get you some smaller heels, girl,” said Sophia. “Maybe I can take you out shopping sometime soon, huh?”

“Ok!” exclaimed Brooke, looking up at Sophia and beaming for the first time.

“Ok,” said Sophia warmly as she locked eyes with Lucas. “Go on now.”

A few moments later, they were back in his office.

“Now what was your hourly at Macking?” Lucas asked.

“I...um...I can’t really r-remember,” said Brooke.

“You...can’t remember?” asked Lucas incredulously. He looked over at his framed diploma from Georgia Tech, as if to share his disbelief with the inanimate object.

“Oh wait...I remember,” said Lucas. “It was an unpaid position. You said so in your interview.”

“Oh! Oh, r-right,” said Brooke.

Lucas sighed. “Ok. Well...how about we pay you \$17 an hour...you know...for this first month, and just...see how you do, ok?”

“Ok!” she replied immediately, clearly having no idea he was slightly underselling her.

‘Well, it’s just under the 25th percentile for entry-level jobs,’ he thought to himself, drawing up the paperwork. ‘And besides, she’s not even gonna be like a normal temp. This is more than she deserves.’

As he made a record of the compensation, Lucas couldn’t help his mind drifting to what he made hourly.

'Let's see...\$180,000 a year,' he thought to himself, going over the numbers deliciously in his brain, 'working 50 to 60 hours a week...let's just call it 55...55 times 4 is 220...220 times 11 is...'

As he went through the simple calculations, he actually wrote them down in front of Brooke, not paying her any mind. It's not like she knew what was going on, anyway. A moment later, he had it.

'Basically \$75 an hour,' he thought happily. He still hadn't gotten over how successful he had turned out to be.

But looking at Brooke, who was staring absentmindedly up at the ceiling, he wasn't sure he was being paid enough to deal with her.

"Ok, let's go," he sighed, getting out of his chair. "Let's get you a security clearance."

Chapter 4

Lucas strode out his office down the hall, as he listened to Brooke stumbling along awkwardly behind him in her oversized heels. Rolling his eyes to himself without turning around, he just kept on walking purposefully, down past Trent's office, Ryan's office, and so on. He knew that he was going to be stuck with Brooke, more or less, for the rest of the day — the sooner he got this tour over with, the better. Then he could finally settle down in his office and do some meaningful work, perhaps after giving Brooke some simple, mundane task to do that would undoubtedly take her the rest of the day to complete.

'Maybe that's how I can do it,' he thought to himself, 'Maybe, when Dave and Bill ask how she's doing...if they even do ask...I can just tell them what she's done...or not done...and they'll finally see how unqualified she is and let her go...and let me off the hook.'

He passed Olivia in the hallway, giving her a knowing, wide-eyed look and tipping his head back behind him, as if to say, 'Yeah, I'm stuck with her,' only to have his eyes travel inevitably down to her cleavage, which was even more obvious whenever Olivia was moving. Her big breasts were already plainly obvious to anyone when she was sitting down, but when she was walking, they stood out even more, since they bounced and jiggled up and down with every sway and sidle of her athletic, curvy body. How could Lucas not stare!? It wasn't really a conscious choice on his part — at this point, it was almost automatic. Her medallion was nowhere to be seen, buried deep down in the chasm of her cleavage, swallowed up by the bountiful, bodacious breast flesh on either side, squeezing together in the inadequate space of her top, seemingly threatening to burst out at any moment. Olivia blinked and shook her head a little, tilting her head to the side and giving Lucas a playfully censoring glance, before smiling warmly at Brooke and continuing on her way.

'What's with the women in the office, making a point of being so sweet to her?' thought Lucas, with a bit of frustration. 'First Sophia and now Olivia...being all buddy-buddy with her. Probably just trying to spite me, is all. I know that's what Sophia's doing...she probably had a little chat with Olivia and put her up to it too. That would totally be something she would do.'

Ever since he and Sophia had been briefly involved together, Lucas saw every aspect of their interaction like a game...or more specifically, a chess match. The stakes had dropped considerably, ever since they had stopped dating, but the game had continued, though with no real end goal in mind. The two of them were simply used to that peculiar mode of interaction: flirtation that took the mode of incessant teasing, mocking, and scheming against one another. At least, that's how Lucas saw it.

He turned the corner in the hallway, glancing over his shoulder as he did so. He saw that Brooke was farther behind him than he had thought, causing him to slow his pace down a little as he sighed in frustration. He knew that he really needed to get a handle on his irritation if these next few days...or weeks...were going to be remotely manageable. But really, how was he supposed to act when every single aspect of his existence had been slowed, restricted...curtailed...by the presence of this utterly inadequate girl?

"S-sorry, Mr. Minuar," Brooke said, mispronouncing his name again as she kept him waiting. "It's...uh...hehe, I'm p-pretty clumsy in...in these shoes."

“Then find some better ones to wear,” muttered Lucas under his breath.

“Huh? Wh-what...what was that?” asked Brooke, finally catching up on him. “Hehe, I, uhh...I have a little tinnitus in my ears, s-so,, uhh...hehe, yeah. Sometimes I c-can’t hear as well.”

‘Of course you have tinnitus,’ thought Lucas to himself, but he smiled outwardly, making a point to do his best impression of Sophia and Olivia’s kindness. The women didn’t have a monopoly on empathy in this office, he reminded himself.

“I said, maybe Sophia can take you out shopping sometime soon,” he replied, cringing at the thought that he was playing into his colleague’s game. But even though Lucas didn’t care what this new temp-intern-whatever thought of him, he didn’t want her to labor under the knowledge of his own frustration and irritation with her. He didn’t feel this way because he cared about her — it was entirely to do with her performance...and her nervous energy. If she knew that he was frustrated with her, that would doubtlessly only make her more nervous, and would lead to her being even more incompetent and awkward. The last thing that Lucas needed was for this girl to make his life even harder...but really, how much farther down could she go?

‘She already stutters every other word,’ thought Lucas, resuming his trudge down the hall toward the laboratory, where they were going to get Brooke her security clearance. ‘And she’s already clumsy enough as it is. If she was more nervous, then she probably wouldn’t even be able to get a word out of her mouth...she’d be tripping and falling every step she took!’

The thought was so absurd that it actually made Lucas chuckle out loud. He shook his head without turning around as he continued walking. Brooke wouldn’t know that he was thinking about her; as he turned another corner, he saw her several paces behind him, her eyes intently focused on the floor directly in front of her.

‘Wow, she’s making sure she doesn’t fall, every step she takes,’ thought Lucas. ‘Poor girl.’

He actually did feel a little sorry for Brooke, even if his empathy for her was far outweighed by his empathy for himself at having to put up with her. He realized, around this moment, that he had been walking silently in front of Brooke, and that he should probably try to engage her in some kind of small talk to make everything seem normal.

“So...Brooke,” he said, his pleasant, conversational voice sounding oddly out of place in the situation, “How did you first...uh, get into software engineering?”

“H-how did I, uhh...g-get into it?” she asked blankly from behind him. It sounded to Lucas that she was already out of breath...from walking a little bit down the hall? Maybe it was just her nerves.

“Yeah!” said Lucas, glancing back at her again and giving her a forced smile as they turned another corner. “Like, I don’t know? What got you into this business in the first place?”

“Oh! Oh y-yeah!” said Brooke, her face brightening as she looked up at him. Now that she was looking at Lucas, she wasn’t quite watching where she was going, and she took the corner a bit too sharply, her bony hips smacking a little into the corner of the wall.

“Ow!” she exclaimed, rubbing the protruding bone.

“You ok?” asked Lucas.

“Y-yeah...yeah I’m, uh...I’m used to it. Umm...umm...” She seemed to have forgotten about what they were talking about.

“So...how you got into software engineering?” asked Lucas helpfully, privately not quite able to grasp how easily her mind trailed off.

“Oh yeah! Uh...w-well...I...I’ve always been interested in, um...in computers,” she began, looking back down at the ground in front of her, preparing to dodge any obstacles that came her way.

“Mhm,” nodded Lucas, turning another corner and looking at the steel-reinforced laboratory door down the far end of the hallway.

“And...and, uh...I...I always p-played computer games...when I was a kid,” she continued.

“Mhm, yes...most people have,” replied Lucas. He quickly realized that his comment could be taken as rude, and so he quickly added, “But I’m sure you were really good at computer games, huh?”

“Uh, hehe...I, uh...I m-mean, not really,” said Brooke, blushing. “I was, um...n-never really that good, uh, actually.”

“But you enjoyed them,” said Lucas, coming up to the laboratory door. It was an imposing door, to be sure, its steel glinting strangely in the hallway light. Everything else in the office suit looked more or less like a normal office, with normal modern decor. But the heavy laboratory door, kept secure with a code panel and fingerprint scanner, made it clear that there were extraordinary things going on in this office...things that needed to be kept guarded...and secret.

“Y-yes...I did,” said Brooke, trailing off a little as she looked up at the door. “Wh-where...uh... where does this lead to?”

“This,” said Lucas impressively, not wasting an opportunity to show off Braden’s, “is the entrance to the laboratory. It’s where most of our cutting-edge research happens...you know... our important research?” He had realized that Brooke might not even know what “cutting-edge” meant. He looked at her, and she seemed to nod her head, even though her face was blank.

“Here at Braden,” continued Lucas, typing in the code and inserting his finger into the scanner, “We’ve been doing a lot of research on next-generation technologies. Software engineering is going to be key for the major inventions of the future, you know. I’m talking about things like nanobots, you know? Remember those?”

“I...th-those...those things that, uh...that I w-was reading about...on...on w-wikipedia?” asked Brooke.

“Yes, those exact things you were reading about...on wikipedia,” said Lucas, smiling a little to himself at how slow this girl was. It was almost ridiculous. ‘Maybe she’s just nervous,’ he reminded himself, as his fingerprint was accepted and the laboratory door opened with a robotic “unsealing” sound. Brooke jumped back a little, apparently startled at the abrupt noise.

“Haha, oh yeah, sorry,” chuckled Lucas, looking back at Brooke as she gathered herself. “Shoulda warned you about the noise the door makes. All very high-tech, no? Haha, anyway, ok, let’s go in, shall we?”

“B-but...but I don’t have...a security clearance,” said Brooke, holding back with trepidation.

“Yes...yes I know that,” said Lucas, nodding his head with exaggeration at her, as if he was speaking to a child. “But that’s why we’re going in here right now...to get you one. Don’t worry, Brooke, you’re with me. You’ll be ok.”

And, almost as if by accident, Lucas extended his hand toward the timid girl, bidding her to follow him. Brooke looked at his outstretched hand, and then, right after blinking a couple times, she shuffled forward in her bulky heels and reached up, taking Lucas’s hand in her own. Lucas hadn’t expected her to actually take his invitation so literally — he hadn’t been intending for her to actually take his hand. Instead, he had just been gesturing with his hand, encouraging her to follow him. But apparently, Brooke had misinterpreted his intentions, and had taken the opportunity to actually reach up and grasp his palm.

Lucas shuddered at her unexpected touch — her palm was cool and sweaty, and her small, waifish fingers felt strange and unwelcome against the skin of his hand as he felt them moving slightly...it felt like she had just washed her hands, and forgotten to dry them. His immediate instinct was to yank his hand out of hers, but he was able to control this urge and chuckle a little, gesturing with his other hand that they should step on into the lab. As they did so, Lucas felt Brooke’s hand tightening around his own. It was clear that she didn’t have much of a strong grip, but her squeeze let him know that she was especially nervous about going into the lab.

“Hehe, don’t worry Brooke,” he laughed mildly, taking the opportunity, once they were inside, to let go of Brooke’s hand and busy himself pretending to pull the door to and latch it shut. In reality, the lab door closed securely just fine on its own, but Lucas needed a quick excuse to stop holding hands with her.

“No reason to be nervous in here,” he continued pleasantly, turning around and proceeding past her and making sure she was following him. “Do...uh, do laboratories make you nervous?”

“I...I d-don’t know,” said Brooke, her voice shaking a little. “I...I’ve just...uh...j-just never been... anywhere th-this...this imp...important before.”

“Aw, well...” said Lucas, feeling a little proud that he had at least managed to convey to the girl how essential and serious the laboratory was to Braden, “Well...yes. Yes, it’s true that a lot of important things happen here. Very true, in fact. But no need to feel scared!”

“I j-just...just don’t want to...t-to mess anything up,” stammered Brooke, struggling a bit to keep up.

'Well, I've gotta give it to her — the girl knows that she's clumsy,' thought Lucas amusedly to himself.

"Aw, Brooke, don't worry about anything like that. There are safety protocols out the wazoo here — we've made sure of that. And besides, you're with me, remember? The manager of the whole office? I'm pretty sure everything's gonna be fine."

Brooke seemed to be heartened by Lucas's reminder, and they proceeded along silently for a few more moments. The lab was dramatically different from the rest of the Braden office; its walls were all made of shiny steel, as if they housed some kind of strong, secret invention or being that was threatening to break out. A sterile, metallic smell infused the air — it wasn't really all that unpleasant, especially to Lucas, who personally loved the smell. He knew where it came from: the manufacturing of the thousands and thousands of nanobots that they were currently in the process of perfecting. Still, though...there was a long way to go..a long, long way.

"So if you look to your left there," said Lucas, passing a room with the door open, "You'll see the animal testing wing of the lab."

"A-animal testing!?" asked Brooke, her voice sounding a bit strained.

"Yeah...yeah, animal testing," said Lucas, looking back at her, a bit puzzled at her tone. She looked like she was suddenly in a bit of distress.

"We, uh, we test a lot of our new inventions, particularly the nanobots, on animals here at Braden," he said.

"D-do...do the animals get hurt?" asked Brooke earnestly, her dark eyes suddenly seeming even bigger.

"Um...I, uh...I mean, sometimes yes," answered Lucas honestly, sighing inwardly. The truth was that, far more often than not, a large concentration of nanobots ended up killing its host. But that didn't matter; they were making progress! Was this girl one of those flower-girl tree-hugging vegans who pretended like she didn't routinely consume products that had been tested on animals?

"Oh...ok," said Brooke quietly, bowing her head a little. Lucas was glad to realize that if she had any strong convictions, then she was far too timid to express them here and now. He decided to just skip over any kind of justification he had been preparing in his head.

"So yeah...the animal testing is there," he said, coming up on another open side door, "And this room on your right is where most of the mechanistic development happens."

He could tell that Brooke was about to open her mouth and repeat the phrase "mechanistic development" in stuttered, confused syllables, so he stepped in and continued: "Basically just a fancy term for robot-building, or nanobot-building. Essentially, just...where we actually manufacture and create the components that make our AI work."

"AI?" asked Brooke.

Lucas stopped walking and turned to her, staring at her. She had to be pulling his leg. She couldn't be this dense.

"You don't know what AI stands for?" he asked, point-blank, not bothering to hide his disbelief.

"I...w-well...w-well...I u...used to," she stuttered, turning bright red, "b-but I f-forgot!"

"Easy, eeeeasssy," said Lucas, immediately regretting his bluntness, for his own sake. "Let's jog your memory a bit: "A" stands for "artificial," right...? And "I" stands for....?"

Brooke stood there for a moment, stooped in thought, and then, suddenly, she gave a great whoop.

"Intelligence!!" she cried. "I remember now!"

"There you go!" laughed Lucas, his eyes still wide as he stared at her with a smile that was slightly too wide. 'Jesus...fucking...christ,' he thought.

"Haha, I knew I remembered that from somewhere!" laughed Brooke, smiling toothily, reminding Lucas of her overbite as she did so.

"Hehe, I'm sure you did," Lucas said, in a forced laugh. He noticed Brooke's voice had sounded a little raspy. Maybe that's how she sounded whenever she got excited. But right then, she gave a little cough.

"You all good?" he asked.

Coughcough

"Uh, y-yeah," Brooke laughed apologetically. "I j-just...uh, *coughcough* maybe I got a little t-too excited there."

"Need some water?" asked Lucas.

"Uh, n-no...no I'm...I'm fine," she answered.

They continued to make their way down the hall, until they stopped at a final door to their left.

"Now this is the storage sector," said Lucas, punching in another code and scanning his fingerprint again. "This is where we store a lot of our supplies, the original prototypes for our inventions, and the various works-in-progress that we're developing. This is also where a lot of the lab paperwork gets done, so that's why we're here -- it's where you get your security clearance."

The door opened up, and they walked into the storage area, the main room of which was much bigger and more open than the other rooms. All around, there were tall shelves that reached all the way up to the ceiling. A long steel table was in the middle of the room, and, standing with

his back turned, was a scientist in a white lab coat, who appeared to be writing down something on a clipboard. The door shut, and he abruptly turned around.

“Lucas!!” shouted the scientist, spreading his arms wide as he hurriedly scooted himself around the table, making his way toward them. “I’ve gotta show you something!”

“Hi Rick!” exclaimed Lucas, a bit taken aback by his colleague’s enthusiasm. “What’s up?”

“You’ve gotta see it to believe it!” said Rick, almost out of breath with excitement. He was looking straight at Lucas, and didn’t seem to have even noticed Brooke. Lucas barely registered that Brooke had started coughing again — he was far more interested in what Rick had to show him.

“Is it about...the...?” he asked Rick, raising his eyebrows.

“Oh yeah,” said Rick, nodding his head impressively. “It may not be as dramatic as we think, but I was analyzing the data this morning, and...Lucas, let me just say, there’s every reason to believe that it’s pointing in a positive direction. Like, far more positive than we ever thought before.”

“So, like, you mean...” said Lucas, feeling his heart beat faster as he got excited, “Like...we might be able to move testing forward...in...huma — ”

“Don’t say it!” cried Rick, laughing as he dramatically put his hand to his forehead. “Don’t say it out loud! Or you’ll jinx us!”

“Haha, “jinx”...very empirical of you, Rick,” laughed Lucas.

Coughcough Brooke was getting a little worse.

“Hey, we don’t know everything, you know,” said Rick, finally looking at Brooke for the first time. His eyes went over her quickly, and the information he gathered quickly produced a puzzled expression on his face.

“Oh, so this is Brooke,” said Lucas, indicating to her. “She’s a new...employee here. We’re actually here to get her a security clearance, so...”

“Can it wait just a minute?” asked Rick, having sufficiently introduced himself to Brooke with a curt, impersonal nod. “I really, really want to show you this data.”

“I...uh, yes! Yes, ok!” said Lucas, feeling himself getting more and more excited.

Coughcough

“Oh, uh, Brooke, why don’t you, uhh...just sit tight here for a minute, ok?” asked Lucas. He knew that he should probably bring Brooke with him, so as to not leave her all alone in the big scary lab room, but he didn’t want her impeding his conversation with Rick. Besides, she technically didn’t have a security clearance yet anyway, so...

“Uh, o-**cough**, o-ok,” she said with difficulty.

“You all good there?” asked Lucas, turning to leave. It wasn’t lost on him that he had asked Brooke some version of that same question three times already this morning.

“I’m...I’m f-fine,” she said. “J-just...just maybe need to...g-get a drink or something.”

“Well, uh, you can get yourself something over there,” said Lucas, flippantly gesturing toward what he meant to be the vending machines in the corner. Unbeknownst to him, however, Brooke had followed his gesture with her eyes, and had then fixed her gaze on a seemingly-innocuous glass of water that was sitting on the smooth metal laboratory table, close to where Rick had been standing when they walked in.

“O-**cough** ok, th-thanks,” she said, walking over toward the glass. By the time she reached it, Lucas and Rick were already gone. Without even thinking, she picked up the glass, nearly spilling its contents in her haste to quench her cough. She tipped the glass back and drank deeply, loudly gulping the water down in just a few seconds. She noticed that the water had a slightly metallic taste to it, but she didn’t think anything of it — she had learned, over the course of her life, not to trust her senses. She glanced around anxiously for a sink to wash the glass in, since the last thing she wanted was for Lucas to feel like she just left dirty dishes around. She found a sink in the corner, washed off the glass, dried it with a paper towel which she then threw away, and finally put the glass back on one of the shelves, along with hundreds of other empty glasses that looked just like it.

A few minutes later, Lucas and Rick came back, chattering excitedly.

“I mean, if we’re taking the standard deviation into account,” said Lucas, “Then there’s no question that we’re onto something serious here.”

“Well yeah, I mean, we definitely can’t forget to divide it all by the population,” enjoined Rick enthusiastically. “This is basic high school stuff, haha!”

“I knew we made straight A’s back then for a reason!” laughed Lucas. He looked at Brooke for a few moments, and it took his mind a little extra time to adjust from what he had been talking about to the reality of dealing with her.

“Ok...well...ok, Brooke — all ready for the security clearance?” he asked.

“Uh, yes, definitely!” she chirped.

“Well, so, you ready, Rick?” asked Lucas, noticing that Rick had been staring, looking a bit puzzled, where the glass of “water” used to be.

“I, uh...yeah! Yeah, I’m ready. I just thought...that...” he muttered.

“Thought that what?” asked Lucas, peering at him.

“N-nothing...nothing,” Rick said, shaking his head, blinking, and smiling. “I’m so excited that I must be losing my mind. Never mind all that — let’s go.”

They all went back into one of the rooms to file away paperwork, none of them aware of what had just happened. The glass of water that Brooke had gulped down was not just water. It was 99% water, and 1% animal-tested, cutting-edge, Braden-Premium nanobots. There were now 25,000 of them...inside her body.

Chapter 5

Lucas snapped awake, his phone buzzing fitfully on his nightstand as it rang out strangely into the darkness of his bedroom. He lurched over to the side in his bed, catching up his phone awkwardly in a frustrated flurry — he wasn't used to being called at this hour of the night. What on earth was going on!?

He looked down and saw that it was Rick who was calling him. Frowning slightly, Lucas answered, not quite knowing why there was something a bit off, a cold pit of some sort, that was beginning to develop in his stomach.

"Hey...Rick," he spoke into his phone, sounding sleepy at first, then clearing his throat and speaking more clearly. "What's...going — "

"Lucas!!" cried Rick's panicked voice from the other side, "She drank them! I just saw the footage!! We're in deep shit!!"

"What?!" asked Lucas, closing his eyes and shaking his head in the darkness. "What are you talking about, Rick? Who drank what??"

"Your new intern!!" yelled Rick into the phone. "Whatever her name is!! She drank my sample of nanobots that I had in that glass of water on the table when you all came in!! I knew that I hadn't misplaced it! I knew it!! And I went back and looked at the security footage...and...and there she was, drinking it all down!!"

"N-now...now just...just take it easy, ok?" said Lucas, now fully awake. A shot of sickening adrenaline had started his heart thumping, and a cold sweat was beginning to develop on his brow. This was bad...very bad. No animal in the early nanobot trials had managed to survive, and most of them had died quite horribly, their bodies actually exploding. Lucas's mind shot to an image of Brooke's bloody body in some run-down apartment; he quickly tried to shake it away, but doing so wasn't so simple.

"Take it easy!?" exclaimed Rick, almost apoplectic on the other end. "Take it easy?!? How am I supposed to do that when we've just killed someone!!"

"W-we...we don't...we c-can't be sure, though..." said Lucas, who was already frantically throwing on his clothes. "Maybe...maybe it...uh...are you sure that's what you saw, Rick!?"

"Drop the bullshit and get your ass over here!" Rick shouted. "See for yourself! Oh my god, oh my god...I KNEW that I hadn't forgotten to take that sample out...I just KNEW it...and now... holy shit, she's probably dead alrea—"

"Ok, stop!" said Lucas forcefully, dashing around his bedroom, running into things, stubbing his toes as he got dressed. "No more talk over the phone, you understand? This could all get used against us down the line, ok? So...I'll be over there as soon as I can, alright? Just...just sit tight."

"Make it fast," said Rick, and hung up.

A short while later, Lucas got to the lab. It was early in the morning, just before 5 am. Normally, without coffee, Lucas would be a bleary-eyed mess at this hour, but the serious, horrific, and surreal nature of what was going on ensured that he was wide awake. Lucas's mind was buzzing with all kinds of thoughts whirling and cycloning on each other. How could this have possibly happened!? He knew that Brooke was incompetent and unqualified, but...on her second day!? Managing to drink tens of thousands of nanobots!? It was almost too ridiculous to believe...it would have been funny in a kind of sick way, if the implications weren't so utterly appalling. Why the fuck had Rick left the nanobots out like he did?? In a glass of water!? Surely that was an irresponsible breach of protocol! As he rushed into the lab, Lucas couldn't help feeling aggressively enraged at Rick for being so lax, at Brooke for being so clumsily and ignorantly stupid, and at himself for somehow allowing all this to happen under his watch.

"I turned off the security camera!" reassured an unkempt and wild-eyed Rick when Lucas rushed into his lab office. "Just so...so we can talk...talk freely."

"Ok," said Lucas, breathing heavily as he closed the door. "Ok, so...oh my god...fuck!! Show me the video."

Rick hurriedly did so, and Lucas felt a deep, infuriated antipathy toward Brooke as he watched her pick up the glass, drink it down, and go wash it off. He felt something like sympathy, too, watching the poor girl ingest what was surely going to be her violent death...but he pushed down these feelings of sympathy. Right now, he only had room to feel angry at her, and terrified for himself.

"She's gotta be dead right now," said Rick in a fatalistically dead-pan tone, flopping his arms up in a gesture of futility. "She's dead in her apartment, as we speak. And it wasn't a quiet death, let me tell you. Her body must have — "

"Ok, ok!!" yelled Lucas, putting up his hand to stop Rick. "I think we both know what the bots do to animals, alright? No need to say it out loud. Ok...so...so what do we do now? Wait to hear about it?"

"We're fucked!" cried Rick energetically, pacing back and forth and rubbing his hands together. "It's gonna get traced back to us, no question. They're gonna put two and two together about this girl getting an internship at a place that does nanobot research...with documented cases of animal testing resulting in said explosion of animals."

"But that's...that's not public knowledge," countered Lucas.

"Yeah, but investigators will find out about it!" replied Rick immediately. "We can't hide those kinds of records from law enforcement! They'll trace it back to us — easy! And then we're fucked!"

"But...but maybe you can, uh...s-somehow get rid of the security footage!?" asked Lucas, his lips feeling oddly dry.

"Oh yeah, surrrre!" said Rick sarcastically, throwing up his hands. "That'll look GREAT in the deposition, when we say that oh, I don't know...somehow the security footage gets mysteriously

scrubbed by some unknown source literally THE DAY that her body explodes. Sure, that'll totally fly with a jury."

"Ok, so...uh...so what else?" asked Lucas, feeling increasingly desperate.

"It's all over," said Rick, the despair in his voice somehow more poignant now that he was speaking softer. "All our research...done. Caput. Finished."

"Y-you...you think?" asked Lucas.

"Oh my god, just think!" exclaimed Rick, looking at him with desperate misery. "The lawsuit that's gonna come crashing down on our heads...Jesus Christ, just imagine it, Lucas! Braden is gonna be wiped off the map!"

Lucas had no response to this — Rick was right; that's all there was to it. They were all going down...him, Rick, the company that had been his sole foundation for corporate advancement, the research they had all invested their blood, sweat, and tears into...EVERYTHING. It was all totally fucked. He and Rick just stood there for a few silent, awful moments, agonizing over the crazy misfortune that had befallen them.

"I...just...let's just hold on a minute, ok?" said Lucas shakily, moments later, breaking the silence.

"We don't...we don't know...for sure...if anything's happened yet," he continued. "I mean...maybe...maybe we just wait. Wait to see."

"Wait!?" asked Rick ruefully, shaking his head. "I'm not waiting for anything, Lucas. We KNOW what happens with these bots. I think you and I should just...just high-tail it out of there while we still can."

"You mean...go on the run?" asked Lucas, hardly believing what he was hearing.

"I mean, it's better than a jail cell for life!" cried Rick. "That's what we're facing here, Lucas!"

"I know...I...y-yeah, I know," Lucas said, nodding and putting his hands out in a calming gesture. "But...but if we ran now, then...I mean, there'd be NO question of our guilt, you know? That would look extra bad."

Rick looked at him blankly. Lucas knew that he had a point, and he also knew that he was not going to entertain running...at least not just yet.

"So...so I say," he proceeded, "We just...wait. Wait to see, maybe...if she comes in? Who knows? Maybe the bots malfunctioned or...or something. Maybe she's ok. Maybe something happened with them and it's not as bad as we thought."

"Yeah, but Lucas —" began Rick, but Lucas cut him off, using his irritation with Rick's laxity as fuel for his own tone.

"I'm not saying it's probable, alright?" he said, "I'm just saying that we should just...act normal... and see what happens. Alright? We didn't see anything...we don't know anything. We just... carry on as usual...until we hear something about her, ok? Otherwise, it's gonna get traced back to us immediately, and we'll have no defense. We gotta have each others' backs on this, ok, Rick? You hear what I'm saying?"

Rick looked like he was going to keep arguing for a moment, but something in him seemed to suddenly deflate and he gave a great, anxiety-ridden sigh.

"Ok," said Rick. "Just...business as usual...at first. But I'm telling you, Lucas, if the investigators start snooping around here and asking me questions, I'm gone. You understand?"

"I...I get it, Rick, really, I do," said Lucas. "And I'll be right behind you, if it comes to that."

It was an agonizing few hours before Brooke was supposed to come into work. Lucas tried to distract himself by working on this or that, answering emails, getting coffee, pacing up and down in his office, playing random little games on his phone to take his mind off his terrible problem, and so on. But nothing worked, and as 8 o'clock neared, his anxiety reached such a fever pitch that he had to go into the bathroom a few times and splash off his face with cold water. Sophia had poked her head into his office, joking about getting to work before her for once, but Lucas wasn't having any of her games this morning and had snapped at her, telling her to mind her own business.

"Huh, a little touchy this morning, are we?" she inquired, raising her eyebrows and looking at him hard, before retiring to her office. Lucas knew that Sophia must have been aware that something was up, but he just didn't feel like he had the energy to engage her in witty banter.

8 o'clock came and went, and Lucas's anxiety deepened. He was sitting in his leather chair, rotating a few inches to the right, and then to the left, in a halting, nervous cycle. He wasn't even looking distinctly at his computer screen anymore. If Trent or James or whoever had walked into his office and asked him a question, Lucas would have just stared at him blankly, unable to form a response.

8:05...

'She's late because she's late all the time,' thought Lucas to himself, over and over, as the minutes ticked off the clock. 'Brooke couldn't be on time to save her life...'

But that saying got him thinking about the grisly reality of what had probably happened, and he felt sick to his stomach...partially out of sympathy for her, but far more than anything else, out of sympathy for himself and his career, which was in danger of being totally destroyed.

8:10...

He was sure this was it. She wasn't coming in...she wasn't coming in because she was dead. The reality of the situation began to weigh heavily upon Lucas like a lead trench coat, enveloping him deeper and deeper into its crushing embrace. He suddenly, crazily, realized how hard it was going to be to act normal and innocent from now on. His mind flashed to all the crime drama movies and shows he had watched over the years, and how unrealistic it was for

the villains to feign their innocence. He was feeling the reality of it all right now...crushing down upon him. He was going to have to make plans...make plans to get away, as fast as he —

A slow, dark movement appeared in Lucas's periphery, in his doorway. He looked up to see Brooke peering awkwardly into his office. His heart stopped. Making eye contact with him and quickly looking down, Brooke proceeded to shuffle into the office, towards the empty chair next to his desk. Lucas followed her with his eyes as she moved, watching her with incredulous and anxious intensity. She sat down in the overly-large chair, heavily put down her work knapsack, and crossed her hands in her lap, clearly waiting to be told what to do. Lucas couldn't do anything except stare — she looked totally normal. Frumpy, wrinkled clothes, wet hair...the whole shebang. It was...it was just Brooke...sitting there before him...apparently unchanged.

She nervously picked up a nearby newspaper, in an attempt to stave off the awkward silence, and started a crossword puzzle. Lucas turned away towards his computer, pretending to look over his emails, and watched her go over the clues from the corner of his eye. She winced a little to herself and shook her head, clearly struggling with the crossword. Lucas couldn't believe it. She was...okay!

"Well...hello there...Brooke," he said finally, trying to sound official. His voice echoed oddly off the walls. "A, um...a little late again today, I see?" He had meant his voice to sound professionally put-off, but his question came out sounding more searching and anxious than he intended.

"Oh! Y-yeah, I'm...I'm s-sorry!" said Brooke quickly, looking up from the crossword. "It's just...uh, I got...a l-late start this morning."

"I...um...I see," said Lucas, looking over her. He wished he could get the anxiety out of his voice, but at present it was still pumping through his bloodstream.

"So...so you're um, you're feeling ok, though? Not feeling sick or anything?" he asked. He realized that he couldn't afford to sound fishy, so he added: "Because we really don't want anyone coming to work who might be sick. Would compromise the whole office, you know?"

"Yes, oh...oh yes," responded Brooke, nodding vigorously. "I...but, yes, I'm fine. I feel fine."

"Ok...uh...yeah, ok," said Lucas, looking at her closely. For the life of him, he couldn't see anything wrong with her, aside from what was already there. In fact, he even realized, subconsciously, that her overbite was gone. For the first time that morning, his heart began to lift a bit. He turned back to his computer screen, staring at it blankly for a few long moments, before he quickly opened his email and typed a secure, encrypted message to Rick, informing him about the crazy miracle that had just happened. In the meantime, unbeknownst to Lucas, Brooke had abandoned the crossword puzzle and had opened up her laptop, where she started typing in a digital diary that she kept every day. Lucas couldn't see what she was doing — he was too busy with his email to Rick.

By the time Lucas was done, about ten minutes later, he and Rick had exchanged a series of disbelieving, agitated, and ultimately exhilarating emails. Their mutual concern and worry had quickly turned into excitement as they began to realize the potential business-profit implications of Brooke surviving the dose of nanobots. This is exactly what all those months of animal

testing had been geared towards: making the nanobots viable inside of a human host. And now...now it had already been done! And as a total fluke, at that!

'But that's just how these things work in science sometimes!' thought Lucas excitedly to himself as he looked over at Brooke typing in her diary. 'Sometimes, an opportunity just...falls right in your lap...and you have to take advantage of it.'

He took a deep breath. He knew that what he was about to do was ethically (and probably morally) wrong, but he had managed to convince himself that, because he was on the cutting edge of serious scientific advancement, the ends justified the means. And besides, it was just Brooke he was talking about. She should be thankful...and counting herself lucky...to be accidentally involved in such trailblazing research.

"Ok Brooke," said Lucas out loud, turning to her. "Why don't you come with me to the lab?"

"O-ok," she answered, shutting her laptop and bounding up in an ungainly way off the chair. Lucas felt pity for her for a moment, just because of the immediacy of her response. He realized that she totally trusted him...or, at least, didn't really have the capacity not to trust someone in a position of authority. There was something about her innocence, despite her clumsiness, that made Lucas feel bad for her, and bad for how he was using her. But he was able to quickly dismiss these feelings in himself, as he motioned for her to follow him to the lab.

'Gotta stay focused on the ultimate goal,' he reminded himself, gaining confidence and excitement with each step he took toward the lab. On the way, he once again ran into Olivia, who was wearing slightly-higher heels than normal, with a dress that seemed to squish her large breasts together even tighter than usual.

"Oh Lucas!" she trilled, clearly with the intent to halt his stride, "Did you get that email I sent about the coding of the — "

"Not now, Olivia," interrupted Lucas, putting up his hand as he passed. He was barely able to register Olivia's surprised reaction, and the slight affront that her breasts seemed to express as they bounced up and down suddenly, the result of Olivia's forward progress being halted as she stopped dead in her tracks from the sheer surprise of being so cavalierly brushed-aside. Clearly, she was not used to being addressed this way, especially from the manager of the office who was generally much more receptive to her physical charms. Brooke followed sheepishly in Lucas's wake, obviously not understanding or appreciating the dynamic that was going on. Olivia had time to lock eyes with Brooke and give her a long, hard look as she passed by — it was like Olivia was trying to search Brooke's demeanor for clues as to why her boss was giving this frumpy new intern such clear preference...over her.

A minute later, Lucas and Brooke were in the lab. Rick was watching the exchange from an adjacent room, having figured (along with Lucas) that having both of them there, grilling Brooke about the new research, might be overwhelming for her. But he was certainly watching intently, waiting with bated breath as Lucas attempted to convince her to sign a consent form that Rick had prepared on the lab table.

"So Brooke," Lucas began, indicating that she should sit down on one of the lab stools (while he, of course, remained standing over her), "I've been looking into some...different roles that

you could fill here at Braden. Trust me, haha, there's plenty of different ways we could fit you in, but this morning, just before you came in, I realized something exciting. Wanna know what I thought?"

"S-sure!" said Brooke, her eyes getting a little bigger from anxious excitement.

"Well ok," he continued, making it a point to go slowly as he smiled, "So, how would you feel if we raised your hourly wage...in exchange for you helping us out with a very important job?"

"More...more money?! Uh, haha, ok!" laughed Brooke, blushing.

"Oh yeah," nodded Lucas deliberately. "And I'm talking 20 bucks an hour, Brooke."

"Woah!" she exclaimed.

"Yeahhhh," he said, smiling. "And it's more than just the money, Brooke. It's the nature of the job itself. There's something...historical about it."

Brooke continued to look at him, a bit blankly, even as she continued to timidly smile.

"So about this job," persisted Lucas, feeling like he may as well just go out and say it, "You would be the first human nanobot test subject. How does that sound to you?"

Brooke opened her mouth, but nothing came out. Lucas quickly realized that he should just keep plowing right ahead, and not stop for her reactions.

"Now, not to worry," he continued, "This particular brand of nanobots is our new variety, and totally safe for humans. I mean, think about it, Brooke! You'll be at the forefront of this new cutting-edge technology, you know!? And I'm serious: this nanobot research REALLY has the potential to change humanity for the better...like, full stop, this stuff is gonna be world-changing, you understand? Haha, and just think, all those nice people I introduced you to yesterday, Trent...James, you know? Sophia! This is your chance to really become...part of the team! Oh, and wow...not to even MENTION how this would look on your resume. Haha, it's pretty much a no-brainer, Brooke. But I just, you know...wanted to ask you before I have you sign this consent form here. You know, because I don't wanna force you to do anything. But I just think you should understand...what a big opportunity this is."

Brooke just sat there on the lab stool, looking up wide-eyed at Lucas, obviously overwhelmed by everything he had just said. She tried to distract herself from her deluge of thought and feeling by looking all over the lab, her eyes darting left and right behind her horn-rimmed glasses, as if looking for a way to escape the responsibility, into some quiet refuge. Lucas felt a twinge of pity, which was quickly subsumed by an impatient and exasperated momentum.

"I mean, no pressure, of course," he said out loud, shaking his head slightly and opening his palms to her a little, as if indicating that this was all totally casual, despite the excited speech that had just come out of his mouth. "If you're uh...not interested in a pay raise, then I suppose we could look for someone else to..."

“N-no!” cried Brooke, her eyes going wide as she shook her head back and forth. “No! I’m...I am interested! It...um, it’s just...hehe, wow! This is...pretty great! I’m...I’m in!”

“You’re in?” Lucas repeated, grinning down at her.

“I’m in!” she said again, a little louder and more confidently.

“Alllll right then!” laughed Lucas. “So if you’ll just put your John Hancock down on that dotted line at the bottom, we’ll be all good to go!”

It occurred to Lucas that his “John Hancock” allusion might be lost on Brooke, but even if it had, she seemed to understand what he had been talking about, and she dashed off her signature on the consent form. Lucas knew that, in signing herself away like this, Brooke was doing all his work for him. He had already drafted an email that, pending this first, impending experiment, he was going to send everyone in his office, informing them of Brooke’s willing participation, and assuring them that they should not freak out should they notice any changes in her. Lucas had only just begun to dare thinking about these potential improvements to this girl. It was almost too thrilling to contemplate the nanobots actually working, but at this point, the most important thing was done: getting Brooke to sign that consent form. And Rick had the security cameras rolling — it was all there. Even if she ended up dying somehow in these experiments, he and Rick were totally safe now.

“You remember Rick, don’t you?” asked Lucas pleasantly, as he led Brooke into a subsection of the animal-testing sector, the “Human Sector,” hitherto unused. The room was sleek and futuristic-looking, filled with what seemed to be titanium, or a shiny, silvery-type metal.

“Y-yeah,” answered Brooke, looking bashfully up at Rick, who, for his part, was smiling ear-to-ear, looking almost too happy.

“Here she is!” he exclaimed over-dramatically. “Our first subject! Haha, ok, well then Brooke! You ready to get started!?”

“Al...already?” she asked, still smiling despite the uncertainty in her voice.

“Well of course!” cried Rick, turning his head as he kept his eyes on her. “No time like the present to kick off this research, right!?”

“It’s all for science, Brooke,” said Lucas, “But remember, this is also for YOU, too. These nanobots are designed to IMPROVE people. You know, like all that stuff I told you yesterday — better skin, cancer-fighting, more energy...and so on! And you might even feel a bit happier!”

“W-wow!” said Brooke, blushing more. “Th-this...this is pretty c-crazy!”

“Oh tell me about it!” responded Rick with great energy.

“S-so...so do the nanobots I-like...like zap me or...or something?” asked Brooke.

“Zap you??” asked Rick.

“Or...y-yeah...like...how do they help me?” asked Brooke.

Lucas and Rick looked at each other and laughed.

“NO, Brooke!” Lucas burst out, his body shaking with laughter. “You DRINK the nanobots! Here, Rick, show her!”

“They’re all right in here, Brooke,” said Rick excitedly, producing a pitcher that was filled with water.

“In...there?” asked Brooke, pointing.

“Yep! Your first dose!” Rick lied. But he proceeded along with the truth directly afterwards.

“This pitcher of water contains 20 million nanobots...you understand? And you’re gonna drink them all down.”

“D-drink...all that water?” asked Brooke.

“Yep!” said Lucas. “Listen, Brooke, I know it’s a lot, but important that you drink it all down, ok? Just think, it’s essential for the experiment to continue. Plus, I mean, you’ll be helping Braden Inc with our newest technology, right?”

“R-right,” said Brooke, blinking through her smile.

“Well ok, then, here goes!” exclaimed Rick, handing her the pitcher. “Careful, ok? Use two hands...no...ok...uh, wanna help her, Lucas? It’s a little heavy...I don’t want any of this splashing on the ground.”

“Ok,” said Lucas, stepping forward to hold the bottom of the pitcher, as she grasped the sides. “You ready, Brooke?”

She nodded silently, and for a moment, her face went ashen. Lucas had a flash of fear that she was going to try and back out of it, but he made a point to smile at her and even wink, and she blinked her big eyes and smiled back at him.

“Ok, deep breath,” he said, taking one himself, “And...bottoms’s up!”

He gently tipped the pitcher toward Brooke’s mouth, and she responded in kind with her hands. The lab room became full of the sound of her gulping down the liquid, with the loud sounds of her throat ricocheting off the smooth metal walls.

Gulp...GULP

After about half of the liquid was down, Brooke began to struggle — her head was starting to shake as she made more and more of an effort to gulp down the liquid.

“There we go,” said Lucas encouragingly, tipping the pitcher ever so slightly.

GULP...Gulp...gulp

Lucas was aware enough, through the shimmering haze of his own excitement, that what he was doing was morally objectionable. Here was this poor, hapless, totally confused little girl, with no experience, who he was forcing to consume an ungodly amount of water that was filled with millions of nanobots, which he had only just now realized were viable in human beings. And yet, even though Lucas knew that he should feel guilty, he simply didn't. He was far too excited to see the nanobots in action, in a live human subject, right in front of him. He was able, in his agitated, animated mind, to brush aside the humanitarian concerns. They were on the cusp of something crazy: an unprecedented scientific advancement that he had only been able to dream of before. And Braden was going to spearhead it!

Gulppp...Glluggg....GULPPP

"Just keep going, Brooke, you're doing great."

Some of the water dripped down Brooke's chin, running in thin little rivulets down her neck, and staining her white blouse dark near her collarbones. Lucas's eyes were drawn to the water; at first, he thought it was because Brooke was wasting precious nanobots, but he knew that a difference of a few thousand or so wouldn't matter. No...Lucas couldn't help but realize that it was something else: as he watched the water run down Brooke's chin and neck, and listened to her gulping it down, Lucas realized that he was...getting a little turned-on. This was a confusing thing for him to realize. What exactly was hot about the scene? There wasn't anything attractive about Brooke, and...and besides, wasn't there only reason to be excited about this experiment progressing so quickly into human trials!? It didn't really make any sense. And yet, as Brooke continued to struggle and gulp down the liquid, Lucas felt his cock gently tent the front of his khakis. He stepped a bit to the side, shimmying his membr a bit in between his legs, hiding its slightly-engorged mass. He blinked and tried to re-focus himself.

Ggggullpppp...ggullppp

When the pitcher was three-quarters empty, Brooke even let out a slight moan of discomfort, quite unintentionally, as she toiled more and more to get it all down.

"Almost there!" said Lucas, tipping the pitcher up even more. "Almost gone, Brooke! Keep it going!"

Giving one great heave of inhaled breath through her nose, as she looked up anxiously at the lab ceiling, Brooke fought to swallow the last remaining quarter of liquid, her face now clearly fatigued from the effort. by the time she finished it all, she staggered back a little, coughing and breathing hard, as Lucas caught the pitcher from falling out of her hands.

"You did it! Nice job!" he said spiritedly, feeling another twinge of guilt as he saw her struggle to catch her breath. But once again, the guilt was overridden by his hunger to see what would happen next.

CoughCough *COUGH*

Brooke coughed a few times, loudly and deeply, screwing her face up in reaction to the massive amount of fluid she had just consumed. Lucas cautiously and a bit noncommittally reached over

and patted her on the back a few times, as a kind of token, tacit gesture, more than anything else.

“There...it’s, uh, it’s ok, Brooke,” he said. “You ok?”

Cough

“Uhh...y-yeah,” she replied, panting slightly. “I’m...I’m ok, I think.”

“Alright, great!” said Lucas, his hand, still on her back, now gently but firmly guiding her towards the large glass cylinder in the middle of the room. “Ok, now...I’m gonna have you step in here, ok? No need to be worried — it’s just the, uh...let’s call it the “observation capsule,” haha, where we can monitor the nanobots that you’ve just, uh...ingested. Sound good?”

“Y-yes,” said Brooke, still struggling a bit to catch her breath.

“And there’s a little door here...in you go...and we’re just gonna close it, ok?” Lucas knew that he was rushing Brooke through the whole process, but he didn’t really care. He just needed to get her in there and close the door. Once she was inside, he pushed the glass door shut and latched it from the outside. Brooke gave him a nervous and slightly fearful look through the glass, but he just flashed a quick grin at her, gave the “thumbs-up” sign, and turned his back on her, going back behind an extra layer of glass to join Rick in the “observation booth” part of the room. Turning around again, Lucas got the full picture of Brooke in the glass cylinder — it was a fairly tight fit for her 5’5 frame, but her relatively small stature allowed her to lean back slightly. She also had a good foot of space above her head.

‘More than enough room,’ Lucas told himself, to stave off any guilt that he had just put a discombobulated, nervous, and possibly claustrophobic girl into this glass cylinder without so much as an orientation concerning what was about to happen.

“Ok Brooke,” Lucas said, over the intercom, “The nanobots that you just drank are good for you, you understand? They’re basically just designed to keep you, the host, healthy, alright? They’ll remove any cancer cells they find, they’ll reduce wrinkles...haha, heck, they might even make you just feel happier in general! But the point is, they’re a net positive for you? Ok?”

“O-ok,” said Brooke, looking extremely uncomfortable in the cylinder.

“Ready to get this party started?” asked Rick eagerly, with a hungry edge to his voice. He had just sat down in front of a sprawl of computers and monitors, which were set up and programmed to record and observe all the data coming in from the sensors in the “observation capsule” Brooke was in.

“Am I!?” laughed Lucas, feeling positively giddy.

Rick reached over and handed him a small, hand-held remote.

“That’s to turn the bots on and off,” said Rick. “You know the drill...same as with the animals we’re testing now. Button has to be held down to keep the bots on, you know, for safety reasons, yadda yadda.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” said Lucas, almost impatiently. “And the remote is uniquely mine, right? Like, it has the same biosensors the other ones do?”

“Yep,” answered Rick, adjusting a few monitors. “It only recognizes your fingerprint signature. No one else can turn them on.”

“Perfect,” intoned Lucas, unconsciously licking his lips a little.

“So now, if she explodes, it’s all on you!” laughed Rick.

“Oh stop it — that won’t happen,” chuckled Lucas, not quite knowing whether or not he was right. He looked back up at Brooke, whose hands were crossed timidly in front of her, as she looked down at the glass floor beneath her.

“Alright, ready Rick?” Lucas was trying to keep his voice steady, but it wasn’t easy.

“Ready.” Rick was just as excited as he was, positively poised on the edge of his seat.

“Ok, here we go!” breathed Lucas, and pressed the button on the remote.

At first, there was no indication that anything had changed — there was no sound, no reaction from Brooke, no spike in the charts on the monitors. Lucas and Rick waited breathlessly for the bots to do their work. It was a surreal thing...Rick’s eyes were fixed on the computers and monitors, but Lucas’s were locked firmly on Brooke. It was so strange to look at her, and know that millions of nanobots were busily working inside her, totally unseen.

“Holy SHIT!” cried Rick suddenly, gasping out as the data started to pour in through the monitors. “Lucas!! Jesus fucking christ, take a look at this!! Her red count is WAY up! Oh my god, look at her hemoglobin levels!! The...holy fuck, her Chymotrypsin is off the charts...are you seeing this, Lucas!? Look at her Tyrosinase spikes!! Are you kidding me!? This...this is REVOLUTIONARY, Lucas!! This...is...haha ohhhh god, her HGH is climbing now...godddd...fuck! Her glucose production capacity already doubled. This is gonna...oh my god, Lucas — this is gonna change the world!! Are you seeing all this!? Lucas!?!”

Lucas wasn’t looking at the monitors; he wasn’t looking at the computers and taking in all the figures; he wasn’t even really hearing what Rick was saying. Instead, his eyes were inexorably fixed upon Brooke’s body in the glass cylinder. She was visibly beginning to change. Lucas could see that her head, ever so surely, and at a constant rate, was beginning to inch upwards. She was...growing taller, in real time, before his eyes. And it wasn’t just her stature that was changing. The blemishes on her skin began to fade away, until they had disappeared entirely. The uneven distribution of flesh in her cheeks evened out, to the point where Lucas was amazed at her face’s proportionality. The slight dimples in her chin seemed to get swallowed up in an increase in the vibrant fleshiness of her blossoming cheeks and chin. There was no getting around it...Brooke’s face was actually starting to look...not bad at all...pretty good, in fact.

But the changes didn’t even stop there. Lucas felt his eyes drawn to Brooke’s chest. Her previously-flat chest, with barely any breast mounds to speak of, was now burgeoning

noticeably under her white blouse. Lucas felt his wide eyes expand even wider as he took in exactly what was happening. He could hardly believe it — this change, along with many of the others, was totally unexpected. Underneath her blouse, the twin mounds of her breasts were clearly growing, swelling bigger and bigger with each passing moment. Brooke's blouse grew tighter and tighter in her chest region, as her breasts began to press themselves into the fabric from the inside. Lucas was able to get a clearer view through the blouse of Brooke's nipples, and with a jolting thrill, he saw them lengthening and thickening, growing slightly darker as they increased visibly in size.

Lucas blinked his eyes in stunned arousal as he unconsciously licked his upper lip...his nostrils were flaring, and his cock, which was already slightly hard, grew harder still. Brooke's blouse continued to tighten in the front of her chest; the previously-loose fabric grew straight and taut, with their wrinkles gradually creasing themselves out more and more with each passing moment. Without realizing it, Lucas drew in a sharp breath as, for the first time, a cleavage actually became visible, swelling itself up in the warm, organic bliss of the fleshy mounds of her breasts that continued to grow in tandem, squishing themselves up against each other, seeming to duel for space inside Brooke's ever-tightening blouse. Her legs and arms were also growing, beginning to lose their spindly shapes as gentles surges of female flesh started to fill them out. And all the while, her head kept going up, up, and up some more. Lucas was positively dumbfounded — shocked beyond measure as his body temperature rose, his cock beginning to strain in the confines of his pants. He was literally watching a woman emerge out of what the old Brooke had been before.

Gradually, Lucas became aware of something insistent sounding off to his right. The noise was muddled and undecipherable at first. It took him a few long moments to realize that the sound was a voice, and then a few extra moments to ascertain that the voice was Rick's, and that it was urgently conveying something.

"Huh? What?" asked Lucas, still not taking his eyes off Brooke.

"Stop, Lucas! Stop!" came Rick's emphatic voice. "Turn them off! That's more than enough!!"

"Oh...come on, j-just...just a little longer," said Lucas, his mouth slightly slack as he breathed heavily in and out, feasting his eyes on Brooke's burgeoning form. "Just, to, uh...just to make sure...it works."

"No way — are you serious!?" cried Rick. "It's not safe, Lucas!! Come on, we've gone far enough — turn them off!!"

As Brooke continued to grow in the background, Rick reached for the remote. As soon as his fingers brushed the edge of the device, something seemed to go off in Lucas's head, and he tried to pull it away. But Rick had already latched his fingers onto the end of it and wouldn't let go. Lucas finally broke his eyes away from Brooke to focus on wrestling the remote away from Rick. The two men pulled and tugged, in a brief but intense struggle, each of them breathing hard.

"Lucas...for fuck's sake...let me...come on...turn it off!!" panted Rick.

"I...I'm...ok, ok!" said Lucas, coming to his senses and taking his finger off the button. He held the remote up to Rick, with both of his hands raised, in the motion of surrender. "See?! It's off! Ok, god!"

"Fuck!" exclaimed Rick, shaking his head as his eyes lingered on Lucas for a long moment. "You...we have to be careful, Lucas! Come on, man."

"I...yeah, I mean," said Lucas awkwardly, furrowing his brow a little bit, almost in confusion. "She's...look, don't get all worked up, ok?" he said, recovering quickly as he gestured over to Brooke. "Look at her — she's fine." He noticed that her head was a little closer to the top of the cylinder ceiling than it had been before...and there was no question that her breasts had grown larger still, even during the brief time that he had looked away.

"That we know of!" said Rick, his voice full of stress and excitement. "Ok, uh...ok, yeah, it's fine...it's fine. She looks fine. It's...wow, Lucas. Take...uh, well, go over and check on her first, but when you get back....Jesus...you gotta look at these charts!"

Lucas was already on his way over to the glass cylinder, wiping his forehead with his hand on the way, and taking a series of deep breaths. He was strangely more aware of his body in this moment than he had ever remembered being before. Only when he was almost at the glass container's door did he look at Brooke in the face. She was still no beauty, but there was no question at all that her appearance had improved. Her face looked brighter, fresher, and more vibrant. She was blinking her eyes, which looked even bigger, and whose sockets were slightly more angled at the corners, giving her whole facial structure a sharper and more pleasing edge. What mood was she in? Lucas smiled up at her in an obligatory way as he unlatched the door.

'She looks totally confused,' thought Lucas. 'Same old Brooke.'

He didn't quite know why he was thinking this thought to himself as he opened the door — it was quite clear that this was not the same old Brooke, at least physically speaking.

"There she is!" he laughed, immediately feeling the awkward weight of his words as they tumbled untidily out of his mouth. "That was great, Brooke! Just great! How, uh...how do you feel?"

"A little dizzy, maybe," she replied, immediately and clearly (which Lucas interpreted as abruptness), stepping out of the container and onto the same level floor that Lucas was standing on. "But actually, uh...not so bad."

"Oh yeah?" asked Lucas, half-hearing her words. He was busy taking in the reality of Brooke's growth. She was obviously taller now — before, the top of her head had barely come up to his chin. Now, Lucas could tell that it reached all the way up to the middle of his nose. She had actually gained a couple inches.

"Yeah, haha, like, you, uh...you were right, Mr. Mineur," said Brooke, smiling some as she unconsciously brought her hands up to her chest and squished her breasts together. "I think I do feel a little happier, actually!"

Lucas registered somewhere in his mind that Brooke had actually addressed him by his last name without messing it up, but nearly all of his attention had become swallowed up in Brooke's breasts. Even though she was squishing them together inadvertently, her nonexistent motives didn't stop Lucas from staring at the newly-swelled, taut breast flesh that was peeking through the upper part of her blouse. Brooke's chest had been almost completely flat before, but now, her tiny A-cups had increased all the way up to solid B-cups. And what's more, he was faced with the reality of Brooke's height increase; even though he was still half a foot taller, there was something intimidating about her face being closer to his...even though there had been no ostensible change, Lucas felt like she had somehow "risen in rank."

The change was dramatic for Lucas, even if others might not have noticed so intensely. He blinked several times as he gawked at Brooke's assets, as she stood there, looking awkwardly at him as her eyes shifted around the lab, and back to him again.

"Uhh...yeah...yeah, that's...that's great, Brooke!" said Lucas, coming out of his reverie after a few moments. He looked back up from her chest and into her face. "Fantastic! I'm...um, I'm glad you're feeling good. We'll, uh...we'll monitor you throughout the day, and uh, and you just tell me if there's anything out of the ordinary that you're feeling, ok?"

"Ok, that sounds good!" said Brooke, blinking as she tilted her head slightly at him and smiled. Lucas smiled back, for the first time actually giving her something that amounted to a genuine expression of pleasure, much in the same way that he would smile at a young, post-college-aged girl who wasn't too bad looking and who had smiled at him as she passed by on the sidewalk.

The rest of the day proceeded along, more or less normal on the outside. Lucas had informed Trent that he would be training Brooke in basic knowledge transfer for the day. Lucas had put this plan in motion before the unexpected results of the experiment that morning — Trent was a fantastic employee, so much so that Lucas had begun to see him as a potential competitor in the general office power dynamics. By dumping Brooke off on Trent, Lucas could, in a sense, kill two birds with one stone: he wouldn't have to deal with her, and Trent would inevitably fall behind in his work due to Brooke's encumbrance.

But that was all before the events of this morning, and Lucas found, as he handed Brooke off to Trent, that he couldn't keep his mind off her as the day went by. He kept thinking back to the moment where he realized that Brooke was actually growing in the glass cylinder...she had been getting taller, fleshier, curvier, and her boobs had visibly ballooned along with everything else. He had watched her...become more...and it wasn't lost on him that, in speaking with her after, she hadn't been stuttering nearly as much. Sure, she was still awkward and didn't have any confidence, but...well, there was definitely some sort of change that had happened internally. And her face too! She was now probably a 5, or even a 6.

He still had the remote. The windows of his corner office had a view of Trent's office, and Lucas realized, around the late afternoon, that he had been fingering the remote fitfully in his pocket as he watched Trent work with Brooke. Lucas inhaled through his nose as he took his hand out of his pocket; he realized that his palms were sweating. He looked back into Trent's office. Trent was leaning over Brooke's shoulder, looking forward into her computer screen in her side cubicle. Clearly, she was having difficulty understanding the software language that Trent was trying to teach her.

Lucas reached back into his pocket again, once again fingering the remote.

'Why not?' asked a voice inside his head. 'There's no reason not to. Go ahead...do it!'

Lucas pressed the button, holding it down as he stared into Trent's office like a hawk. Both Brooke and Trent were too focused on her screen to notice what was happening, but Lucas saw it all in real-time. Brooke began to grow. Lucas saw her shoulder rising, very subtly, bit by bit, near Trent's forward position as he leaned on her desk with his hands. Lucas started breathing hard again, just like he had been that morning when Brooke had started to grow. The difference was that now, Lucas was expecting the changes...and he was alone, in the privacy of his own office. Scolding himself for not thinking of it sooner, he was able to tear his eyes away from Brooke long enough to hop up and close his office door, returning quickly to his chair immediately afterward. His cock was now definitely bulging up through his pants. Brooke turned to the side, seemingly about to ask Trent a question, and Lucas gasped out loud...her breasts were visibly expanding even more than they had been before. Her already-tight blouse grew tighter still as her breasts expanded and squished together even more, so much so that Lucas actually saw the fabric on the back of her blouse tighten as a result of the blooming twin mounds of swelling flesh on her chest.

Lucas's breath started to come forth in faster, shallower gaps as his chest rose and fell rapidly. The heat was building up in his face, and his teeth became clenched, his jaw locking his whole face hard into gear, in preparation...but for what? Lucas wasn't really thinking straight; his thumb was whitening as he continued to press it hard down into the remote button. She was growing, swelling...getting bigger...getting more...all because he was pressing the button. It was HIM...HE was the one who was making it all happen. Lucas kept breathing and panting...harder and harder, with the heat rising to a fever pitch in his face and in his loins, until he finally came, hard, in his pants. He gasped out, strangely not even having expected this end result. He was just too focused on watching Brooke grow...on growing her himself.

He saw Brooke nod her head up at Trent, as she pointed to the screen. Trent's head turned slightly sideways, peering at the screen. Brooke nodded again, once more pointing. Now Trent was nodding...and he straightened up and walked away, back to his own desk.

'Huh...guess she finally figured it out,' thought Lucas to himself, feeling almost giddy in his post-orgasm heatwave. 'Trent's a good instructor...hope that lasts, haha.' He felt like he had just gotten away with something...something slightly dirty, and the fact that no one had noticed only made him more excited.

A little while later, after Lucas had cleaned himself up, Brooke walked into his office, straight up to his desk. Lucas had been reading an email, but he had known it was Brooke walking in as soon as he saw her figure out of the corner of his eye. He had made it a point to look at her as casually as he could, but when he actually looked up at her, he couldn't help but notice that her blouse, her dress, her tights...everything...was tighter. Her face looked perhaps even better, although he couldn't be sure. The main thing he noticed was that her breasts were undoubtedly C-cups now.

'The same size as Sophia, geez,' he thought to himself. She seemed to have gained another inch in height as well — making her 5'8.

“Had a good day?” Lucas asked nonchalantly, turning his eyes back to his email, without actually looking at anything.

“Yes,” said Brooke, sounding a bit eager, “I completed all the tasks Trent asked me to do.”

“Gooood!” Lucas wished he could have made his voice sound more normal.

“But, you know,” Brooke added, “You told me that I should tell you if I felt anything unusual today?”

Lucas looked up at her slowly.

“Yes?”

“Well...I think I had a growth spurt.”

Lucas blinked, willing himself to act normally. “A...growth spurt? Hmm, well that’s certainly possible.”

Brooke tugged on her blouse a little, showing its tautness. “My clothes are tighter all over. I can feel it.”

“Hmmm, well, maybe we’ll need to get you some new clothes,” said Lucas, suddenly getting an idea. He reached into his wallet, pulled out \$120, and folded it up neatly, handing it out to her.

“Here, take this,” he said, smiling up at her. “A little something to buy a new wardrobe with, huh? Maybe even ask Sophia to take you shopping? It’ll be fun! And...I don’t mean to sound rude, Brooke, but...maybe getting a new wardrobe wouldn’t be such a bad change for you, hmm?”

“I...well, no, I could definitely use some new clothes,” she replied, chuckling amiably as her big eyes regarded him. “Thanks, Mr. Mineur! That’s so generous of you!”

“Well, haha...spend it wisely, ok?” he asked, sending her away with a paternalistic wave of his hand. As he watched her go, he turned his head sideways, watching her enlarged butt cheeks actually bouncing a bit up and down as she walked. Sophia strode out of her office a moment later, causing Lucas to quickly turn his attention back to his computer screen. He hoped she hadn’t seen him staring after Brooke...he heard the two women acknowledge each other. Sophia was starting up a friendly conversation. Lucas would have spent more energy eavesdropping, but a ping on his email caught his attention. It was from Rick — he had the final results from the morning test. True to his nearly-hysterical reaction from that morning Rick had titled the email: “GAME CHANGER.”

Chapter 6

A few hours later, as he left his office for the weekend, Lucas's head was buzzing with so much activity and energy that he had to steady himself a little as he turned to lock his door. So much was tumbling over itself in his brain: Rick's wide eyes as he spoke excitedly a mile a minute about all the incredible new data that had come through about the nanobots, and the future promise of making even more efficient replacement bots that wouldn't die out as quickly... Lucas's own visions of fame and fortune, far surpassing what he had dared to hope for before... a shiny new car that he could buy with the financial proceeds of this staggering new invention that would be sure to come through soon...the adoring eyes of Olivia as he strutted through the halls, his brilliance now firmly established...

All of this flashed through Lucas's mind like lightning, but none of it remained in place for too long in his thoughts. This was because, overwhelmingly, he was thinking back to those first moments of actually seeing Brooke grow in the glass cylinder, and later in Trent's office...as he pressed down on the remote button...the remote that he, and only he, had access to. He couldn't get her expanding breasts out of his head — she had been almost completely flat-chested when she had come in that morning, and now she had C-cups...and respectable C-cups at that. Her breasts had gotten so big that Lucas had actually noticed them gently bouncing behind her white blouse as she came into his office to report her progress under Trent's direction.

Her progress! That's right! She had actually completed her assigned tasks for the day! Lucas didn't spend too much time thinking about this specific fact, but it had subconsciously occurred to him that her success had been...well, a bit out of character for her. He hadn't expected her to complete any number of tasks with Trent, but she had gotten through them all!

'Maybe Trent's just a better instructor than me,' Lucas chuckled to himself as he turned around, briefcase in hand, and walked down the hall towards the elevators. 'Some people are just naturally...better educators. Executives like me don't really have time to stoop to that level — it throws us off our game. But I'm glad I have someone like Trent who can usher our newbies along.'

Lucas fingered the remote in his pocket as he walked, his mind absently wandering back to Brooke's gently bouncing breasts, her gently undulating butt cheeks as she had walked away... her arms and legs, and how much more substantial and well-formed they looked. And her face! That was maybe the most dramatic thing of all — Lucas still hadn't managed to wrap his head around how...normal Brooke looked now. And maybe even a little above normal, if he was being honest. Her blemished face had cleared up; her skin had definitely looked more elastic and smooth. That conspicuous overbite she had before...well, that was gone. He remembered, as the memories piled up eagerly in his brain, that she hadn't even come to work with her glasses on. And those big, dark eyes that looked down at him as he sat at his desk...so innocent, so eager to please, so soft...

'A solid 6 out of 10, no question about it,' Lucas thought to himself, almost a little smugly, as he continued to turn the remote over and over in his pocket. Thus far, he had refrained from using it again, for the simple reason that Brooke had gone home, and that he wouldn't be able to see her growth in real-time. But as more time passed, the temptation was still growing for him to use it again, even though he couldn't see her.

Trent suddenly popped out of his office as Lucas passed by, startling Lucas out of his fantasy reverie.

“Oh!” exclaimed Lucas in surprise.

“Oh! Haha, sorry!” returned Trent, backing up a little.

“Hehe, uh...n-no, no problem,” chuckled Lucas, feeling more awkward around Trent than he liked. Trent had caught him off-guard in a private moment, and Lucas did not enjoy the guilty feeling that was fast replacing his fantasies of Brooke’s breasts growing bigger. Why was he feeling guilty like this!?

“So yeah, the new girl, Brooke,” said Trent, leaning back against the wall.

“Yes?” asked Lucas, collecting himself and peering forward eagerly. He had not intended to come off as eager as did.

“Well, I wasn’t expecting much from her, to be honest,” said Trent, laughing a little ruefully. “Started her off with some pretty simple coding stuff...you know, like...I’m talking basics.”

“And?” Lucas felt like he had done a lot better with this one-word question, as he feigned a casual tone and even looked at his fingernails with evident disinterest.

“She struggled through it at first...didn’t make any headway at all,” responded Trent. “I was actually getting close to asking you to take her off my hands, haha, because, you know...i couldn’t get anything done with her in there, just floundering. But...”

“But?” repeated Lucas, tilting his head as he blinked in what he thought was a cool, unaffected way.

“There was a moment where it just...well, it all seemed to just click with her,” said Trent. “Everything just fell into place, and I didn’t even really need to help her after that. Just breezed right through it.”

“Well, isn’t that something?” replied Lucas, turning the remote over in his pocket as he thought about Brooke’s ass bouncing up and down in her wake.

“I don’t know what happened,” said Trent, shaking his head, “But this Brooke girl...haha, yeah, I gotta say, I hadn’t noticed her” — and here, Trent mimed cupping breasts on his chest — “before, you know? Girl’s got an ass too, haha! And, I gotta say...It was a pretty good choice for her to wear contacts too, instead of those ugly-ass glasses.”

“Heh! Uh...right,” said Lucas, feeling strangely violated by Trent’s words.

“Yep, I think you need to start assigning her to me a lot more often!” laughed Trent, slapping Lucas on the shoulder. “I wouldn’t mind — just...throwing that out there, haha!”

Lucas watched Trent laughing as he turned and left, and he felt something aggressive boil up in him. He wasn't growing and accentuating Brooke so Trent could enjoy her! Right then and there, Lucas resolved not to give his young, upstart rival employee so much as a sniff more of Brooke.

"So, Mr. Chief Executive Manager of the 42nd Floor," came Sophia's voice behind him, "I had a nice little chat with your new employee today."

Lucas closed his eyes and turned around. He was not going to give her more ammunition to use to shred him. And besides, he had to remember: HE was the one who had the power in all of this. Not Sophia.

"Oh yeah?" he replied quizzically. "And how did that go? D'ja give her the down-low about how to fast-track file sexual harassment complaints to HR?"

"Actually," said Sophia, shifting her weight to one leg as she crossed her arms under her C-cups, "We arranged to have a nice little shopping trip this Sunday."

"Oh really?" asked Lucas with high-pitched mock interest, as he turned towards the elevators, Sophia following.

'Good,' he thought to himself, 'She's following me...I'm the one leading the exchange here. She won't suspect anything unusual...I'm acting totally causal.'

"Yeah, she said that you gave her some cash for new clothes," said Sophia, with a curious tilt to her tone. "That was...very nice of you."

They had reached the elevators, and Lucas had pressed the "down" button.

"Yeah, well, you know," he said flippantly, "She's a new employee and everything...gotta welcome her to the team and all, right? Make her feel welcome?"

"Mhm," nodded Sophia, her eyes fixed squarely on Lucas. Who was he kidding? She knew. But was she going to mention anything about it, or just let it slide? A few seconds of silence passed.

"Brooke's taller," remarked Sophia, her eyes unwavering. Lucas turned to her and smiled slightly.

"And curvier," continued Sophia. "Girl's got an ass now...and tits too. You notice that?"

"I...did notice," replied Lucas, smiling fully now. He felt like chuckling, but held it in.

"Lucky girl," said Sophia as they stepped into the elevator. "Lucky...girl."

The doors closed, and Lucas suddenly decided to just come clean to her — he wasn't going to keep playing her game and dancing around the subject. If she was going to come at him from some angle, he would be ready.

“Look, Brooke accidentally drank a sample of nanobots the other day,” he said, trying to make sure that he wasn’t sounding like he was making excuses. “And I didn’t realize it until this morning — I got really worried, of course, but she showed up to work feeling fine, with no signs of anything gone wrong, and...well, come on Sophia, this is such a huge opportunity for...for all of us, you know? Brooke included! Rick and I gave her another dose this morning, and...haha, well, the results have spoken for themselves so far, haven’t they?”

As he spoke, he felt himself figuratively rise up more and more above Sophia — this was the big break he had been looking for, and now that it was finally here, of course she was going to try and guilt him out of it.

“And...and,” he kept on, as Sophia was opening her mouth to speak, “She signed a consent form.”

Sophia’s mouth shut, but opened quickly again. “And you told her the risks?”

“Well, it was all in the form,” said Lucas, gesturing impatiently. “If she didn’t read it, then that’s not really my problem, is it?”

Sophia shook her head as she adjusted her jaw. Now it was her turn to smile ruefully.

“Even for you...this is a new low,” she chuckled, almost to herself.

“Oh my god, here we fucking go!” exclaimed Lucas, actually feeling quite angry now at Sophia’s expected reaction. He ushered both hands in the universal “come-on” gesture. “Well go on, Sophia, let me have it — tell me what a bastard I am for daring to take some risks for the sake of our development. Are you seriously focusing on this shit when...when we’ve made...the kind of...of progress that we made today!? Don’t you realize that we’re on the CUSP of developing a world-changing technology that’s gonna make us all millionaires!? But don’t worry, I understand, if you’d rather not participate, then don’t worry, Sophia, you can opt out of the profits right now, if you’d like.”

“Jesus, I got you all worked up, didn’t I?” chuckled Sophia as the elevator doors opened. “Chill out, Lucas. In any case, I’m taking the girl shopping on Sunday.”

“Well...have fun,” huffed Lucas, irritated that he had let Sophia get under his skin. He had let her trick him into thinking that she cared more about Brooke than she actually did...that was just...classic her.

“Oh we’ll have fun alright!” laughed Sophia, waving goodbye. “Let’s see if you and the rest of the boys can keep it in your pants when you see her on Monday.”

“I’m on the edge of my seat,” returned Lucas dryly, not returning her wave as he stumped over to his car. The thing was, though...he was on the edge of his seat. But not for the reason that Sophia thought. He took out the remote again after he had closed his car door. He studied it... what did it matter that he wouldn’t be able to see her become...more...when he pressed it? It was the thrill of control, of knowing that her body would respond to the pressure of his thumb on the remote, that was so overwhelmingly enticing to him.

'And I invented the nanobots...the things that are making it all happen,' he reminded himself, conveniently skimming over the fact that the development of the nanobots had very much been a team effort at Braden. Yes, he had presided over the effort, at least in his branch, but he still knew, in the back of his mind, that Dave and Bill had been the ones to kickstart the whole campaign. But they were the overseers, who didn't have the same intimate knowledge that he did...HE was the one doing all the real work, laboring away in the metaphorical trenches of the 42nd floor, trailblazing a revolutionary technology.

He put the remote back in his pocket as he continued to vaingloriously daydream. He still had some amount of self-control that he could expend against using the remote again so soon. But he knew, not too deep down, that it was only a matter of time before he pressed it again.

Lucas managed to hold out until Sunday. By this time, he had almost forgotten that Sophia was taking Brooke out shopping — he had been so wrapped up in his own kinetic brooding that the outside world had largely ceased to exist beyond his own brain, his memories of Brooke's expanding body, and the reality of the remote on his coffee table, where he had carefully deposited it Friday night when he got home. All weekend, Lucas went about his business, floating from page to page on the internet as he remained suspended in a kind of expectant ether, all the while stealing glances at the remote, looking at it out of the corner of his eye like he was sneaking a look at Valerie's double D's. Olivia...he wondered how she would react to Brooke...ooooohhh this was gonna be rich...maybe this would work out perfectly for Lucas, such that Olivia might actually be forced to "up her game" if she started to feel like her position as the sexy office chick was in jeopardy. Maybe she'd start dressing in even tighter clothes, just to hit home that she was still the "hot one."

'Haha, poor Brooke,' thought Lucas, picking up the remote on Sunday, studying it again as he turned it over and over in the early-afternoon sunlight. 'Doesn't really have a chance against Olivia...but still...why not help her out a bit?' Without thinking any more about it, he suddenly pressed down on the remote button, holding it down for five seconds, before releasing it again. His heart quickened in his chest, and his breathing began coming in aroused bursts. He had been brooding for so long that it felt like a sudden and rash decision to press the button, but once he had done it, it was easier, a couple hours later, to do it again, this time holding it down for longer. He realized that his cock was pressing painfully into his jeans.

'Fuck it, what am I doing?' he asked himself, hurriedly yanking his pants off as he laid back in his bed. With one hand, he pressed the remote again, and with the other, he started jerking himself off.

At the same time, Brooke and Sophia were a few miles away, browsing their way through a Nordstrom women's section.

"I'm not sure that I need...new underwear," giggled Brooke, laughing a little at her own awkwardness.

"Oh nonsense!" replied Sophia immediately. "We're getting you a whole new wardrobe! And any wardrobe starts with the lingerie. What kind you got on now?"

"Um...these?" said Brooke, pulling down her skinny jeans a bit so that Sophia could see her white panties.

“Hmmm, yeah, those don’t even match your bra,” said Sophia, shaking her head kindly. “We gotta get you some sets that match, ok?”

“Ok,” said Brooke, nodding as she snapped her jeans back into place, wincing slightly. “Let’s... yeah, let’s do the lingerie and pants first. These jeans are, like, way too tight for me now.”

“Well that’s because you’ve done a bit of growing these past couple days!” laughed Sophia.

“Well, Friday, anyway,” said Brooke. “I don’t think I grew any yesterday. But today...haha, well, I already told you about that little spurt I felt when we were having lunch. You sure you didn’t notice it?”

“Yeah, I didn’t see anything,” said Sophia gently. “But that doesn’t mean it didn’t happen. I trust what you say about your own body, Brooke.”

“Thanks Sophia,” Brooke said bashfully.

Sophia looked at the young girl and gave her a genuine smile that had some pity behind it. Brooke was clearly less awkward and nervous than she had been previously, but she still hadn’t quite put it together that her growth spurts were the direct result of Lucas pressing a remote. Sophia hadn’t seen any remote on Friday, but she strongly suspected that Lucas still had in his possession some kind of mechanism that activated the nanobots. She was intimately familiar with the research Braden had been doing, and she knew how the bots were activated in all the experiments. She also knew Lucas well enough to ascertain that he was likely getting off on the power of augmenting his “test subject.” It all made Sophia angry, and a little sick, but she knew what she was doing. She thought weeks and months, not days, into the future.

“Do I look ok in this?” asked Brooke eagerly a few minutes later, after shyly emerging from one of the changing-room stalls wearing a dashing, summery red dress that fit her body tightly, showing off her newly-enlarged hips and C-cups.

“Oooohh, I love it, Brooke!” cried Sophia honestly, a bit taken aback by just how good Brooke looked in her new getup. Turn around for me...let me see your butt...oh wow! Yeah...yes! Brooke, you look great in this!”

“Really?” Brooke asked innocently, blinking her big, dark eyes ecstatically down at Sophia.

“Really!” responded Sophia, actually recognizing, for the first time, that Brooke might have the potential to be a bit imposing. The 5’6 Sophia was wearing her casual 2-inch pumps that she often wore outside of work, which made her exactly Brooke’s current height. But as she watched Brooke spin around and around in this red dress, in her bare feet, Sophia could anticipate how different Brooke’s stature might appear when she stepped into some heels.

“How about that bra?” asked Sophia, stepping in closer to look. “Does it feel comfortable under there?”

“Yeah it does!” replied Brooke brightly, glancing down as Sophia peered in.

Five miles away, Lucas had just started pressing the remote again, for a second, longer amount of time. And right there, in plain view of both Brooke and Sophia, Brooke's breasts began to visibly grow. For a second, Brooke didn't quite know what was happening, but when she noticed that her breasts were expanding, she gave a sharp intake of breath from the sheer surprise of seeing herself grow like this in real time. Sophia watched on, her eyes getting wider and wider as she saw Brooke's C-cups widen and stretch at the fabric of her bra, and the tight red dress on top of it. The sound of stretching fabric peppered the air. Sophia's mouth dropped open as her eyes locked onto the burgeoning breast flesh that seemed to build up and swell from some unseen source; they appeared to be expanding and blowing up like balloons. Sophia watched in stunned silence as Brooke's C-cups developed and inflated into D-cups, all in a matter of a few seconds. It was all over as abruptly as it had begun. Brooke winced slightly, pulling Sophia's attention back.

"Oh! Brooke! Are you...are you ok?" she asked, her voice filled with genuine concern.

"I'm fine...I just...ugh, everything feels so squished all of a sudden," said Brooke, her face again wincing in slight discomfort. "The bra especially...geez...it's super tight now."

"Well, that's just because...uh...yeah," said Sophia, reminding herself that she owed it to Brooke to appear calm and collected. She could feel her anger at Lucas beginning to simmer.

"Because I just had another spurt, yeah, I know!" exclaimed Brooke, cupping her big breasts and giving them a disbelieving shake. "Gosh, I like...totally saw it that time! Did you see it, Sophia!? Did you see me grow just now??"

"I saw it, yes," breathed Sophia, taking a deep breath immediately after she spoke to compose herself. "But you feel ok? You aren't in any pain?"

"Not really, no," said Brooke, digging her fingers down into her bra and fitfully stretching and prying it off her breasts in search of relief. "But, I mean...this dress...this bra...everything I'm wearing is too tight now. Like, I wanna take it all off now. That must have been a big spurt, because everything fit so perfectly before!"

"Yeah, let's get you out of these clothes," said Sophia, trying to sound normal. "And don't worry — we can just get that dress in a bigger size. I think it really fits your style!"

"Why is all this happening?" asked Brooke, her voice suddenly taking on a tone of slight desperation and anxiety as she looked with concern into Sophia's eyes. Sophia noticed, as she met her stare, that Brooke was now a little taller than she was...even though Brooke was still in her bare feet.

"Is this all ok? It doesn't seem ok," Brooke continued, her newly-enlarged chest beginning to rise and fall at a quicker frequency as she started getting herself worked-up.

"Shh, shh, it's fine, it's all totally fine," reassured Sophia in a soothing voice, petting Brooke consolingly on her back. "The nanobots are just doing their work, but it doesn't happen at a constant rate, you understand? The bots work in fits and bursts of activity — that explains why you have sudden spurts like you do. But as long as they're not painful, there's nothing to worry about! Haha, and I mean, just look at you! You're taller than me now, and I'm wearing these

heels! And ohhhh damn! Look at your hips, girl! Turn around and lemme see that butt again... yep! Definitely bigger! Hehe Brooke, do you know what so many girls would do, just to be able to get bigger boobs, or a bigger ass!? And it's already noticeable with you! Geez, and this is just the start"

"Just...the start?" asked Brooke, blushing at Sophia's compliments as she smiled sheepishly.

"Well yeah! It's only been a couple days with the bots inside you," replied Sophia, thinking that now was probably the time to switch the subject. She didn't want to freak the girl out too much. "But anyway, the whole point is, you're looking excellent, Brooke. But all the tight clothes aside, you're feeling good?"

"Yeah!" said Brooke, reaching her arms up high as her curvy body quivered and strained in the pleasant stretch. "I...actually feel pretty great, if I can just remind myself what you said, about not having to worry about...about the bots inside me."

This was the first time that Sophia had heard Brooke verbally acknowledge presence of the nanobots inside her organism, and it filled Sophia with a combination of tender pity towards Brooke and hostile anger toward Lucas. But she swallowed it all down, determined to focus on helping the girl navigate what was happening to her. At this point, Sophia had surmised that the bots had improved Brooke's confidence as well as her appearance, but she was as-yet ignorant of the cognitive augmentation that was developing unseen in Brooke's mind. Brooke felt it — things were becoming clearer now. She felt like she was in the process of walking out of a thick fog, or waking from a deep sleep.

"Ok, let's get you a bigger dress, bigger bra, bigger everything," laughed Sophia. "And then, let's have you try on some heels, huh?"

"Oooh yes!" cried Brooke excitedly, clasping her hands together.

Hours later, after the night had nearly deepened into midnight, Lucas finally went to bed, having firmly reassured himself that he would not press the remote any more. Since Brooke's growth spurt at Nordstrom's, in front of Sophia, Lucas had pressed the remote three more times, holding it down for five seconds, then two, and then only one, right before he went to bed. He hadn't been able to help himself. He had become almost helpless at the feet of his own arousal — the control he had over Brooke's body, and the growth of her body, had proven an indulgence he could not resist.

As he attempted, with difficulty, to sleep, he looked forward to the next day, Monday, when he would see what Brooke looked like...his little project. Maybe her boobs...and curves...would even be close to Valerie's! He couldn't help but smile to himself as he thought about all the fun and sexy office drama that could come out of all this. Brooke versus Olivia...Olivia versus Sophia...maybe even Brooke versus Sophia...hehe, and the look on Trent's face when Lucas would take Brooke as his own personal assistant. What did it matter if she couldn't code to save her life? He could just look at her...and if she wasn't what he wanted, he could just press the remote again.

He finally fell asleep, with images of breasts bouncing through his head.

Chapter 7

Lucas arrived at his office early Monday morning, much earlier than he was accustomed to coming in. After he had finally managed to fall asleep the previous night, it seemed to Lucas that he woke up in the process of stepping out of his bed. Generally, upon waking, he laid in bed for a few minutes, dozing as he thought about the day's busy itinerary. But not this morning. This morning, he felt wide awake before he even stepped into the shower. He performed his whole morning routine in record speed, and within half an hour was in the drive-thru line at the coffee shop. Lucas didn't quite know why he was in such a state of frenzy. He understood his excitement well enough...he was looking forward to seeing what Brooke looked like after all that remote-pressing he had done over the weekend. But why he was rushing to get to the office...well, Lucas wasn't sure.

It was 7:30, so Lucas got himself situated and started reading and answering emails, trying as hard as he could to go about his business as he normally would. An intense liquid thrill, the kind that furtively permeates the interior of someone hiding in plain sight, began slowly creeping over him, however, the more the minutes ticked off the clock. A few times, he couldn't help but feel for the remote in his pocket with his fingers, rubbing it slowly, almost caressing it, in preparation for seeing what he had made over the weekend.

He kept his office door slightly ajar, after having decided that leaving it open might give himself away to Sophia. He didn't want to be making it too obvious to her that he was eager to see what Brooke looked like. Correctly, Lucas suspected that Sophia had actually seen Brooke have a growth spurt, and...well, from their parting conversation Friday, she knew full well what was going on. Right then, as he mused about the situation, Lucas heard Sophia unlock her office and go inside. He sat there in his black leather chair, tensed up and hardly daring to breathe as his heart hammered away in his chest...he was irritated at himself for reacting this way, and wished he wasn't...but the tension died away moments later after he heard Sophia's office door close. He had been expecting her to barge into his office and start the interrogation, but that hadn't happened.

'Maybe she didn't actually see anything,' Lucas thought to himself. 'Maybe I just need to chill the fuck out and not let whatever Sophia thinks get me all tied up in knots.'

He glanced at the clock on his computer...it was 7:49. Brooke would undoubtedly be late again, but he knew that he needed to take the time to get into his work routine, in order that he seem as normal as possible when she did come in. He reckoned he had probably fifteen or twenty —

"Good morning, Mr. Mineur!"

Lucas's eyes snapped up from his screen, and his heart came to a stop. There, standing in the doorway, was a tall, elegantly-curved, and stylish young woman in a form-fitting red dress that went down to about her mid-thighs, showing off more than enough of her well-formed legs, and that barely seemed able to contain her prodigious bust, which hung prominently out from her chest in a stunning twin display of tight, heavy flesh. It didn't matter how much Lucas had prepared himself to act normally — it all went out the window now. His mouth dropped open halfway, and his eyes became wide and fixed upon the woman's impressive figure.

It was Brooke...there was no doubt about that. But Lucas had to take a few seconds to compose himself, and to convince himself in real-time that this woman WAS actually Brooke. There was a strange dichotomy going on in Lucas's mind, in which he simultaneously knew that it was Brooke as soon as he heard her voice, while also knowing that there was no way...just NO WAY...that someone as frumpy and unattractive as Brooke could have possibly undergone such a transformation over the course of a single weekend. Her hair looked full and brushed, cascading down her shoulders in luscious waves, and her skin looked totally cleared-up; her face looked even sleeker and sexier than it had before.

'Jesus, she's a 7 out of 10 now, easy,' Lucas thought to himself. 'Fuck, maybe even 7 and-a-half.'

And it wasn't just what she looked like — it was her whole attitude that had changed. She didn't look awkward anymore; she was looking slightly up at him, and she even had a cute, eager little smile on her face, like she was ready to get to work. But (and this really threw Lucas for a loop), at the same time, she had her right arm extended towards the door frame, and was actually leaning against it...casually. She wasn't quite posing. But she was showing a level of comfort and confidence in her own body, and with the physical office itself, that Lucas had not been prepared for.

"G-Good morning, Brooke!" he finally managed to say. "Had...had a good weekend?"

"Oh yes!" she answered cheerily, stepping into the office and putting her briefcase down by her chair.

'Had she always had a briefcase?' Lucas thought to himself.

"I went shopping with Sophia and she was soooo nice, and helped me pick some things out!" Brooke was clearly excited about her new outfit, and she even did a little twirl for Lucas. "You like it?"

"I...haha, wow!" he exclaimed, suddenly realizing that his cock had already been hard, and was getting harder. The bust area of her red dress was fastened up tightly with three buttons, which looked slightly strained as they struggled to contain the heavy weight of her large breasts. "Yeah, Brooke, I really do! I think it all looks wonderful!"

"Thanksss!" she replied, crossing her hands in front of her as she stood before his desk. "Well, anyway, I know I'm a little early, so I'm just gonna sit down over there for a couple minutes, before I'm "on the clock," you know? Haha!"

"Haha, ok!" laughed Lucas, finding it very hard to maintain his air of authority. "You...you do that, Brooke." He had to do better than that...

"I'm just gonna finish answering all these emails first...and there's a bunch of them, haha, you know, since it's Monday...so yeah. You just sit tight, and I'll let you know when we can get started with your tasks for the day."

"Ok, great!" she chirped, and promptly collapsed into the chair.

'Heh, that was a little clumsy just then,' Lucas thought to himself, smiling. 'Guess she's not totally a finished product yet.' But as he looked at Brooke's bare, fleshy, luscious legs cross and uncross themselves under her chair, he quickly realized that her movements hadn't been clumsy — they had just been nonchalant and...relaxed. What a strange thing it was, to think of this girl being relaxed...in his office.

Lucas nearly forgot that he was supposed to be pretending to answer his emails, and so he turned back to his screen, starting a new email to no one in particular and typing gibberish into it, occasionally stealing glances at what Brooke was doing. God she was curvy now...her thick hips and large butt pretty much filled the seat she was sitting in now. Before, Lucas had been able to see the actual fabric of the chair beside her nonexistent hips, but now...he couldn't see any fabric...at all. She had taken out her laptop, and was now busy typing away at something.

Brooke glanced up, sensing that Lucas was watching her — she caught his eye. He felt ice in his chest — he had to think of something to excuse himself. He smiled pleasantly, blinking his eyes as he verbalized the first thing that popped into his mind.

"Writing in your diary, hehe?"

"Actually, yes," Brooke responded, her eyebrows going up in mild surprise as she returned his smile. "How'd you know?"

"I...oh...well, you know," struggled Lucas, not prepared for her answer, "Just...just a hunch, you know? Haha, you seem like the diary-keeping type, you know?"

"I do?" asked Brooke, tilting her head slightly in interest. "That's interesting! What do you mean by that?"

"Haha, well...well you know, uh...hehe, you definitely seem maybe, uhh...like the insular type, you know? Maybe even the cerebral type, deep down, you know? Cerebral...it means, like — "

"Oh I know what it means," cut in Brooke amiably, rescuing Lucas from his floundering. "And I would never have used that word to describe myself before, but...but — "

"But what?" asked Lucas, with a little too much interest and energy, as he just realized once the words had escaped his mouth.

"But, well...I don't know," said Brooke thoughtfully. "I mean...I know that I grew bigger over the weekend — "

"Oh yeah?" asked Lucas, trying to sound as offhand as he could. Brooke turned to look at him squarely in the face.

"I mean...isn't it obvious to you?" she asked, sounding almost concerned that he hadn't appeared to notice. With her laptop resting squarely on her thighs, she squeezed her upper arms in toward her D-cup breasts, pressing the two big, fleshy mounds together and making them seem so much bigger.

"I...y-yes...yes, yes," said Lucas, having to swallow a couple times to mitigate his dry mouth.

“Bigger?” offered Brooke. “Taller?”

“Oh well, yes, of course...yes, I did notice,” said Lucas, now feeling slightly stupid. Once again, he found himself searching with more than slight desperation to reassert his authority.

“But, you know, with those impressive new heels you’re wearing, it was hard to get a good read,” he added, feeling quite satisfied with himself as he saw Brooke smile.

“Oh yeah...haha, I’m still getting used to them too,” she chuckled. “They’re 3 inches, so according to Sophia, I’m exactly 6 feet tall when I’m wearing them! Haha, you know, it’s funny, everything up high seems so much closer to me now, and everything down lower seems so...far away. Guess I just have to get used to it, haha.”

“Haha, uhh, yes...yes, definitely,” enjoined Lucas, feeling his heart start to kick off again. Brooke was six feet tall in her heels!?

‘Four inches,’ he reminded himself, as his hand drifted down into his pocket, turning the remote over and over in secret. ‘She’s still four inches shorter than you...that’s...an entire third of a foot...she’s tall for a girl now.’

“But yeah, anyway, like I was saying,” Brooke continued, her eyes going back up to the ceiling in thought, “I know I’ve changed physically, but...like, my thoughts...the things I’m thinking about now...they’re just...I don’t know...”

“Yes?” asked Lucas, still turning the remote over and over in his pocket. He was still paying attention to what Brooke was saying, but he could already feel his mind slipping into a leering, lustful fixation on her heavy, weighty D-cups, the hard, defined impinges of her nipples against her dress, and the long, plunging line of her cleavage that extended down the middle of her expanded bust. Was her breasts already almost as big as Olivia’s!? A ravenous desire was beginning to brew in him to grow her again...and this time, to make sure the growth was happening in front of him.

“Clearer, maybe?” Brooke was saying. “Quicker? I’m not really sure. It all seems to be happening so quickly that it’s hard to make sense of everything. That’s why I’m so glad I have this diary, you know? It helps me organize my thoughts.”

“Ah...yes, well...that’s just excellent,” said Lucas indistinctly, feeling the intensity of his erection starting to press into his pants. He had to grow her again. He couldn’t wait...but he had to ease himself into it. And above all, he must not let Brooke find out that he had the key to her growth...in his pocket.

“Ok, you just keep on doing that,” grunted Lucas, standing up, feeling like he had done a prime job making his grunting sigh sound natural, authoritative, and male...the slow sigh of the office manager. “I’m just gonna pop down the hall real quick...need to take care of something. I’ll be right back.”

“Alright.” Brooke was already buried in her typing, and didn’t even look up from her screen.

Lucas left his office in a hurry, with his right hand in his pocket, grasping the remote. At the same time, his pocketed hand was also holding his cock at bay — he didn't have an overly-large member, by any means, but he also wasn't small enough to go unnoticed if sporting an erection as big as he was currently. The last thing he wanted was for Brooke, or anyone else in the office, for that matter, to see him like this. His plan was to press the button a few times down the hall, and quickly return to his office to see the results; he badly wanted to watch Brooke grow in real-time, but he didn't think he had the confidence yet to hold himself together.

He had been counting on not seeing anyone, but as he rounded a corner, he saw Olivia striding up in his direction.

"Hey Lucas!" she chirped.

"Hey...Olivia," he answered, trying not to look too disappointed. He quickly remembered to compare Brooke's tits with Olivia's, and used this opportunity to steal a healthy glance down at her breasts.

'Nope, Olivia's definitely still bigger,' he thought to himself, blinking and feeling a strange sense of relief. But the relief was almost immediately followed up by a renewed sense of lust. Brooke's tits were still smaller...but they wouldn't be for long.

"Had a nice weekend?" asked Lucas airily, his eyes doing a circle around and up to the ceiling before settling back on Olivia's face. She always looked so sexy...and while Brooke sure looked good now (especially compared to what she had been before), there was still no question that Olivia was the office beauty.

"Yeah, it was ok," she said flippantly. "Chase had a crossfit tournament, but I didn't go this time...so I was kinda home alone. Pretty boring."

"Oh...you didn't go?" asked Lucas, wondering why on earth he was making small talk with Olivia right now.

'It's to keep up the appearance of normalcy,' he reminded himself. 'Remember? Everything's normal...normal...normal...'

As he thought these words, he tapped the remote button in his pocket a couple times. It had just occurred to him how thrilling it would be if he grew Brooke while he stood there, chatting it up with Olivia, looking at her tits from time to time, and imagining Brooke's getting even bigger.

"No, I skipped this one," said Olivia, shaking her head slightly. "I mean, when I go, I GO, you know? I'm there, cheering on my man, yelling his name, making a whole big scene of it...I just didn't have the energy this weekend, though."

"Oh, well," said Lucas, tapping the button again as he stole another side glance at Olivia's ample breasts, "I'm sure Chase totally knocked it out of the park, anyway."

"Not this time, actually," answered Olivia immediately, as if she had been ready for those words. "He usually places in the top 3, but this weekend he got 8th. Poor guy, looked like a sad little puppy when he came home yesterday."

“8th, huh?” said Lucas absently. “Chase? Jesus, I’d hate to see the other 7 guys who were better.

“He needs me there,” Olivia declared, stretching herself up to her full height as she puffed out her chest. “He basically said as much. He’s not as strong without me there, yelling his name, haha.”

“Heh...well, interesting,” said Lucas, making an attempt to move away from the conversation.

“You ok, Lucas?” Olivia asked suddenly.

“Huh? Me? Yeah...yeah I’m totally fine. Why?” He hoped his tone had sounded blank enough.

“It’s just...you’re looking kinda flushed,” said Olivia. “You sure you aren’t getting sick or anything?”

“Uh, no, just...haha, just need to use the restroom is all,” he chuckled strangely.

“Ugh! God, ok, then don’t let me stop you, geez!” Olivia grinned a little as she backed away and went away toward her office. Lucas turned away and went around another corner. He heard more talking down the hall...he wasn’t going to engage in any more small talk out here. His loins were boiling at this point, and there wasn’t anything that was going to get in his way. Slowing down his walk, he pressed the button in his pocket, took his finger off after a couple seconds, pressed it again...took his finger off...and then pressed it again, this time only for a split second.

‘This is only the first bit,’ he reminded himself, breathing hard, as his brow began to sweat. ‘Later on today...I’m going to press it, when I’m in the same room with her.’

Lucas got back to his office a couple minutes later, after wiping off his face in the bathroom, splashing it with cold water, and wiping it off again. He looked normal, surely. Everything was normal. He had passed by Trent’s office on the way, and Trent had called out to him.

“Oh, Lucas!” he had said, arresting Lucas’s quick steps back toward his office.

“Yeah?” asked Lucas, peering his head in, taking pleasure in sounding slightly impatient this early on a Monday morning.

“I just wanted to let you know that I’m gonna be a little swamped the next couple days,” said Trent from behind his desk, sitting up straight, “So, um...yeah, I don’t think I’m gonna be able to, you know, have the time help that new girl out.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Lucas, almost laughing.

“Just...letting you know,” said Trent, perhaps a bit puzzled by Lucas’s reaction.

“Haha, uh, don’t worry, Trent,” chuckled Lucas. “I’m not gonna be needing you to work with Brooke much anymore. I’ve decided to take her on as my private secretary!”

“Uh...oh..Ok.” Trent was now thoroughly puzzled, both by the news and by Lucas’s oddly cheery tone.

“Yep...so...no worries!” said Lucas brightly, and swung out down the hall, towards his office.

He found Brooke still in the chair. She had definitely gotten bigger — there was no doubt that her hips and ass filled even more than before...Lucas even noticed that her ass cheeks had started hanging slightly off the chair, on both sides. Her legs looked sexier too. But what Lucas noticed, before anything else, were Brooke’s breasts. They were pushing even more insistently into her red dress, straining the three buttons even more than they had been before. The top button actually looked like it was about ready to bust off the dress entirely — her breasts had gotten so big that Lucas could now see their weight being held back by her bra and dress. If her dress was merely containing her tits before, now it was actively engaged in preventing them from exploding out.

Without saying anything, he quietly went back around to his desk and sat down. Brooke had put her laptop away and was engrossed in the same crossword puzzle that she had been struggling with a few days before. Now, though, Lucas could see that a number of the blocks had been filled in. Was Brooke already that much faster and smarter than she had been before? Were the bots really accomplishing all that too!?

“So!” announced Lucas, breaking the silence. He was slightly disconcerted to see Brooke gently and smoothly look up from her crossword; he had been trying to startle her a little bit. She was looking at him expectantly, so he had to continue.

“So...Brooke, I’ve been thinking,” he began, “I’ve been needing a personal secretary for some time, you know. Someone to help me with all the various tasks my job entails...it’s all very busy, very complicated. You wouldn’t believe how many different people and departments I have to manage.”

“Mhm,” nodded Brooke.

“So I’ve been looking for someone who can take on some of my responsibilities,” continued Lucas, reminding himself that he actually needed to sell this to Brooke, since she was apparently a little more cognizant of things in general now. “And...well, since you did so well with Trent last Friday, it recently occurred to me: why not you?”

“Oh...wow, ok,” said Brooke, clearly interested. “So I’d help you around the office here, organize things, keep everything aligned, answer phone calls, that kind of stuff?”

“Exactly,” said Lucas, fingering the remote again as he looked at her hungrily. He knew he wasn’t going to be able to wait until later in the day. He HAD to see her grow again...with his own eyes, in real-time. And he wouldn’t be spying on it through a window like he had done last Friday — it would be happening IN FRONT of him now.

“Would the pay be the same?” asked Brooke.

“Excuse me?” Lucas blinked, his train of thought momentarily derailed.

“The pay,” said Brooke. “Would I still be making 20 dollars an hour?”

“I...oh! Oh, yeah...yeah!” answered Lucas, arriving at laughter towards the end. His thumb hovered over the button. “As my secretary? Haha, you’ll be making more than 20 bucks an hour! Let’s call it 25 for starters, and see where that takes us, huh?”

“Would 27 work?” Brooke responded immediately.

Lucas had not expected this response at all, but he was caught up in such lustful urgency that he didn’t even think of pushing back.

“All...right!” he said, twisting his head to the side a little as he let out an appreciative chuckle, trying to come off as paternalistically admiring her pluck. “Done!”

He pressed the button, holding it down for a couple seconds this time. Brooke’s face had brightened into a smile after she had secured her new pay so easily, but almost immediately, her elation became threaded through with a wince as her brow furrowed slightly. Lucas knew why she looked this way, but if he hadn’t, he would have thought that Brooke was experiencing some kind of mild, sudden, throbbing pain that felt almost sweet.

But he wasn’t focused on that — instead, he was looking straight at Brooke’s chest, which was clearly growing and expanding before his very eyes. With each passing second, the steady growth was causing her breasts to sink down further and further on her chest, as the points of her nipples widened and pressed even harder into her dress. The three buttons that held her breasts within her dress were tightening and straining even more than they had been before, with the top button especially looking like it was almost begging for release.

To see an already-attractive woman getting bigger breasts, and growing all over everywhere else, was almost more than Lucas could take. He knew he was flushed; he knew he was breathing hard, but he was totally transported now. The sound of Brooke’s stretching dress quietly cut the air, and her head twisted around a bit, as if she was trying to shake the feeling off. To Lucas, her motion came off as painfully sensual and erotic, and he very nearly came in his pants right then and there. A titanic effort, nothing less, enabled Lucas to take his thumb off the remote. He had pressed down for a millisecond too long, however, because right at the moment that he took his thumb off, the top button on Brooke’s dress could take no more, and popped off entirely, jumping several feet in the air before spinning down onto the carpeted floor below. As the button flew off, the prodigious mass of her breasts immediately filled in the space, almost like they were sighing in relief at being able to cram the territory that had been denied to them. Brooke’s surprised eyes went wide as they followed the trajectory of the button, crossing slightly as they honed in on the small object, and her mouth opened up in an “o” of amazement.

“I...oh! Sorry, I just felt a little wave of a spurt just then!” exclaimed Brooke, breathing hard as her newly-fledged bosom rose and fell in all its glory. Her cheeks reddened in embarrassment as she quickly bent down to retrieve the rogue button off the floor. Not knowing what to do with it, she started turning it over and over in her fingers, smiling sheepishly.

Lucas had barely managed to avoid cumming in his pants as he watched all of this happen. She was a full 8 out of 10 now.

“That’s...quite alright,” he managed to say. It wasn’t lost on him now that he was looking straight into Brooke’s eyes, without even having to look slightly down. In her heels, she was as tall as he was now.

“Haha, well anyway,” giggled Brooke, recovering much faster than Lucas was prepared for, “This all sounds lovely, Mr. Mineur!”

“Lucas,” came his immediate response. “You can call me Lucas.”

Chapter 8

“Ok...Lucas,” intoned Brooke as she smiled, with her eyes darting around the room a little. She clearly felt a bit strange at Lucas’s sudden insistence on familiarity. But it wasn’t really anything that was too big of a deal, and after all, she had basically just received a huge promotion...on her third day at work. As Lucas stood there staring at her, she took a deep breath to pass the time, and perhaps usher in a new aspect to the interaction. More than anything, she was indicating to him that he ought to go ahead and carry on with whatever the plan was.

As Brooke heaved her bright sigh, however, all Lucas could focus on were those twin freshly-grown breasts, which were now free to breathe a little easier now that they were held back not by three, but only two buttons. He could see even more of them now — the smooth, creamy terrain of her breast flesh, which jutted out farther from her chest and hung visibly lower than before, had been vastly increased, now that her dress was restraining less of her. And the more he stared, the more his desperation and fever increased to see her grow more in front of him. He knew he was staring awkwardly...inappropriately, at her; he knew that it was becoming more and more obvious every passing moment. A large part of him didn’t care, but he nonetheless managed to smile, nod at her, and go back around to his desk to sit down. Before he sank into his chair, however, a dirty idea suddenly popped into his head.

“I hope you understand, Brooke, that your new position isn’t just for my benefit,” he said distinctly, delighting himself with how contained his voice sounded as he drifted down into his chair.

“I’m...not sure if I follow, Mr. Mineur...Lucas, sorry,” said Brooke, shifting her weight to one leg as she put her hand on her hip. ‘Jesus Christ,’ thought Lucas, ‘She doesn’t even realize what she looks like.’

“So in addition to having you shoulder a certain amount of my responsibilities,” said Lucas, leaning back and putting his fingers together, “In this new position, you’ll be working...well, close to me. We can get you a little desk to go in here and everything.”

“I...ok...yes,” said Brooke, still obviously not quite understanding where Lucas was going with this. Chuckling genially, he continued on.

“You see, Brooke,” he said, leaning forward in his chair, “I want you to understand how important it is, being a willing participant in this groundbreaking new human trial, that you be closely monitored during this whole process. It’s key that we know exactly how the nanobots are behaving, the effects they’re having on you, and so on. And of course, it’s not just all about the nanobots — it’s about you too, Brooke. I want to be able to keep an eye on you, and make sure it’s all going...according to plan. Does that make sense?”

“Um, yes. Yes it does,” said Brooke, nodding. “Thanks for your concern, Lucas. That...yes, that makes sense to me.”

“Like, if I may?” asked Lucas, abruptly rising up from his chair and coming over to her. He had to do it again. Just seeing how tall and stately Brooke looked, with her hip cocked like that, and her juicy breasts looking so fat and engorged, like they were just ripe for more...

"It's important that we monitor your bone structure from time to time," said Lucas, standing quite close to her and reaching up his hand to touch her shoulder. He felt the warm, firm shape of her upper arm in his hand, and jostled his fingers up a bit to her shoulder. She was just standing there, letting him do all this — he was still totally in control. But internally, his heart had started hammering away again, and he had to make a distinct effort to breathe normally. Her face just looked so much...sharper...sexier. Her jawline was more defined, and she had begun to develop prominent cheekbones which were now quite obviously making her appear more regal and confident. And her lips! Lucas could hardly believe how plush and full they looked.

'Definitely kissable,' he thought to himself, getting lost in a daydream. He felt himself drifting towards her face, but he was able to pull himself back, even as he continued to keep his hand on her.

"E-especially in the connecting joints like the shoulder, you understand?" he said, coming back to reality, his hand now appearing to test her joint. As he did so, however, he allowed his thumb to explore a bit outward, and it brushed dangerously close to the bare flesh of her top left breast.

"Uh...yeah, I get it," said Brooke, looking at where Lucas was touching.

'She's still so innocent,' Lucas thought, his other hand in his pocket, 'She has no idea.'

He pressed the remote again, and immediately he felt her shoulder pressing into his hand. It was happening again...she was growing. Lucas's eyes flitted over to her breasts, which were now expanding and swelling up directly under his face. Her cleavage deepened and lengthened simultaneously, and Lucas could see that the other two buttons on her dress were straining and quivering desperately above the expanding chasm between her breasts. He might have stopped himself before, but it was too late now. He held his thumb down on the remote, feeling Brooke's body continue pushing back against his hand more and more. His arm had been almost fully extended before, but a crook was fast developing in his elbow as Brooke's body pushed his hand backward.

The two remaining buttons on her dress suddenly popped off, flying somewhere into the office, and as they went, Brooke's breasts seemed to flood the area of Lucas's vision when he looked slightly down. His eyes were wide, unblinking, almost crazed, as he hungrily drank in the sight of her liberated breasts, which were now literally bouncing up and down from the sheer momentum of their release from the tight dress. Her nipples were still covered, but only just, and even though they remained under the dress, their large, round, pressing orbs forcefully mashed up against the inside of the dress left little to the imagination. Lucas's thumb was still touching the top part of Brooke's breast, and as her growing body continued to push his hand back, he realized that his thumb was being pressed back at a faster pace than the rest of his hand.

"Ugh...I think...it's happening again," said Brooke uncomfortably, twisting her body a little, as if trying to escape both Lucas's touch and the growth itself. "I don't know if it's...the bots, or...or what...but..."

"Easy now, Brooke...eeeeassssyyy," he said soothingly, keeping his hand firmly on her shoulder and even giving it a slight shake to emphasize the point that she should relax and trust him. He looked straight forward into her eyes, and for a moment, their eyes met, and Lucas could see

that she was definitely distressed, and even a little frightened. He felt powerful, staring at her, but he knew that he had to keep selling his point. And so he took his hand off her shoulder (still pressing the remote) and crouched down in front of her, examining her exposed knees.

“Hmmm, yes...yes, ok,” he said, taking the opportunity to admire how sleek, sexy, and full her legs had become. And they were still growing! Perhaps not as obviously as her breasts, but still, it was obvious.

“Your knees look fine,” he announced calmly. “How are your feet feeling?”

“A little tight, maybe, but nothing too intense,” came Brooke’s answer. She certainly seemed to have calmed down; her voice sounded quite smooth. “Sophia thought I should get heels that had a little room in them, you know? In case I had more spurts...just like this one, I guess, huh?”

“Yeah...” muttered Lucas, his eyes momentarily lost in the sight of Brooke’s exposed lower thighs swelling in front of his face. “Yeah, that was...that was smart of her.”

He suddenly realized that he should probably stop pressing the remote, and took his thumb off. There he was, kneeling at Brooke’s feet, staring straight forward into her legs. He glanced upward, and was suddenly treated to a magnificent view of her protruding breasts, which had become so big (double-D cups) that he couldn’t even see her face from where he was kneeling. Lucas had to swallow a few times to assuage his dry mouth; he had been unconsciously gaping.

“Still feeling ok?” he asked up at her, even though her face was beyond him.

“Oh yes!” she intoned from somewhere beyond her breasts, “I feel...pretty good, actually. My mind is...how to say it...hehe, I don’t know, I’m just thinking a lot clearer this morning! And I’m actually...starting to recall some old memories...i-it’s nothing, though, hehe, nevermind.”

Lucas was slightly puzzled by the tone in her voice. Just a few seconds before, she had been uncomfortable, frightened...almost trying to squirm away from him. But her tone had totally changed — she was much calmer, cooler...and her voice...what was going on with that? Was it somehow...deeper? More feminine? Lucas couldn’t tell. But whatever it was, it was penetrating Lucas’s body to the core, and seemed to be sending an electric current straight down to his groin.

“Well...that’s good! Good to hear!” he responded, getting his weight under him and rising back up to his feet. “See, this is one of the reasons that I thought it was a good idea...to have you...around...”

His words trailed off as he straightened up completely to his full height, because he had just realized that Brooke’s head was tilted slightly down towards his face. Lucas felt his eyebrows spasm a little of their own accord. Brooke’s eyes were above his. She was actually looking down at him. It wasn’t by much, but it was enough to be noticeable. In her heels, she was taller than him now. But even more striking than that was the twinkle in Brooke’s eye as she looked down at him...playfully? What was that look!? Was it authority? Confidence? Maybe even a little...naughtiness? Lucas was off the map at this point — he had never seen Brooke look at

him like that, and at this point, he didn't think she even had the capacity to pull those kinds of expressions.

"Oh, is that right, Mr. Mineur?" she asked flirtatiously, her eyebrows going up a bit as she spoke coolly. "Is that why you want to have me around?"

"I...I...uhhh...y-yes," he stammered, looking up helplessly into her eyes.

Brooke narrowed her eyes slightly down at him, and for a moment, Lucas was afraid that she would bore into him and continue the interrogation. But then she blinked and seemed to brush aside the option, instead choosing to flash him a smile that was so gorgeous and sunny that it left him feeling drained.

"Haha, well ok then," she laughed, putting her hands on her hips and jostling herself playfully from side to side, her huge breasts swinging left and right crazily, massive, weighty entities unto themselves as they hung licentiously off her chest. If she had come to work looking like that, Lucas would have felt professionally obliged to tell her to change.

'Holy fuck,' Lucas thought to himself, 'She's a 9 out of 10 now...she's one of the sexiest, hottest people I've ever seen. And she's right here. I've got her! She's mine.'

"So...as your new secretary," asked Brooke, once more putting her hands on her hips, "What would you like me to do now? I'm gonna need a desk, won't I? Want me to go ahead and order one?"

Lucas had been distracted by how much Brooke's widened frame was filling the doorway, but her practical professionalism jolted him back into reality.

"Um, yes...yes, that would be very nice," he said. Brooke nodded and strode over to her chair. Lucas watched her go, with her tits bounding and bouncing like a disturbed body of water.

'My god,' Lucas breathed to himself, 'She's GOT to be a double-D now...at least.'

Brooke was bending down to retrieve her laptop, and Lucas was now met with the sight of her luscious ass, which was straining and pushing so intently into the dress that Lucas could even see the prominent, bulging curve where her buttocks met her thighs. She wasn't looking at him...and he felt himself crack again as his cock surged in his pants. He thrust his hand back down into his pocket, fumbled feverishly for a moment, and pressed the remote again. Instantly, Brooke's ass began swelling up, and Lucas saw with nearly-drooling lust that Brooke's red dress was now riding up on her upper thighs...and now...yes!! Just a hint of the curve of her lower ass cheeks came into view. Because Brooke was bending down and growing at the same time, her slightly-exposed ass was all the more noticeable.

"Gosh, maybe I'm just hallucinating," said Brooke, straightening up and turning around (Lucas quickly lowered his face and made his way mechanically over to his desk), "But does it feel a little chilly in here to you?"

"Chilly?" asked Lucas, loosening his collar as he let a furnace of hot air escape from his neck.

“Heheh, I don’t know,” chuckled Brooke, turning around and plopping down in her chair as she opened her laptop. “Maybe it’s just my hormones being all out of whack with these growth spurts, you know? Ugh, geez, I can even tell that I’ve gotten bigger just by sitting down. Are you seeing this, Lucas? I can barely even fit in this chair anymore.”

“That’s...quite something,” he forced out of his mouth.

“Ok, so what do you think? Mahogany? Oak? Redwood? Haha, probably not redwood, they’re endangered.”

“What?” asked Lucas, not having the faintest clue what Brooke was talking about. He had been gaping at how her ass was literally squishing itself under the armrests, and out the sides of the chair.

“My desk, Lucas!” laughed Brooke. “You know, the one I’m buying right now?”

“Oh...uhhh...just...get whatever you want,” muttered Lucas, waving his hand, not even bothering to pretend that he cared. “Um...you can use...use my card to...buy it.”

“Aww, that’s very nice of you,” she returned graciously. “I’ll be sure to pay it forward!”

Lucas kept sitting there at his desk, watching as Brooke tapped and typed around on her laptop, buying the desk. He was feeling completely out of control — he wanted to grow her again, but even he knew, at this point, that doing so (at least right now) would be sure to arouse Brooke’s suspicions even further. Lucas was having an arduous time making sense of the last ten minutes of interaction. It had gone by in a whirlwind. And now, sitting before him, in the bizarre calm after the storm, was an absolute bombshell of a young girl who was more or less completely under his control. What was he waiting for!? She was like the perfect meal, all prepared and served up to him on a silver platter! All he had to do was dig in.

“Brooke?” he asked, his voice sounding like someone else’s as he spoke it.

“Hmm?” she responded, not looking up from her computer screen.

“How would you like to go to dinner with me?”

Lucas wasn’t even looking at her — he was looking into the corner of his office. But he could feel that her eyes were on him now. He turned back toward her and met her inquiring gaze.

“Tonight,” he added, for emphasis, as he looked straight at her.

“Dinner?” she asked, tilting her head slightly sideways. “You mean, like, just a...fun little night out as — ?”

“I mean...dinner,” said Lucas, his intention clear.

“So...a date?” Brooke’s eyebrows furrowed a little. She was clearly surprised. Lucas didn’t answer verbally — he just kept his eyes fixed on her hungrily.

“Um...uh, yeah. Yeah, sure,” said Brooke, blinking a couple times. Her neck straightened up as her face brightened a bit; whether she was putting on a good face or not, Lucas didn’t really know. And he didn’t care.

“Yeah!” she repeated. “That’d be fun!”

“Well...excellent, then!” he remarked, flexing his hands together as his knuckles cracked. He felt like, in asking Brooke out, he had somehow reasserted control over himself. “We’ll have that to look forward to after a nice day’s work, then. You still feeling ok after that...most recent spurt you just had?”

“Yeah, I’m feeling pretty energized, actually,” said Brooke, stretching her arms up over her head as she balanced the laptop on her full thighs. “I just need one thing from you, though.”

“Oh?” asked Lucas, sensing something a bit mischievous in her voice. “And what’s that?”

Brooke was grinning at him now. “Your credit card number.”

Later on that evening, Lucas was ushering Brooke to sit down at their reserved table for two at one of the fanciest restaurants in town. He had managed to hold himself to only tapping the remote once all throughout the rest of the work day, but when Brooke had gone home and changed into a more elegant dress and heels, he could already feel his resistance beginning to crumble. She looked absolutely ravishing. A full 9 out of 10 in Lucas’s eyes, in her stylish 4-inch heels, she now rose an entire two inches above him, topping off at 6’3. Lucas had been briefly overcome with a tide of self-consciousness when they had been walking from the parking lot to the restaurant; he had turned his head to look at her, and saw that he was staring into her teeth, which were exposed in a slow, confident smile. It was not lost on Lucas that he had to actually raise his own eyes to hers. He felt a nasty sense of smallness inundate him, but he quickly managed to shrug it off, laughing to himself. So what if she was a little taller than he was in heels? It would mean that people would turn and gawk at her all the more, and there he would be, escorting her like the bombshell trophy she was.

And bombshell she was: her ass and hips seemed like they were about to burst out of her tight dress, which was a deep and alluring shade of violet. Her breasts were now solid double-D’s (maybe even triple-D’s, Lucas thought), stuffed into the chest area of a dress that had been made for large busts. And the way she moved...well, Lucas was already beside himself with awe because of her body, but the way that she was holding her head high, her confident stride (almost a strut), and the easy, effortless sway of her whole figure told Lucas that Brooke wasn’t just growing and expanding physically. Hitherto untapped reservoirs in her mind were welling up from within her subconscious, and she was beginning to drink from them.

‘And it’s all because I’m doing it,’ thought Lucas as he felt for the remote in his pocket, taking his place at the table. ‘She’s my creation...my work.’

“Gee, what a nice place, huh?” laughed Brooke, leaning back in her chair as she surveyed all the other lavishly-adorned guests around them. “You sure it’s ok that I’m here with you?”

“Of course it’s ok,” said Lucas, taking out the remote under the table. “I asked you to come with me, didn’t I?”

Brooke gave a little huff of laughter and smiled appreciatively.

‘What did she mean by that?’ Lucas wondered, his eyes ever-drifting down toward her enormous bust. ‘Is she laughing because she’s a little nervous, or is it because she knows why I asked her out and she’s making fun of me?’

Whatever the answer was, he wasn’t going to wait any longer. As soon as he had sat down, he realized that this was the moment he had been saving himself for all day long. He could totally let loose now — and so, staring across at Brooke over the white tablecloth, he pressed the remote. The waiter had just arrived at the table, and was in the process of pouring water into Brooke’s water glass, when her expanding breasts, which had already been dangerously close to the glass in the first place, actually grew into the glass.

“Oh, ma’m! I’m so sorry!” he exclaimed, pouring some water onto the table. He, of course, had not been expecting the glass to move, or be moved, for that matter. Brooke had felt the spurt, however, and reached forward to catch the glass before it fell all the way over.

“That’s ok! It’s my fault!” she laughed good-naturedly, as she gave Lucas a wide-eyed look, as if to say ‘Wow, there it goes again, haha!’ Even as she looked at him like this, with those wide, winsome eyes, Lucas kept his finger pressed into the remote, leaning forward across the table to get an even closer look at her swelling bust. He could even tell that she was sitting in her seat a little higher now. After a few more seconds, he finally took his finger off, and exhaled. He hadn’t realized that he had been holding his breath.

“So you and Rick,” Brooke was saying, taking a healthy drink of her water, “Who’s really the brains behind this whole operation, anyway?”

“The...the brains? What?” asked Lucas, shaking his head a little as he managed to tear his eyes away from Brooke’s chest and up to her eyes. Was she seriously suggesting that he...? But he had no way of knowing — there she was, just sitting across the table, holding her glass up to her mouth, smiling coyly at him.

“Yeah!” said Brooke, putting her glass down. As she extended her arm, Lucas couldn’t help but notice that her silver bracelet looked a little tighter on her wrist. It had been a little loose before...but now, as Brooke raised her arm up as she leaned sideways on her hand a little, Lucas could see that the bracelet was firmly latched around her wrist.

“Yeah, like, which one of you is, like...the driving force behind it all?” Brooke continued. “It had to start somewhere, didn’t it?”

“Well, I suppose, in a manner of speaking,” said Lucas, finding his mind wandering away from the conversation again, despite being almost irritated by Brooke’s implication. He was shaking his head at himself as his eyes travelled over her hands, her arms, everything...she was already big, but, like he had been rendered completely helpless, he felt himself hovering his thumb over the remote again. Brooke blinked and smiled crookedly at him, turning away to her right momentarily, upon seeing that he was not going to answer her question right away. As she turned, Lucas saw the long, healthy tendons in her neck straining against the silver necklace

that embellished her throat...she looked so regal...so magnificent...that in that moment, Lucas was once again consumed and overcome. He pressed the button again.

“Don’t wanna answer that one, huh?” chuckled Brooke, leaning forward toward him as she put both elbows on the table, resting her chin on her hands. Lucas gazed in awe as he saw her figure rising up, up, and up over him. He felt like he was sinking back down into his chair, but it was only an illusion that was brought on by watching Brooke beginning to loom over him. Her bare forearms swelled and expanded, looking firmer and more voluptuous than ever...and then, she started playing with her fingers underneath her chin, and Lucas could see her fingers lengthening and thickening. The rings that she was wearing began to disappear into the flesh of her fingers...and Lucas was almost stunned to see how Brooke, almost without even thinking, reached down and took the rings off her fingers, one by one, her eyes never leaving his face.

“I bet the bots were Rick’s idea, weren’t they?” she remarked with a slow smile. “He seems like the real innovator...nerdy, no sense of style, doesn’t really know or care how he comes across. But brilliant, you know? He’s the real brain power behind it all. And you...haha, you’re the smooth, cosmetic finish on the whole project, aren’t you? You’re the one who polishes it all up and pitches it to your bosses. That’s how this whole thing got started, right?”

Lucas was totally at a loss now — Brooke was effortlessly tearing him apart, her intelligence clearly expanding beyond his ability to respond, all while her body was growing bigger, bustier, and more beautiful with each passing moment. Lucas felt pressure up against his legs under the table, and realized that Brooke’s legs were actually growing into his. And still, he couldn’t tear his thumb away from the remote. His cock was raging in his pants; he looked down into his pocket, as if in doing so he could somehow stop himself from mashing his thumb down on the button.

“Whacha got in your pocket there, Lucas?” asked Brooke, raising an eyebrow as she watched him from the other side of the table.

“Huh!?” Lucas managed to choke out, feeling his stomach clenching in on himself. Had she caught him? Did she know!?

“Wh-what...what, in my...my pocket?” he asked, feeling like he needed to at least attempt to put up a normal face. Besides, she couldn’t really know anything...the remote was in his pocket. He hadn’t shown it to anyone, least of all her.

“Hehe, yeah, in your pocket,” chuckled Brooke, shifting slightly up in her chair in an effort to rearrange her big body, which was growing bigger and bigger by the second. Lucas’s eyes almost popped as Brooke’s breasts wobbled and shook with her movements, a huge, titanic mass hanging off her chest that was steadily gaining in size.

“You playing with your phone? You keep looking down at it — you sending text messages to someone, hmmm?” Lucas stared hard up at Brooke’s face, which was regarding him wryly through the candlelit restaurant. She was definitely teasing him, but he had no idea if she actually knew what was going on or not. If she did, then it meant that she was just toying with him — if she didn’t (and he had to bank on this option), he had to get out ahead of her right now and stop her full-force.

“N-no...no, it’s nothing,” he said dismissively, his finger still on the button. “But anyway...hehe, well, I have to say, Brooke, that...while you just described myself and Rick there in a nice, neat little way, you know...like a nice, neat little package, all tied up with a bow...yeah, that’s not really a reflection of how things...of how things are...at Braden.”

Lucas had managed to ride a temporary confidence high as he spoke, but he felt his concentration starting to crack towards the end, because Brooke had started taking off her silver bracelet, contorting her face slightly in effort as she steadily tried to pull it off her arm. Lucas could see that it was now actually digging into her gorgeous, creamy flesh...when before, it had been loose.

“Oh...is that right?” asked Brooke mildly, finally managing to wrench the bracelet off her arm. She looked at Lucas with wide, smiling eyes as she shook her head. “Gosh, having another spurt here...who woulda thought, huh Lucas?”

‘She knows,’ he thought immediately, ‘She’s gotta know...or maybe she’s just flirting with me!’

He had no idea, but he was still not about to have her take the reins of the conversation.

“So, yeah, anyway,” he said, choosing to ignore her last comment, “How was it you described me? As the...”

“The cosmetic finish on the nanobot project,” nodded Brooke, taking care to move her water glass, plate, and utensils well out of the way before leaning forward onto the table, seemingly erecting a tall, fleshy cliff of breast flesh under her calm, intent, and quickly-beautifying face. Already, she was starting to look not just big...but huge. But Lucas kept his finger hungrily on the remote.

“You didn’t like hearing me say that, did you?” she asked, with an unmistakable touch of humor.

“Well, uh, no,” replied Lucas, feeling himself become annoyed at her cavalier attitude. Didn’t she realize that he was the reason she was becoming like this in the first place?!

“Because, I don’t like hearing anything about me that isn’t true,” he continued, tilting his head in what he thought was a mild and controlled manner. “Good or bad.”

“Aw, well ok,” responded Brooke immediately, rubbing her wrist where the bracelet had been as she continued to fix Lucas with her cool stare. “Guess I have a lot to learn about Braden in general, huh? Why don’t you fill me in on some of the basics?”

“The...basics?” asked Lucas, finally managing to take his thumb off the remote. He heaved a kind of deep breath, like he had just come up for air. Brooke noticed, but she only smiled a little broader, as the corner of her mouth twitched for a moment, like she was about to laugh.

“Yeah, the basics!” she said brightly, leaning back in her chair, reaching up, and stretching her arms. “Aaaughhh, that feels goooood....haha, when I’m growing, I almost get a kind of ache all over. But when it’s done, my whole body feels all warm and tingly. Mmmmmrrrrrgghh, yeeeah!”

Lucas couldn't answer in any appropriate allotment of time, because he was too busy marveling helplessly at what Brooke had already grown into. She had to be at least a couple inches taller, and her curves had become so prominent that her body had almost completely swallowed up the chair she was sitting in — Lucas could hardly see the backboard anymore. But when she had raised her arms and stretched, her breasts had expanded out with her arms, and Lucas decided, right then and there, that there was no way she wasn't an F-cup already.

"Haha, ok Lucas," chuckled Brooke, putting her arms down and seeing that Lucas was unable to carry on a normal conversation. "I'll try a different angle. So...you think Braden has a bright future, don't you?"

"I...of...of course we do!" declared Lucas, now trying to sit up in his own chair, realizing as he did that he didn't fill anywhere close to the amount of space that Brooke did in her chair.

"Braden is on its way to becoming one of the top...uh, fifteen or so software companies in the country, at this rate."

Brooke's eyebrows went up and she leaned forward again on her elbows, chin on her hands, regarding him with that same calm intensity as she formed an archway over her breasts with her sexy, creamy arms. Her breasts, of course, completely filled the area in between her arms.

"Wow, that's quite ambitious!" she remarked. "I admire that kind of drive, you know? But...haha, I mean, top fifteen in the country? You don't have to overdo it just to impress me, Lucas."

"I...wh-what!? Overdoing it?!" he cried indignantly. "What're you talking about? If we keep developing on the same trajectory as we're on now, there's no question that we're going to — "

"But what about Rubik's?" asked Brooke, cutting in, referring to the rival (and bigger, flashier) software developing firm across town.

"W-what...what about them?" asked Lucas, thrown totally off guard.

"They're not even in the top 40 nationwide," said Brooke, adding an almost gentle, maternal edge to her voice, as if she was comforting him. "And...hehe, well, it's not a secret that Rubik's is a lot bigger than Braden, Lucas. Just saying."

Lucas was totally thrown for a loop; he had not been expecting Brooke to know these kinds of things, but even more, he couldn't believe that she was trying to undermine him — what was she thinking!? Who on earth did she think she was?? HE was the branch manager, HE was the one who had taken HER to dinner, and HE was the one who had the power to change her at will...in his pocket, no less!

'I'll show her,' Lucas thought to himself feverishly, and he pressed down on the button again, hard. 'I'll show her who's in charge!'

The waiter had come by, and was already speaking with Brooke when Lucas looked up. He felt annoyed that the waiter hadn't addressed HIM first, but he was more preoccupied watching Brooke grow...next to the waiter. Lucas could actually see her head getting higher and higher compared to the waiter's body. Her body was now completely swallowing up her chair — Lucas couldn't see it anymore.

“And for you, sir?” asked the waiter, turning to Lucas, who could feel the waiter’s eyes going over his own body. In a flash, he realized that he was being judged...as the beneficiary of his pairing with Brooke. In the waiter’s eyes, he was the lucky one...he was the one who had somehow managed to land a date with a woman who was so completely out of his league.

“The...steak,” he somehow replied. “Medium...rare, please.”

Once the waiter turned and left, Brooke leaned forward again on the table towards him, making that same archway with her arms. Now, however, her breasts were beginning to crowd the pillars of her arms, spilling out even further onto the table than before.

“Ok, well anyway,” said Brooke energetically, her bright eyes flashing with radiant beauty as she stared forward and down at him. “All that aside, it’s nice that you think big, Lucas. Shot for the stars.”

Lucas knew that she was teasing him now, and he just pressed down on the button harder, as if willing himself to exert control over her the more he pressed it.

“Haha, I mean, after all, that’s how all the great inventions are conceived, right?” she said, winking at him. “Look at Ada Lovelace.”

“L-look...look at who?” asked Lucas, once again feeling Brooke’s full firm legs beginning to press up against him underneath the table. She was growing into him again, despite the fact that she had already re-situated herself. A sexy little pant of a chuckle escaped Brooke’s full lips, wrenching Luca’s attention back to her face; he realized he had been staring at her breasts again, which were beginning to actually squish and squeeze themselves under her arms, desperate for more room.

“No...come on, Lucas,” she intoned, tilting her magnificent head slightly sideways as her eyes sparkled humorously down at him. “You’re kidding, right?”

“I...should I know who this random chick is?” he asked, becoming increasingly annoyed at the trajectory of the conversation, even as his groin became more and more turgid. Her knees were pressing up against his now...but she wasn’t moving.

Brooke let out a low whistle. “This “random chick,”” she said calmly, her mouth upturned slightly in amusement, “Ada Lovelace, was the first person to recognize that Babbage’s Analytical Engine had applications beyond pure calculation. She wrote the first algorithm for the machine, Lucas. She’s literally the mother of all computers...and computer programmers.”

“Uhh...o-ok,” stammered Lucas, whitening his thumb now as he continued pressing down on the remote. He felt like he was being completely carried away on a tide of his own lust at this point, even as he registered that Brooke was fast exceeding him mentally as well as physically. Lucas was having a hard time concentrating on anything except how tight Brooke’s deep, violet dress had become. It looked like it was a size too small — her body was positively rivening with curves. But Brooke, far from complaining, actually sat back and folded her arms under her chest. Her enormous breasts were so big and weighty now that they hid her crossed arms.

She just sat there, staring down at Lucas with something like smugness in her face, like she was enjoying watching him squirm in place.

“Just...I...I’m not really a big history guy, o-ok?” he stuttered, desperately trying to claw his way back to the top of the conversation.

“Apparently not!” laughed Brooke. Even a light little laugh from her was enough to send those same spindles of electricity straight down to his crotch once more — her voice was definitely deeper again, and even more feminine, embodying a strange, impossibly alluring contrast between smoothness and slight-huskiness...at a slightly dropped octave. Lucas had to cross his legs in place, squeezing his cock between them desperately to try and stave off a premature orgasm.

“And...and anyway, you shouldn’t be asking me those kinds of questions,” said Lucas brusquely,, trying to sit up straighter in his chair (and noticing helplessly that Brooke was still a good number of inches above him, even as she was leaning back casually). “Office managers don’t have time to...to go back and remember all these old names and dates and stuff that is totally useless for what’s happening on the scene right now. You understand that, Brooke? I have to...to be dynamic all the time, ok? And...and thinking about how we’re going to compete and get out ahead, all the time? I...I live this stuff, Brooke. It’s my bread and butter. I fall asleep thinking about it and wake up picking right back up from where I started. And, you know, as a...a fresh hire, shall we say, I can’t really expect you to be on the same wavelength as me when it comes to all that stuff.”

Lucas ended his little tirade abruptly, realizing that he had made it patently obvious to Brooke that she had gotten under his skin. He sat there, breathing in and out quickly, as Brooke continued to become “more,” in every sense of the word, in front of him. And as much as Lucas was transported by her growth, flowering intelligence, and confidence, he felt like it had all gone too far. He managed to take his thumb off the remote once more.

“Ok Lucas,” Brooke answered, smiling at him and giving the slightest hint of a chuckle. She was condescending to him...or at least, that’s what Lucas thought. He felt his blood start to boil, even as his crotch became more uncomfortable as his hard cock continued pressing against his pants.

“I don’t have any doubt that there’s plenty about your job that I don’t understand,” Brooke continued mildly, shooting him a suggestion of a smirk. Was it a smirk? Lucas couldn’t tell if she was mocking him or not — he was sure she had been a moment ago, but now he couldn’t tell. His mind was beginning to play tricks on him.

“Like, the refinement process for software engineering regular old computer programs is one thing,” Brooke persisted, looking around the dining room pleasantly, almost casually.

‘Too casually,’ thought Lucas, feeling himself getting angrier. ‘She’s almost acting...bored.’

“But to write and refine the programs for things like...you know, nanobots, for instance,” Brooke kept on, turning back to him and giving him a knowing stare with her big, gorgeous eyes, “Well, that’s something else entirely above me, haha.”

She paused, studying Lucas intently, before her mouth curved into a beautiful little smile as she whipped out her phone.

“And speaking of that,” she trilled, her deep, feminine voice going up an octave briefly, once more electrifying Lucas’s pants, “What’s Rick’s number? I’d love to pick his brain sometime about the refinement process for these nanobots. I’m kinda interested, you know? Because they’re in my body, and all...and I’d just like to get some insight into how they were made.”

Now Lucas knew that she was twisting the knife. He felt himself consumed with anger, and he pressed the remote button down again, hard. He knew that he was complicating his problems by doing so, but he was unable to prevent himself resorting to this brute show of force — he was controlling her, and there was nothing she could do to prevent him from proving it, over and over.

“You don’t need Rick’s number,” he responded through gritted teeth, “I can tell you anything you need to know...ab-about...about the...nanobots.”

Once again, Lucas found his words knotting themselves up in his mouth — Brooke was growing again, and becoming ever-more more stunning and radiant. Lucas watched as she coolly extended her hand down, fastened it around her water glass, and gently lifted it up, up, up to her mouth. She took a long, slow sip of water, her eyes never leaving his, and with a shock of comprehension, Lucas understood what she was doing; she was drinking this way to emphasize that the glass, at lip-height for her, was actually over his head. That’s how much taller she was than him now...and clearly, this fact amused her. Her gorgeous eyes were sparkling with entertainment as she slowly lowered her glass from her lips, licking them sensuously. She was finding this humorous! Lucas blinked as his cock continued to rage in his pants. Her tongue looked longer...thicker...redder.

“Hehe, you can?” asked Brooke doubtfully, cocking her head slightly to the side as she smiled down at him. “I don’t knowwww, Lucas. I’ve got some pretty technical questions that I’m not sure you’ll know the answers to.”

Now it was Lucas’s turn to adjust in his chair; Brooke’s legs were pressing up on him under the table, to the extent that he wasn’t able to compose complete thoughts, let alone words. He could feel the firm, smooth flesh of her thighs beginning to press on the interior of his own...and she wasn’t doing anything about it. Pretty soon, her legs were going to make contact with his erection, and Lucas couldn’t have that. He backed his chair up a little, readjusted himself, and tried to start laughing, making his best effort to appear light, humorous, and nonchalant.

“Heheheh...well, why don’t you give me your best shot, Brooke?” he chuckled, smiling at her unpleasantly. He noticed a little commotion behind her, and realized that several waiters were gathered together in the corner, speaking together in hushed voices, looking over to their table. Lucas saw them all share a hearty laugh, and he felt himself raging even more on the inside. They were in on it too! They were having a laugh about the sexy vixen going out with some guy who they thought was beneath her. Well, the joke was on them, now, wasn’t it?!

“Well...oh-kay,” said Brooke, heaving a sigh as she sat up straight in her chair. Lucas felt the tip of her knee touching his leg again. “It’s a question about Buckminsterfullerenes, though, so I’m not really sure if you — ”

“Oh, buckyballs!” laughed Lucas, instantly feeling back in control as he spoke the informal name of the specific allotrope of carbon that Brooke had just referred to.

“Oh! So you know about them?” asked Brooke, looking a little surprised.

‘Yeah, that’s right,’ Lucas thought lustfully, pressing down the button even harder as he licked his teeth behind his closed lips. ‘Not so cocky now, huh?’

“Haha! Of course I know about them!” exclaimed Lucas heartily, shaking his head. “Come on, Brooke — just because I know how to dress myself doesn’t mean that I don’t know what I’m doing in the software world. You underestimated me for a minute there, didn’t you, haha?”

“Heh, well I guess I’m sorry, Lucas,” chuckled Brooke, clearly backtracking a bit as she raised her hand up to scratch her head a little. Her arm looked so solid, so stunningly feminine and strong, that Lucas had to remind himself that he had the upper hand in the exchange.

“So...good, you’ll be able to answer my question, then,” Brooke continued. “So researchers have demonstrated that Buckminsterfullerenes can be used to be the “wheels” of proposed “nanocars,” right?”

“Yesss,” said Lucas nodding his head. Her legs were pressing up against his to the point of discomfort again, but Lucas was too busy looking forward to showing Brooke how mistaken she had been about him.

“Although,” Lucas cut in, pinpointing an opportunity to nitpick her premise, “It’s a little late to be talking about buckyballs being used as nanocar components, Brooke. We’ve already developed carborane wheels, along with a light-powered helicene synthetic molecular motor, so...haha, yeah, we’re a bit beyond the premise of your question, I think.”

Brooke had been about to open her mouth to speak, but then she closed it again, apparently put in her place. Lucas was almost giddy with triumph as he looked across the table, watching this incredibly sexy, amazonian glory sit there silently, taking in her obvious mental inferiority to him. She didn’t answer right away — instead, she just continued to sit there, regarding him, as she continued to grow. The silence was almost tangible, hanging in the air between them, as Lucas watched her body continuing to rise vertically. He felt the heavy heat of her legs pull away from him slightly, as Brooke adjusted herself again in her chair. It was clear that she knew she was having another spurt, and she even reached up and, her forearm swelling slightly from the effort, lifted up part of the left breast of her dress, as if providing temporary relief for her massively expanding breasts. She had to be approaching a H-cup now, Lucas thought to himself. She suddenly let her dress go, and it smacked back down in place, sending currents through the huge fleshy wall of her heavy breasts, which were now squeezing together like never before, in constant battle with the violet dress that contained them. Brooke leaned forward again on her elbows, now sporting a knowing smile.

‘My god,’ thought Lucas, totally stunned, ‘She’s a 10 out of 10 now.’

“I’m aware of all that, Lucas,” Brooke said, her eyes flashing wide with amusement again, her body and mind flush with the most recent spurt. “But don’t you think it would be useful to

consider how the Buckminsterfullerenes' molecular structure could be used to capitalize on the deprotonation of closo-dicarbododecaboranes using organolithium reagents?"

"U-uusing...using what?!" stammered Lucas, his face falling completely. He had no idea what Brooke was talking about.

"Organolithium reagents," Brooke repeated. Her legs were encroaching upon his to a ridiculous degree now. "Come on, Lucas, you know? The organometallic compounds that contain carbon – lithium bonds? And of course, you know, as far as their charges go, the relative electronegativities of carbon and lithium suggest that the C-Li bond will be highly polar."

Lucas just sat there, gaping. This 10-out-of-10 bombshell had grown totally beyond him...and yet, Lucas couldn't find it within his power to take his thumb off the button in his pocket...with her body looming larger with every passing second, up, and up...and up...

"Haha, of course, though," laughed Brooke, almost as an aside to herself, "certain organolithium compounds possess certain properties in nonpolar solvents that make it more difficult, but..."

And here, she turned to look at Lucas again, and he was shocked to see her eyes flash briefly green, for just an instant. He blinked, shook his head, and looked again — it was gone, whatever it had been. Brooke's leg was now pressed right up against his crotch, directly in his throbbing, pulsating erection — he could actually feel her firm, powerful thigh slowly widening the sitting stance of his own legs as it grew steadily between them.

"Yeeaaah," chuckled Brooke softly, blinking down at him with an almost-maternal condescension, "I'll just ask Rick about it tomorrow."

Lucas felt his own eyes go wide, as he started to panic. She had just...so casually dismissed him right there...so effortlessly shown her mental superiority over him, that he couldn't even begin to feign normalcy. She had just eviscerated him without even trying, in that soft, strong, unbelievably-sexy feminine voice that was threatening, along with her thigh between his legs, to make him cum right then and there in the restaurant. And even worse, she had looked almost...disappointed that she had overpowered him so easily, so quickly.

"Excuse me," said Brooke suddenly, smoothly flagging down their waiter with an easy smile as she spoke up with easy, confident intonation, "Do you think my date and I could get a different table?"

"Oh! Of...of course, ma'm!" answered the waiter immediately, blushing slightly at having been addressed so directly by such a woman. "Is...um, I'm sorry, were you having an issue with your table here?"

"Haha, well the table's fine," laughed Brooke, swinging her legs out from underneath the tablecloth (causing Lucas to exhale involuntarily), "But...well, it's just become a bit of a tight fit for me, you see? If I was the same size as my date here, we'd be all good, but, well...I've got a little bit on him, wouldn't you say? And I'd like us both to have ample leg room."

"Oh, y-yes...yes, of course, ma'm," said the waiter quickly, pushing past his obvious puzzlement at Brooke's apparent growth. "Please...follow me — I'll get you a...more appropriate table."

Brooke stood up, rising majestically in regal splendor; everyone in the restaurant turned to watch her. She took one step over toward Lucas and extended her hand down, grinning at him.

“Well come on,” she chuckled down at him, “Let’s go!”

Lucas felt apprehensive about standing up — his ego desperately wanted Brooke to be further away from him, so that she wouldn’t notice the height difference. Her smile grew wider.

“Come on, Lucas!” she laughed, indicating with her offered hand, “Get up!”

He wasn’t moving quickly enough, so she suddenly reached down, caught his hand up in her much larger, warmer, stronger grasp, and yanked him to his feet. Lucas was totally disoriented, and stumbled into the tower of her body, which didn’t budge an inch, despite the contact. She was as sturdy as a rock. The impact caused a heavenly jiggle in her bosom, and Lucas felt the collision softened by her breasts hitting his shoulders and upper chest. He heard the smooth ocean-like rumble of her feminine laughter somewhere above him, and felt the warm pressure of her huge hands on his shoulders, steadying him. He looked up, to see what he had created... and saw that he was staring straight into the top of the long, mighty chasm of her cleavage. Her clearly-evident nipple nubs were poking against her dress, and Lucas could feel himself gently graze over them as he regained his balance. The weighty panorama of her breasts filled his vision completely. He looked up, and up...and UP, past her chin and perfect nose, to her eyes, which were positively alive with humor.

“After you, Mr. Mineur.”

