

Paralinguist

By Hanna Nopar, Junnifer Ngo, Natalie Novella



Chapter I: Piper

My problem is bigger than North West's butt. As I look back on my life, I cannot wrap my head around the crazy events that have happened to unfold.

I lie here, in this hospital bed, unable to move my body. My mind, while fully functional, is a little hazy. I guess that's what happens when you're paralyzed from the neck down. Lukas and Axel told the paramedics that I fell down the stairs, but I know that's not true. To be honest, I don't really know what happened. I know that a force of some sort threw me backwards into a wall; it all happened so fast, it's hard to remember the details. I do know that Lukas and Axel have been working so hard on their *project*; I don't know how anything could have gone wrong, or how it did go wrong. I just can't remember what it is, I don't know. Axel would never tell me any details about the project; where he got the blueprints, where he got the materials, how all of this started. All he said was that he "had to do it," it was his "life's work." He became obsessed with it, it consumed him. And as his sister, I'm worried about him.

When did my life get so complicated? I think back to when I was 7 and Axel was 9; when times were different for the both of us. We're in the front yard playing tag. He was always so outgoing and joyous; you could tell he was going to be a bright kid. His black hair against his pale complexion made him look like a mysterious ghost; but his intense blue eyes gave his face life. I always loved that memory of him. Now he is antisocial and obsessed in his work. I rarely ever have time with him, even though we live together. He gives off this "stay out of my business and I'll stay out of yours" vibe to everyone he meets and has contact with. Especially to my fiance Lukas, who works on the *project* with him.

My brain jumps to a different memory, the moment I met Lukas. I was in a Starbucks drinking coffee while working on a report for my job as a biomedical researcher. I was just about to leave when I bumped into a stranger, and of my papers spilled to the floor. I crouched to the floor to pick them up, and the strange man helped me gather the papers. I finally looked up and what I saw I wasn't expecting: the most striking man I've ever seen. He had tousled curly blond hair, hazel eyes, and a big goofy smile. He wore a blue and white checkered collar shirt buttoned up to the neck, tan dress pants held up with suspenders, brown dress shoes, and a black tie. To others, he may appear as your average nerdy chemistry teacher, a little bit on the scrawny side, but to me, he was so much more. I knew from the second I saw him that he was the one.

Lukas suddenly comes into my room closing the door loudly behind him, interrupting my thoughts. He has stitches on his face. I feel like I should know what happened. I'm so glad to see him, I try to smile, but I'm afraid it comes off as a grimace. He pulls up a chair and sits next to me, I wish he would take my hand. But even if he did, would I be able to feel his touch?

"Hey Pipes," says Lukas. He looks so tired, so beat down. I know it's taking all of his will power to not cry. I want to tell him it's okay, that everything will be fine. And maybe I would if I wasn't injected with so many drugs. Seriously, if we replaced the medication the doctors gave me with silicon gel I would literally have a bigger butt than North West and her mom combined. And that's saying something. My problem is *definitely* bigger than North West's butt.

"Piper?" he asks. "You with me?" I wasn't, I was spacing out, thinking about celebrity butts. What a great fiancé I am. I manage to mumble a no.

"Right, I'll just start from the beginning."

Chapter II: Axel

The cringes echoing creak greets me as I storm through a tarnishing, corroding door. I wrap my hands around the chilling doorknob and slam it shut, ending the groans of the door with a loud bang. And all that's left is silence and the thoughts of guilt in my head. My hands sting with pain as I slam them on the cold table, rattling all the bottles of chemicals and scattering neat piles of papers. The lump in my throat forces my mouth open to let out a string of curses. With a red-face and shaking fist, I ram my knuckles into the old brick wall. In my frenzy of anger, tears find their way to my eyes, falling against my will. My loud curses turn into feeble mumbles and sobbing gasps.

Even still, *her* gasps of pain, *her* shrill shrieks of agony rings in my ear; *His* shouts of panic, *his* desperate wails for help resounds in my mind. When will it stop? As if to answer my plea, a ring chimes out. My trembling hand reached into my pocket and pulls out my blinking phone. A text message is waiting to be read. Hesitant and anxious, my finger swipes it open. It was from Lukas.

I'm visiting her.

Another chime.

Anything you want me to pass onto her?

I take shaky breath and tap my reply.

No.

Taking a deep breath in, I force myself to back away from the wall. Letting out my breath, I make my way over to a large, cylinder, grabbing my blueprints and tools as I pass by my desk. The cylinder was large enough to easily fit a human inside, maybe even two. The top and bottom were created from metal while the center was made from glass. I crawled into the

cylinder, sprawling myself on the ground with a screw driver. Jamming the head into the small screws on the metal plate, I glance back to the blueprints, cursing myself for the mistake I had made, causing this mess.

For years I had been trying to build the greatest machine of our time: a teleporter. Although the idea has been studied for years, centuries even, no fully functional machine has been created. Previous scientists have tried and created a machine that could teleport the atoms of a human but the brain could not be reconstructed properly and sometimes certain atoms wouldn't form properly, causing brain damage, death and other abnormalities. At the end of the experiment, the government banned the continuation of teleportation studying. But I couldn't let that stop me. I took their failure and I plan on making it work. Still there are inconveniences due to its illegalization. Funding can't be collected and I can't work in a lab, which is why I am working in my cold, run down basement. I can't let that stop me either. More than ever, I need this to work. I need to help *her*.

Small bolts lightly clang on the metal as they're pulled out from small holes. I pull the sheet of metal out, revealing wires knitted in a tangled mess. The array of colors and disorganized jumble gives me a slight pounding in my head but I continue to press on, rummaging through the wires. Without exactly knowing what had went wrong, I have to guess where to start. I see the yellow wire I'm searching for: the wire that transfers chemical 1 to chemical 2 allowing a fission which creates enough energy to take apart every atom of the human body and reconstruct them in the perfect order in another location. And then I see it. A leak.

The anger I felt entering the room entraps me once again. Such a small slip up caused *her* - my own sister - to get hurt. With a deep breath, I shake off my boiling anger and set myself to the goal of fixing the problem. Of course this couldn't be the only problem with the machine. A leakage wouldn't cause the accident. It had to be the chemicals used. Such beautiful machine requires much more energy than most machines to function. So to create enough energy, fission is used. Fission is forced within the machine when neutrons are shot at nuclei of various elements to make the nuclei unstable and split in two. The splitting of the nuclei causes massive amount of energy to be produced. The fission between the chemical we used this time created too much power, resulting in the accident.

A groan rips through my throat as I drag myself to my journal to readjust the notes. What other chemicals can be used to create enough power but not too much? Thoughts race through my head as I stare at my mess of a journal. My thoughts are interrupted by chiming. I pull out my phone.

An unknown number. I answer.

"Hello?" I start, clearing my throat of the lump from my previous fit of scorching rage.

"Ah yes, are you Mr. Axel?" a voice replies.

"Yes that would be me."

“This is Doctor Lee from Washington D. C. Memorial Hospital. I’m calling about your sister, Ms. Piper.”

“. . . Yes.”

“Well, she’s paralyzed from neck down and although we have some medication, it would be . . . very expensive. For now, we suggest you try to pay for physical therapy but there isn’t a guarantee she’ll be able to move even after the treatment. Um, does Ms. Piper have medical insurance Mr. Axel?”

“No,” I answer defeated and dejected.

“Well, it would be \$135 every 15 minutes.”

“How much is the medication.”

The doctor sighs. “About half a million. It surpasses the price of Soliris.”

My mouth goes dry. Years have gone by since I last had a proper job. I can remember my father screeching at me with the eyes of an angry bull. Mother was sobbing, begging for a reason why I threw away my life for a delirium that would never work. Only Piper and the memories of my grandfather was there for me. She didn’t judge me or pity my stupidity. She merely stood by my side and supported as she still does now. She took on the job of earning us a living. But she can’t give me that comfort and warmth our grandfather always gave me. He would leave his job in the middle of the day when he heard I was hurt or crying. When Mother and Father were yelling at me, he would be by my side. When I needed to get away from the stuffy air of my home, he would take me away. But the best times I had with him were when he was talking to me about his work. He would sit down with me and explain blueprints and science for his lifelong project. He would gush to me about the miracles he would help create if he could only get his machine working. Our happy times were short lived. He passed away while I was in graduate school. I took up his work. I quit everything to make his final dream a reality. And now I sit here in this cold basement tinkering away at this machine that caused Piper harm.

The doctor’s voice is drowning on in my ear. Useless words stutter out of my mouth before I hang up. My hands slam onto the table, clattering the tools and beakers. I pick up the hammer lying on the table and storm towards the machine. My clenching hand rises up, about to slam down on my life’s work. I gave up my friends, my happiness, my family, everything for this piece of metal; and how does it return the favor? By hurting my only sister, the only one that’s been by my side. A familiar chime disrupts the erupting volcano in my head. I look down.

I unread message from Lukas

No, this wasn’t my beautiful machine’s fault. It was all his fault. I told him *not* to bring her down here. I told him that I wasn’t done with the fruit of my glory. He’s the one who’s making me blame my purpose in life. He’s the one who hurt my sister when he promised to love her. It’s all his fault. No, my life’s work won’t be destroyed or blamed for his mistake. My machine, my work, is the key to her revival. This machine will help me get that medicine by any

means. This machine - no SHE - will help me get my life back and stand by my side even if she has to break the law.

Chapter III: Lukas

The pungent odor of anesthetics assault my unsuspecting nose as I stride through the cramped and dated halls of Washington D.C. Memorial Hospital. The path to Piper's hospital room is a labyrinthine of long corridors and looming doorways. I can feel myself walking stiffly and awkwardly, but people will probably mistake my uneasiness towards hospitals for my discomfort with my itchy dress shirt and slacks. At least I'm wearing a nifty and stylish bow tie.

To my immense relief, I found Piper's room and slipped through the door and closed it with a loud *thud*. Unnerving silence greeted me as I stepped further into the room. I could hear the faint beep of Piper's heart monitor in the background, but it was almost completely drowned out by the sound of my frantic beating heart booming in my ears and ragged breaths escaping my chapped lips. I take a deep, calming breath and hesitantly continue on into the room towards Piper's hospital bed.

"Hey Pipes," I say in an embarrassingly shaky tone, after clearing my throat I try again in a firmer voice.

“Um... How are you?” *Wow Lukas, she’s paralyzed from the head down, what do you think?* Thankfully it looked like she wasn’t paying attention to that awful failure of a greeting. I sit down in the chair next to her bed and take her hand in mine.

“Piper? You with me?” She mumbles something incoherent and incomprehensible, but it sounds like a no to me.

“Right,” I shifted uncomfortably in my chair and cleared my throat “I’ll start from the beginning. As you know, Axel-- I mean you, um, I, we built a-- well we were *trying*,” I abruptly stopped that sorry excuse for an explanation and took a deep calming breath while I gathered my thoughts. “As you know, Axel and I were trying to build a teleportation machine. Well, technically it was Axel who was doing it but I jumped onboard at the last minute. But anyway, we had just finished building it and I had brought you downstairs to show you even though Axel wasn’t there and had told me not to...” I tenderly held Piper’s hand even though I knew she couldn’t feel it.

“I-I just was so proud that we finally finished, I wanted to share that happiness with you, so I turned it on and it hummed with power and we were happy and you hugged me and then within a second everything went horribly wrong. The, uh, machine-- it started malfunctioning and well to put it simply there was a *major* calculation error that must have happened during the building process. Somewhere in there, a measurement wasn’t correct, and well you know this is teleportation we’re dealing with! There’s no room for inaccuracy and miscalculation.” I was getting really worked up by now, my hands were shaking and my face was red. I withdraw my hand from Piper’s and lean back in the chair away from her. I don’t deserve to touch her right now, I did this to her.

“So, um, the machine started to suck in everything in the room at once, but when an object was about to be teleported it was violently repelled. Our basement looked like a mini hurricane, dangerous tools and chemicals were flying everywhere. We were separated an-and,” I take a deep breath.

“You were sucked towards the machine. I tried everything within my power to get to you but I was hit in the head with a flying beaker and thrown off balance,” I motioned to the stitches on my forehead.

“The machine sucked you in and threw you at the basement wall. And-- um the collision broke your sixth and seventh vertebrae in the part of your spine in your neck area, rendering you paralyzed from the neck down. I-I’m so, so, *sorry* Pipes, this is all my fault, I did this to you.” Piper gave me a look that said *This isn’t your fault you idiot*. I rub my hands over my face so she can’t see the tears welling in my eyes. To distract my mind from the looming depression and guilt I start to work out what went wrong out loud.

“I’ve been going over how this explosion--or whatever it was--happened, and it must have been an imbalance of electrons that caused instability in the machine. You know how atoms with one electron on the outer shell react better to another atom that has a missing electron in the outer valence shell? And how there are typically eight in shell, and the amount of positive

charges in the protons and negative charges in the electrons determines whether the atom is stable or not? Well the machine must have messed with the correlation of the atoms. I just don't know for sure!" I ground my teeth and blow out a harsh breath, I *hate* not knowing. *Axel* no doubt already knows why and I'm going to get a load of crap for it because he's going to find a way to blame me for it.

"If we are talking about the structure of the atom, according to Schrödinger, the electron would usually be found in an electron cloud, but there is no way to know absolutely. It's like, you know how you call people on a cell phone and you're all like, "Where are you?" Well, if a proton were to call an electron on his cell phone and he's all like, "Where are you dude?" The electron would be all, "I can tell you where I *probably* am, does that help?" Psh it doesn't, there are massive equations to solve for the location of an electron but even then that's only *possibly* where it is." I don't even know why I just told Piper all of that, she's a scientist as well, and judging by her slightly condescending and amused stare I can tell she's thinking the exact same thing. Science calms me, I know that's the nerdiest thing to say ever, but it's true and I think Piper knows it too.

To change the subject quickly, and efficiently, I lean onto her bed and say, "Hey! Are you made of copper and tellurium? Because you are lookin' CuTe!"

Oh yes I did! Haha! Piper gave me a narrowed glare and mumbled something incomprehensible but I know exactly what she meant.

"Pshh! I don't tell chemistry jokes *that* often... Only periodically." I laugh at my own joke and shot Piper's glare one of my signature goofy grins. She can act like this all she wants, but I know that deep down, she secretly loves my corny jokes. "But, uh, anyways, there's some good news and some bad news, well I mean bad news other than the obvious, erm." Piper stares at me incredulously and I hesitate. "The doctor said that there's a medicine called Paralingunt that can completely repair all of your damaged nerves and you'll be able to walk again... but it costs half a million dollars." I squeezed her hand as I looked into her eyes with determination. "Once we finish the teleportation machine, we are going to sell it and get enough money to buy you that cure, you *will* be able to walk again Piper, I promise."

My stomach twists unpleasantly with knots as I spit out the lie to my beloved Piper. There is no way that Axel and I will be able to sell our machine without getting arrested, but that doesn't mean we can't use it to steal the cure. The thought of it scares me, but I'd walk to the ends of the earth for her, so really, what's stealing some medicine from a ridiculously high security government regulated Pharmacy? I wonder if I should politely ask if they'll give it to me for free.

Chapter IV: Piper

As I stare blankly at the wall, the minutes ticking by, I can feel myself becoming more alert; the drowsiness wearing off. Fifteen minutes have now passed, my mind is only able to concentrate on one thing and one thing only: the news about the cure. There's a cure? How come the doctor didn't tell me about it? The doctor comes in to check my vitals, I manage to get her attention.

"Lukas tells me there's a cure?" I ask the doctor softly.

"Yes, I've been meaning to talk to you about that," she replies. "I was waiting for you to become more awake. So there are two different types of spinal paralysis. There's paraplegia, which is if the injury occurs on your lower spinal cord, paralyzing you from the waist down. And then there's quadriplegia, which is if the injury occurs in the upper region of the spinal cord, or the neck area, paralyzing you from the neck down. You have quadriplegia, but it is not the most serious case that I've seen. In most cases, the quadriplegic needs a ventilator to breathe. But you are lucky, the spinal cord broke right below the main axon that connects to your lungs. Your body will still be able to breathe normally but it will be harder. It will feel like you hiked up a very steep hill with 50 pounds on your back in high altitude; still able to breathe but kind of difficult. I suspect that 1 week on a ventilator for, hmm let's say 5 hours a day, and you will become strong enough to breathe on your own. This is just so your body can get used to having to work harder to breathe." She pauses to let that sink in, like it's good news.

“The Paralingunt cure treats both types of paralysis, but the cure costs more for a quadriplegic because there are more nerves that need repair. The cure starts from the top and works its way down the spinal cord. It finds its way to where the injury occurred and creates ‘faux cells’: stand in cell tissue that connects the spinal cord together. It then uses a special chemical that duplicates the bone in the spinal cord and replaces the faux cells. The faux cells then disintegrate once the bone is fully healed in its place.”

“But what about my nervous system?” I ask. “The bone is healed, but that doesn’t mean the nerves in my spinal cord are.”

“Yes that is true, the Paralingunt cure has GMPs, genetically modified proteins, that interact with neuron heads in brain. The neurons communicate with each other using axons, which is what the spinal cord is made of. When a neuron receives a message from a different neuron, it sends an electrical signal down the length of the axon. The electrical signal is then converted into a chemical signal, and the axon releases chemical messengers called neurotransmitters. The neurotransmitters are then released into the synapse where they are then converted back into an electrical signal and the actions are then performed. But I’m sure you know all about that considering you’re a Biomedical Researcher.

“Well, the GMPs are synthesized to bind the broken axons back together. The neuron heads in your brain are still in function, it’s just when the axons that make up your spinal cord snapped, your neuron cell bodies couldn’t send any neurotransmitters past the breakage.”

“That’s how I’m still able to breathe,” I say, “because the main nerve connecting my lungs to my spinal cord was above the breakage point.”

“Exactly. So when the GMPs reconnect the axons, the neurotransmitters are then able to reach the rest of your body, resulting in you being able to walk, swim, jump, anything you were able to do before you were paralyzed. You would be good as new.”

I soak it all in, all of the possibilities. I would be able to walk down the aisle at my wedding. I would be able to dance the first dance with my new husband. I would be able to go on my weekend hikes up to Rocky Ridge. I would be able to have a child. I would be able to do all of the things that I’d be missing out on. But we don’t have the money.

“I’ll leave you to your thoughts,” says the doctor. She then leaves and closes the door; and as she does, a single tear falls down my cheek, along with all my hopes for a better life.

Chapter V: Axel

Pitiful squeaking fills the basement as I pick up another furry subject. I ignore its attempts to scurry out of my tight grip and place in on the fixed machine. I close the door shut, watching the subject scratch at the glass frantically. My hand finds a switch and with a swift flick, humming fills the basement. The subject's frantic squeaking turns into hysterical wails as slowly, it's body started disappearing, recreating itself back within its cage. Picking the subject once again, I place it in a maze. Before being teleported, all the subjects have been trained exactly how to escape from this maze. To test the recreation of the subjects brain, I carefully observe it's change in behavior and method of escaping the maze. Pitifully, the rat's claw scratches at the wall, it's head twisting in every direction to look for some way out. A sigh leaves my lips as the rat runs into walls looking for a way out. Another failure. Another hour wasted instead of helping Piper.

The sudden sound of footsteps pulls me out of my angered thoughts. Lukas walks into the basement, his hands stuffed into his lab coat. Annoyance coats my face as I watch him glance up at me, only to quickly bring his eyes back to his feet.

"Hi, Axel," Lukas murmurs.

I grunt in return, not trusting my voice to answer him calmly. Instead, I seat myself at my desk once again, looking over at the blueprints. The combination of chemicals for the energy fueling the teleportation machine needs to be adjusted again. The power has to be strong enough

to take apart the human cells and reform them perfectly in another location. Due to the fragileness of the human brain, the energy also has to be soft enough not to cause any damage. Another growl played at my throat as I slam my hands on the paper. A powerful chemical bond is created through how well the atoms can bond with the number of electrons on the outer orbit. Feeling tired and unable to remember the entire periodic table, I rummage through the mess of papers to find my paper copy.

Without any thought, my hand roams to the left where the reactivity increases the further I go. When I realized the reactivity has nothing to do with fission, I shook my head at myself. My hand skims down the paper to the very left hand corner, examining the element's size increase the further I go. To decide which chemical I use to create fission, I have to examine the relative size. The larger the nuclei, the more there is to cause fission with. Thus, the the larger an element's atom is, the more power is creates. My hands slides back up, knowing that an element with too big of a nucleus wouldn't fix the situation. A chime rips me away from my frustration. A text appears from a chemist friend of mine.

Are you still working on that teleportation machine?

I rise an eyebrow questioningly at his question before typing a reply.

Yes.

Another chime rings almost immediately.

There's a new man-made element going around the black market. It might help. I hear it can produce a high energy reaction with any element with seven electrons in it's outer cloud. It might work if you combine it with an element with less ionization energy.

Hope. There's still hope for Piper.

How much?

There's a short pause before I hear the chime.

Not money. I want that machine's blueprint. I mean what are you using it for anyway?

I flinch. To give away the secrets of my life work was devastating. He didn't understand how hard I've worked to create the program to input coordinates, the machine to contain and use the energy, the amount of trials I've done to look for this last element. But without this last element, I can't save Piper. Without it, how can I complete my life's achievement?

"DAMN IT!" I screech, kicking my wooden chair across the room, watching it turn into nothing but a pile of broken wood. Lukas scampers to the other side of the room, eyeing me like a bomb. He slowly places his hand on my shoulder to console me but instead I could feel another spike of disgust run through my veins. "Don't touch me, you little wimp!" I growl out. "You went against what I said! *You* were the one who got her hurt! Now look at yourself! Sitting here, in my lab doing nothing but whining!"

"I-I," Lukas stammers, daring not to look away from my enraged eyes. "I didn't mean to. I'm sorry," he sobs. Lukas fell to the floor, cradling himself in his arms. He mutters his meaningless apology over and over. "I feel the same way as you do. I want to help."

“Help?” I snap, grabbing his shirt with a tight grip. “You don’t know the first thing about how I feel! Don’t pretend you understand anything that I go through! You don’t know the humiliation of being taunted for the creation you know you can make!” Silence and tension drowns our unmoving bodies as I glare into his shocked, trembling eyes. “Get out,” I breath, holding myself back from slamming my fists into his head. My grip slackens and Lukas lets out another whimper before rushing out of the basement.

Panting heavily from my sudden outburst, I seat myself on the cold floor. Grabbing my phone I text back my final reply.

I’ll send it to you through a flash drive. I’m using it to get a cure for my sister.

Chapter VI: Lukas

The excruciatingly frigid feeling of dread and horror race through my veins and seize my heart as I step down into the basement. I'm so ridiculously anxious and panicked that I can't even crack a good chemistry joke. The dim flickering lights overhead do their best to make me even more uncomfortable. *Why haven't we gotten those fixed?* I maneuver expertly around the various deadly chemicals and hazardous tools laying around. Jesus, this place really needs to be cleaned up.

As I make my way closer to Axel's looming silhouette, I thrust my hands quickly in my pockets so Axel can't see them shaking. The machine is finally fixed—for good, let's hope—and I was scared to death about what we are about to do. Steal a half a million dollar cure from a maximum security, government funded pharmacy; although Axel is unbelievably scary, there are other things to be worried about. I walk up to the work table and try to rest my elbows casually on it and stare at Axel, he's hunched over the machine—probably making the finishing touches. I *hate* how I become a timid shell of myself whenever I'm around him. These past couple days saw the harshest treatment I had ever received from Axel. I deserved it though. Everything that has happened to Piper is my fault. This morning he seemed better though, I know he had to give the blueprints of the machine to a "friend" in exchange for the only thing that will make our machine work last week. What's done is done though, now we are just one step closer to helping Piper.

"Hi, Axel."

He impassively glances at me.

“Lukas. I didn’t see you.”

I clear my throat to fill the silence that came afterwards.

“Wow! I love what you’ve done with your hair! Do you go to Sylvia too?” I exclaimed.

“I need a drink,” he muttered under his breath.

I look around the dim basement and let out a hum of agreement. Why does he need to make having a conversation with him so difficult? I take a deep breath and lean back against the table behind me. Axel is picking at a couple of wires in the back of the machine.

“Um, are you almost done?” I ask cautiously. I don’t want to give him any reason to be annoyed with me, God *knows* he already has enough. He grunts and I stared dubiously at him until he closes the latch and turns to me, wiping the grease off his hands on a rag. “Yes, we better go now.”

I sucked in a sharp breath and nodded. We had gone over the plan many times: Axel and I would be transported inside the pharmacy via teleportation machine. Once we find the room the cure is located in I will stand guard while he gets it. Here’s the catch, the teleportation machine doesn’t teleport itself, just the people or things inside of it; so it’s up to Axel and I to escape. Since the pharmacy has never had to deal with anyone breaking *out*, the only thing that will sound the alarm is when we open the doors. Once we do that, we will have exactly three minutes to escape before the security guards arrive.

Completely fool-proof.

Axel fastens the straps of his black backpack and looks towards me. It’s time to go. As I hesitantly make my way towards the machine I steal forlorn glances at the home I’ll probably never see again. I remind myself that everything we are about to do is for Piper. I would do anything if it means the love of my life will be able to walk again.

“Are we going to go or do you want to stare at some rusted tools a little bit longer?” Axel’s snide remark harshly interrupts my thoughts. I glare his way and pushed past him and stepped into the hollowed cylinder looking teleportation machine. I could tell he was utterly astonished by my actions, but his attitude was getting on my nerves. I don’t understand why he has to be so rude all the time, can’t he at least pretend to be nice? Axel steps in beside me and closes the door behind him. His shoulders are tense, probably because he’s forced to stand so close to me.

“Let’s hope the machine will put all of our atoms back together correctly.” He said tersely and started flipping switches to turn the machine on.

“Yeah, I don’t really trust atoms though... I hear they make up everything.” I said casually. A laugh escaped me when Axel turned to give me a condescending look. He really set himself up for that one. Beneath us the machine started to hum with power and everything around us started spinning in streaks of light and sound.

Here we go.

Chapter VII: Axel

I let out a shaky breath as I look through the isles on pills. Foreign and complicated names cover the plastic containers as I skim through the “P” section. Where is it? My eyes dart up and down, side to side, desperately searching for the only medication I need. Where is it? I finally come to the end of the isle. Still, my eyes have not landed on the medication I need. Where is it? Jerking my head around, I see a blocked section of the pharmacy, a small shelf of pills protected by glass waiting for me. I scurry around the office, looking for any keys. I’m able to find some but none of them fit. Clenching my fists, I notice Lukas rushing towards me with an electronic key. If the key didn’t fit, the police will be alerted of our presence. Sucking in a breath, I watch Lukas place the key into the hole. The lock clicks open.

Wearily, I wasted no time to make my way to the cabinet. After testing every key I had found, the glass finally unlocked. Without hesitation, my hand reached out to grab the bottle all my hard work has been put into getting: Paralingunt. Before my hands could wrap around the bottle, red flashes across my vision paired with the loud bells of alarms. Cursing under my breath, I grab the bottle and crouch low to the ground, pulling Lukas along. Keeping my head under the counter, I led Lukas towards the door out the pharmacy. I freeze the moment I hear a firm command yell out at us.

“Freeze and come out with your hands above your head!” a policeman yells out at us. Lukas starts shaking at looks at me with teary eyes. I want to tell him something, even a snarky remark to slightly calm him down but my thoughts are too jumbled. How did they know? How did we get caught?

“What do we do?” Lukas asks, even his voice trembling.

Snapping out of my shocked daze, I say, “Shut up and follow my lead,” before pulling out the pistol I had hidden before leaving. Lukas’s eyes grow to the size of saucers as he stares at the weapon in my hand. Ignoring him, I take a deep breath before suddenly jumping out to shot the gun. Without looking at the damage my first shot did, I pull myself back down under the counter. Shots are heard as they destroy the computer that stood where my head was.

“Put the weapon down and come out with your hands above your head!” the policeman yells out again. In response, I yell out a colorful insult. Ignoring his next words, I turn to Lukas. Before I could tell him anything, a familiar voice calls out. Shock forces my body to peak out from under the counter, my eyes locking on my trusted partner who had help me make my life long work a success.

“I would do what the police are telling you, Axel. It would be less painful and a favor for me since I gave you that new element that ended up being the key ingredient to your teleportation machine.”

Venum coats my voice as I reply, “What the hell. You ratted us out!?”

He let out a disgusting crackle. “You see, I knew you couldn’t sell this machine for money since it’s currently illegal, so it’s most likely you would be using to steal the cure for your dear sister. I’m glad I could get my hands on the blueprints without lifting much of a finger. Still, my connection with you could cause some trouble later when I sell this so it’s better I pay these policemen to take you out and forget about my little deal with you.”

I snarl at him words, slamming my knuckles into the concrete floor. “You b-” Before I can finish, Lukas tugs on my shirt, his cheeks stained with tear coated tears. I let out a shaky breath before telling him my plan.

“We’re gonna run right through their wall of policemen.”

“What?” Lukas asks, dumbfounded. “You can’t be serious.”

“When’s the last time you heard me joking,” I bite back, rolling my eyes.

“Never?” Lukas asks unsurely.

“Exactly, now follow closely right behind me,” I order, softening my tone. Lukas hesitantly nods before following me as I bolt out the counter, shooting a path for Lukas and me to escape. Guns are firing back at me. Searing pain blooms in my thigh, then my arm then my stomach. I can hear Lukas yelling at me about something. The pain hurt too much for me to understand his words. I’m not looking at the door anymore. I’m looking at the ceiling. My pain in my limbs is too much for me to think straight. Someone shut that annoying laughter up. Why is Lukas crying? It’s hard to see. Darkness is eating away at the corners of my vision. Piper. I won’t be able to see Piper’s smile. Or his. Lukas. I guess it’s now that I realize that he’s the only that’s been here for me while I’ve been trying to get back Piper. He’s been by my side. I don’t hate him. I want him to live.

Weakly, I gasp out, “The pills. Take it to Piper.” Lukas only starts to cry more. I wonder why. He’s hugging my limp body but I can’t feel it. Darkness has almost consumed all

of my sight. This isn't fair. I was going to prove everyone wrong with my machine. I'll think up something later. Revenge can wait. I'm too tired.

Chapter VIII: Lukas

A prison guard strides through the dark, grimy halls of the maximum security prison. Surrounded in an aura of smugness, he casually flips the on and off switch of his taser with a seemingly permanent scowl etched on his weathered face. Dirty looks that promised punishment were shot at all of the inmates who dared to peer at him through the bars of their cells; the inmates knew to stay away from him. He was bad news.

The guard was finally released for his lunch break and he planned on taking advantage of every single minute of it. The only solace from this godforsaken place was his chicken salad sandwich. He couldn't wait to—

“E-Excuse me, sir?” a timid voice broke through his thoughts.

The guard turned sharply and his nostrils flared in indignation. Who would dare speak to him? His eyes scanned the dingy cells until they came across a scrawny pale inmate leaning against his cell bars. The guard took his time to menacingly stalk towards the cell and stood a foot from the inmate, who weakly smiled at him. It was a poor sight, purple and yellow bruises stretched across the inmate's face and down his neck where it looked like someone had tried to strangle him. One of his eyes was swollen shut and his right arm was in a sling. He must be that new inmate that the prisoners took to beating up. Come to think of it, he's that guy who tried to steal some ridiculously expensive cure from the government regulated pharmacy. Yeah, he's heard of this newbie. What an idiot.

“Can I help you, princess?” The guard says, voice dripping with sarcasm, his eyes flash with malicious intent. Snickers arise from the surrounding cells.

“Um, it’s just, they won’t let me have any contact with my family on the outside, I-I was just wondering if you could send this letter for me. It’s to my fiance and she’s paralyzed and has no one left and I really want to talk to her and tell her that I love her one last time.”

The prison guard barks out a humorless laugh and says, “Should’ve thought about that before you tried to steal from the government, inmate.”

The inmate grips the bars tightly and pleads, “Please, *please, sir*. Don’t you have someone you love? Can you please do this for just once? I’m not a bad person, I was just in a bad situation.” He thrusts a dirty envelope into the guard’s hand and looks solemnly into his eyes.

The guard rolls his eyes and his face morphs in repulsion but he takes the letter nonetheless and gives a short nod. Once the guard reaches the now empty break room he pulls out a chair and slumps onto it. Curiosity dominating his hunger, the guard rips open the envelope and starts reading the letter inside.

Dear Piper,

I miss you. It hurts being here. They won't let me call or send letters to anyone but I had to talk to you. I long for your gentle hands stroking my hair as you tell me the honey-soaked words of "I love you." I'm always desperately calling out to you in my dreams here. Well, I used to. My dreams have all turned into nightmares. I've lost all salvation in this cage. In the darkness, I only see Axel's dying face. I only hear his dying gasps. When I close my eyes, I only image your pained weak face in that disgusting hospital bed. Your screams of pain echo on my mind. My sanity is slipping away. My hands shake in this cell. Not because I'm cold or scared. Because I want to destroy that damn machine. Without that machine, you wouldn't have gotten hurt. Axel wouldn't have been killed. You wouldn't have to deal with any loss. I want to see you when I finally escape this hell hole. I want to feel your warm caresses. I want to hear your radiant laughter. More than anything, I want to tell you how much I love you. Piper. I love you.

Love,
Lukas

The guard stared unsurely at the letter for a couple seconds, then let out a spiteful laugh. He stood up and walked toward the mailbox, his steps led him past the the metal slots and to the

garbage can where he tossed in the crumpled letter from the inmate, and walked away without a second look. It's not like the prisoner will be alive by the time his fiance writes back. He get's the death penalty next week. The guard walks back to his seat and eats his chicken salad sandwich.

Yep, just another day on the job.

Chapter IX: Piper

Five years have gone by and I haven't heard from Lukas once. You would think he would write considering how he doesn't have a single thing to do in prison. I'm still pissed off they broke into that Pharmacy. How the hell did they think they were going to pull that off? What went through their minds? That they were going to use that stupid teleportation machine to get in, steal the cure, then leave without anyone noticing? Boys are so freaking dumb. God, why do they always treat me like I can't handle myself? I'm fine! Well, actually no. I'm *not* fine. I know everything now, and what's worse is that I found out from the news. No one ever came to my door and told me. I wish someone would had told it to me straight.

I walk to the basement door dragging a heavy wood and metal object, my expression deceptively calm. As I open the door, I think back to when I heard the news. After I found out Axel was dead, I couldn't leave my house for a week, weakened from the shock of losing my only brother. The only thing I could do was call all family members that still cared about us and tell them the news, broken hearted and sobbing. So I called my grandmother. She and my parents had a falling out when I was ten, but I always cherished the time she made for Axel and I, taking us to her extremely fancy country club, teaching us how to play golf. I guess I should mention that she's rich. She took the news well and asked how it happened and if I was alright. I told her about how Axel and Lukas broke into the Pharmacy to steal the Paralingunt cure for me and how it went absolutely and horribly wrong. Then I told her about my accident, how I "fell down the stairs" and was paralyzed. It had turned out she heard about the cure and offered to pay for my

treatment. I guess she thought it would make me feel better about my situation, help me feel less awful. It didn't, I hate taking charity, it makes me feel like I can't handle myself or solve my own problems. But I accepted her help anyways because I knew it would make her feel better. And three months later I was completely cured. Whoopy.

I walk down the steps to a room where not one, but two disasters happened. When I reach the last step, cold dank air surrounds me instantly. I flip the switch to my left and the yellow fluorescent lights flicker on, along with the hum of electricity running through the bulbs. And there it is. The oh so famous teleportation machine. I walk over to the machine and stand in front of it. Just the sight of it makes me infuriated. *This* machine tore Axel apart from the inside. *This* machine ruined Lukas's future. *This* machine hurt me and the people I love most in the world.

I'm getting worked up now, breathing heavily.

This machine ripped Axel's life away from him, me, and everyone else that loved him! *This* machine took Lukas, my one true love, and locked him away forever so I could never be happy again! *This* machine is the reason my life will never be the same, and I can't make it go back to the way it was before, I *never* will!!

I lift the one thing I brought down to the basement with me, a sledge hammer. As I lift it, all the anger I held in for five years wells up inside me, ready to burst. A scream seizes me and I bring the hammer down. *Smash!* The hammer leaves a giant dent in the machine. *Smash!* It leaves another. *Smash!* And another. *Smash!* And another. *Smash!* And another. *Smash!* And another. I slam the sledge hammer into the teleportation machine so many times I've lost count. I'm no longer hitting dents into this machine. Instead, pieces of metal are flying off, running away from the merciless sledgehammer that's trapped within my firm grip. I'm still screaming, tears running down my cheeks out of anger or sorrow - I can't tell which - maybe both.

The metal is now so dented and destroyed, the wires have started coming out the seams. I smash the hammer into the glass, the control panel, and crush some more metal. I continue my assault on the cold machine until the sobs choking my throat make me drop the sledge hammer onto the ground. No longer able to hold the heavy weapon, I pick up some empty glass beakers and throw them across the room and into a brick wall. My throat is so scratchy and dry my body forces me to quit screaming, but it doesn't stop the tears. I pick up stacks of research paper and through them into an old metal trash can. I find an old unopened beer bottle leftover from Axel, open the top, take a swig of beer, then dump the rest into the trash can. I then grab Axel's lighter and light it, the flame warming up my thumb. I drop it into the trash can and watch the paper erupt in flames. The fire dances, like Axel did when he was 6. It flickers with light, like Lukas's eyes when he told a corny chemistry joke. It's warm, like both of their hearts. And it smells God awful, like how living life will be without them by my side.

I cry harder and collapse onto the floor in a heap. I feel like dead weight, just a sack of skin and bones. All of the anger I harboured in for so long leaves me, and grief replaces it. I wail and weep like a baby, but I don't care.

I just don't care about anything anymore.

Piper is sitting in her hospital bed, watching the most important people in her life go through their own hell to help fix their mistakes against her. Axel is drowning himself in his work to help her, losing more than just her and his sanity along the way. Lukas is trying to save the love of his life while surviving under Piper's brother's tyrannical wing. When they fall into desperation's grasp, they'll break the law for each other. How will Piper find her way out of her drug induced daze? What will happen when Axel finally finishes his obsession? Will Lukas find his way back to his love and save her brother from his fatal end?

"I couldn't take my eyes off the words after I started."

- **Hanna, a best selling author (also author of this book)**

"They put the novella in this."

- **Natalie Novella, a novella expert**

"I couldn't put the book down because when I did, they threatened to kill my cat."

- **Matt Ruppel, a chemistry teacher of High Tech High**