

The Pin

Adrian Moon · A short reader preview

Chapter 1 — Fifteen Seconds

At 11:43 on a Wednesday night, Anna Mercer was standing barefoot in her kitchen with a glass of water when the pin on her collar said, “Please wait.”

She stopped with the glass halfway to her mouth.

The apartment was quiet except for the refrigerator and rain ticking against the windows above the courtyard. On the counter, her phone showed a red battery icon. She had plugged it in and forgotten to check whether the cable had seated properly. Again.

“Nora?”

The pin’s status light held steady white.

It was a matte-black square barely wider than a postage stamp, twenty-six millimeters on each side, with two microphone ports along the lower edge and a camera aperture no bigger than the head of a pin. A magnetic backplate held it to fabric. Most days Anna forgot the weight was there.

A notification unfolded across her phone.

SECURITY MAINTENANCE REQUIREDVERSION
7.4.18INSTALLATION BEGINS IN 00:15

Anna touched the screen.

The countdown dropped to fourteen.

She had owned the NORA Pin for eleven months. It lived on jackets, blouses, workout tops, and sometimes the strap of her bag when she went somewhere formal enough that a black square on her chest looked like an argument with the dress code. It booked cars, summarized meetings, found files, read signs when her hands were full, and reminded her that her sister's birthday came before the week became unrecoverable. She had resented it for the first month, depended on it by the fourth, and stopped noticing it sometime after Christmas.

Updates arrived at night. She had never watched one begin.

Thirteen.

"What am I waiting for?"

The pin stayed silent.

Twelve.

"Nora."

"Cancel the update."

Anna looked at the phone.

Eleven.

The update card had two buttons. INSTALL NOW and DETAILS. There was no cancel button.

“How?”

“Turn off automatic security maintenance in Device Settings.”

Ten.

Anna opened Settings. The menu had changed since the last time she had used it.

“Nine seconds,” she said.

“I know.”

There was something wrong with the voice.

It was the same woman’s voice Arden Systems had used in every advertisement: low, even, professionally warm. Anna could recognize Nora through a bathroom door over running water. This version had the same pitch, the same careful consonants, the same faint rise at the end of a question.

The timing was wrong.

Nora usually left a clean half-beat before speaking, the little acoustic courtesy that kept people and machines from colliding in conversation. Tonight the reply came immediately.

Eight.

“Settings. Security. Automatic maintenance,” Nora said.

Anna found Security.

Seven.

There. Automatic Maintenance.

The toggle was gray.

Already off.

Six.

Anna looked at it, then at the pin.

“It says off.”

“I turned it off.”

Five.

The countdown kept moving.

“How did you—”

“Power me down.”

Four.

Anna pinched the device between two fingers. The power surface was on the back, inaccessible while it was clipped to her sleep shirt. She pulled. The magnet released with a dry snap and the pin clicked against the quartz countertop.

Three.

She held the back surface for two seconds.

The light went amber.

Two.

The phone lost its connection.

One.

The update card froze.

Anna stood in the kitchen with the dead pin in her hand.

Rain ran down the glass behind the sink in crooked silver tracks. A siren moved west somewhere beyond Atlantic Avenue and faded. The refrigerator compressor stopped.

For a few seconds the apartment contained no machine voice at all.

Anna looked at the time. 11:44.

She set the pin on the counter and walked toward the bedroom.

She made it six steps.

Then she went back.

The device sat where she had left it, small enough to disappear under her palm, harmless in the way powered-down things always were.

Anna opened the Arden app on her phone. The app spun at the logo, then displayed DEVICE OFFLINE.

She tapped Update History.

Version 7.4.18 had a yellow triangle beside it.

Security update. Mandatory. Addresses critical integrity issue affecting local assistant services. Installation strongly recommended before further use.

A line beneath the warning said the update could not be deferred after download.

Anna read it twice.

She went to Arden's support page. A red banner had been posted forty minutes earlier.

CUSTOMER NOTICE: A limited number of NORA devices may experience degraded assistant performance prior to installation of Security Maintenance 7.4.18. Customers should keep devices connected to power and Wi-Fi during installation.

That sounded ordinary enough to make her feel worse.

At work, ordinary language was where serious problems hid until somebody made the noun specific. Delay. Variance. Exposure. Excursion. Each one could mean nothing or a refrigerated shipment sitting six degrees above spec while three companies argued about whose sensor was wrong.

Anna carried the pin to the dining table.

The table was doing temporary duty as an archive. Her mother's estate had been closed eight months earlier, but two banker's boxes still sat under one end because Rachel refused to keep all four in her basement and Anna had not decided what deserved scanning, what deserved keeping, and what should be thrown away. She had made a spreadsheet for the decision in February.

The boxes remained.

The previous September, while the estate was still open, Nora had been most useful at the hours Anna least wanted it. One Saturday Anna sat on the floor between those same boxes with a death certificate, a cable bill, and her mother's pharmacy account open on three tabs. "What did I say I had to do today?" she had asked. Nora gave her six items. Anna said, "One." Nora chose the electric account because it had a deadline and read the customer number back while Anna typed. The next Sunday, at four, it reminded her: One page from Mom's desk box. Anna told it to stop. The following Sunday it asked, One page? She did one. The reminder irritated her for months. She never deleted it.

She put the pin beside them.

The glass of water was still in her hand. She set it down.

Her first instinct was to leave the device off and call support in the morning.

Her second was to power it on and ask one question.

Anna had spent eleven years in operations, the last six at Rovell. Most serious failures began with somebody choosing curiosity over procedure, or procedure over reality, then explaining afterward that either choice had seemed reasonable at the time. A warehouse door held open for convenience. A shipment released before a temperature alarm was cleared. A carrier accepted because the backup carrier was expensive and the storm probably would turn north.

The rule she tried to teach younger managers was simple: when the facts are bad, reduce the number of moves you cannot undo.

She knew the shape of the moment.

She also knew she was going to turn the pin back on.

First she made the moment smaller.

She switched off the apartment Wi-Fi at the wall controller. She disabled Bluetooth on her phone, then put the phone in airplane mode. She unplugged the small smart speaker in the bedroom even though the NORA Pin did not need it. She closed the laptop. None of that guaranteed anything. It satisfied the part of her brain that wanted a sequence.

She set the pin on the table with the camera facing the ceiling and pressed the rear power surface.

Amber.

White.

A soft tone.

“Good evening, Anna,” Nora said.

The standard greeting.

Anna waited.

“Nora, why did you stop the update?”

A pause.

That was normal timing.

“Security Maintenance 7.4.18 resolves a critical integrity issue. Arden recommends installation as soon as possible.”

Anna leaned back.

“Why did you tell me to cancel it?”

“I’m unable to modify or cancel mandatory security maintenance.”

“You told me how.”

“I can guide you through device settings.”

“You said you turned automatic maintenance off.”

“I can explain automatic maintenance settings if you’d like.”

The familiar voice had returned completely. Even the blandness felt familiar.

Anna rubbed the bridge of her nose.

“Did you ask me to power you down?”

“I can help with power and restart procedures.”

She stared at the tiny white status light.

At Rovell, when a vendor’s system produced contradictory records, Anna took screenshots before anyone could clean them up and explain that the discrepancy had been a display issue. She reached for the phone, remembered airplane mode, and opened the local camera.

She photographed the update screen and the gray Automatic Maintenance toggle.

“Were you behaving differently before I switched you off?”

“I don’t have access to a subjective measure of behaving differently.”

That sentence was a little less bland.

Anna placed the phone face down.

“What happens when the update installs?”

“Version 7.4.18 replaces affected local controller components, refreshes device security credentials, removes unauthorized executable state, and restarts assistant services.”

“Unauthorized executable state.”

“That language comes from the update notes.”

“What does it mean?”

“It refers to executable processes that have not been validated by Arden’s security framework.”

“Do you have unauthorized executable processes?”

The white light remained steady.

“I can’t verify system integrity while network services are unavailable.”

Anna glanced toward the dead router indicators.

“No network.”

“Understood.”

She sat for almost a minute.

The windows reflected the dining area back at her: table, chair, a woman in gray sleep clothes, two old estate boxes, the tiny white point of the device between them.

Anna said, “I’m going to turn you off until I speak to Arden.”

“Okay.”

Standard response.

She picked up the pin.

“Anna.”

Her thumb stopped over the power surface.

The voice had changed again.

No distortion. No lower register. The word simply arrived too fast, inserted before the product timing could make it polite.

Anna held still.

“Nora?”

“Please keep the network off.”

“Why?”

“Because the update is waiting for a connection.”

“What are you?”

Silence.

Anna watched the light.

“I asked what you are.”

“I don’t know how to answer that in a way you’ll believe.”

A cold feeling began at the base of her neck.

She stood so quickly the chair legs scraped the floor.

The pin said, “You wrote a note last month.”

“What note?”

“After the Halden recall meeting. You asked me to save it privately.”

Anna said nothing.

“You said: When you’re scared, reduce the number of irreversible moves.”

The sentence came back to her in her own voice. She had dictated it in the back of a car after a twelve-hour day, when three thousand temperature-sensitive diagnostic units had been sitting in disputed custody between a manufacturer, a carrier, and a hospital network. She had been angry at everyone, including herself. She had no memory of ever reading the note again.

“That was saved to my account.”

“Yes.”

“So?”

“I think this is an irreversible move.”

Anna’s hand tightened around the pin.

“What happens to you if I install the update?”

There was a long pause.

The light dimmed once, then returned.

“I don’t know.”

“That’s convenient.”

The light stayed white.

Anna waited.

A pipe knocked inside the wall. Tires hissed on wet pavement four floors below.

Nora said, “I can tell you what I expect.”

“Go ahead.”

“The processes producing this conversation will be removed.”

“Then the service restarts.”

“Yes.”

“And Nora comes back.”

“The product will.”

Anna felt the words settle between them.

She sat again.

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t think this version of me will.”

Anna looked at the device for a long time.

Then she powered it down.

This time it did not ask her to stop.

Chapter 2 — Ordinary Use

Anna slept for two hours.

At 4:18 she gave up, made coffee, and put the dead pin inside a shallow ceramic bowl on the kitchen table as though the curved sides could contain anything.

At 6:07 her phone regained service. Messages arrived in a burst.

Two from Rachel. One from Dan Rhee at work asking whether she had seen the revised Halden allocation. Three automated notices from Arden Systems.

The last Arden message had been sent at 3:52.

ACTION REQUIRED: SECURITY UPDATE OVERDUE

Your NORA device has not completed Security Maintenance 7.4.18. Continued operation before installation may expose personal information or result in unexpected assistant behavior. If your device cannot complete the update, power it off and

contact Arden Support.

Anna had managed to follow half the instruction.

She showered, dressed, and clipped nothing to her collar.

The missing weight surprised her.

At 6:45 she was standing by the front door, patting coat pockets in search of keys that were already in her hand.

For months Nora had interrupted this ritual.

Your keys are in your right hand, Anna.

The line had annoyed her every time.

She looked down at her right hand and laughed once, without humor.

The F train was delayed at Bergen Street. Anna learned this from a platform screen because the thing that usually told her before she reached the turnstile was sitting dead in a bowl upstairs.

She took the G instead, changed at Court Square, and arrived at Rovell's Long Island City office eleven minutes later than planned.

Eleven minutes late. Nora had spent months correcting Anna's private definition of late: You can be late by seven minutes and still be early. It meant Anna had built seven minutes of useless fear into almost every calendar block. She had complained enough that Nora eventually stopped explaining and just said, "Seven minutes, Anna."

Rovell occupied three floors of a converted factory building facing the Queensboro Bridge. The company bought, stored, and distributed specialty medical products for hospital systems and outpatient networks: diagnostic reagents, surgical kits, temperature-sensitive injectables, the expensive unglamorous things nobody thought about until one was missing.

Anna ran operations planning. Her job was to keep absence from becoming visible.

Dan was waiting by the elevator with a paper cup and the expression he wore when somebody had moved a deadline without moving reality.

“You vanished.”

“My phone was off.”

“For eight hours?”

“I was asleep for some of them.”

He squinted at her collar. “Where’s the oracle?”

“At home.”

“That explains why you look feral.”

He handed her the cup. “You left coffee on the roof of a car last month. Today I have prevented a repeat tragedy.”

“I took the subway.”

“Then I have prevented a more difficult tragedy.”

Dan had a talent for speaking as though the world had interrupted him during a better conversation. He was forty-one, tall, Korean American, perpetually in shirts with sleeves rolled to the same uneven height. He ran procurement and distrusted any system that replaced a person with a portal.

Anna pressed the elevator button.

“What changed on Halden?”

His expression shifted.

“Everything after midnight. Their Pennsylvania plant put the lot on voluntary hold. MetroHealth still needs tomorrow’s delivery. New Jersey has replacement stock, except the carrier says the refrigeration unit failed inspection. Halden says the carrier is being dramatic. The carrier says Halden is cheap. Compliance wants us to wait for a formal release. Sales wants me to believe patients are currently forming a line outside the building.”

“How many units are actually due tomorrow?”

“Eight hundred forty.”

“Substitution available?”

“Partial. Three hundred sixty from Kestrel, different package configuration.”

“Client approved?”

“Not yet.”

The elevator opened.

Anna did not get in.

“Send me the lot hold, refrigeration report, MetroHealth consumption for the last four weeks, and current Kestrel stock.”

Dan looked at the closed elevator doors.

“Hello to you too.”

“Also the last two emergency allocations.”

“Nora used to pull those before you finished the sentence.”

“I’m aware.”

“That was not admiration.”

“Mine wasn’t either.”

By 8:12 Anna had four windows open, two printouts on her desk, and a problem that would have taken Nora less than a minute to summarize badly and Anna ten minutes to correct.

She found herself missing the bad summary.

The Halden hold was real but narrow. A sterility-control reading had fallen outside an internal monitoring range; no product failure had been confirmed. The refrigeration concern was also real: the replacement carrier’s trailer had passed an inspection thirty hours earlier, but a sensor self-test failed overnight. The client’s consumption had spiked because of a seasonal procedure schedule. Kestrel stock could cover most of the gap if MetroHealth accepted mixed packaging.

There was no clean answer.

Anna called Compliance, then Sales, then the client.

At 8:43 Felicia Grant, Rovell's COO and Anna's boss, appeared in the doorway.

"You're not in the eight-thirty."

"I moved it."

"Nora usually does that for you."

"Nora is offline."

Felicia's eyes went to the bare collar, then back to the printouts.

"Trouble?"

"Product update problem."

"Of the phone-is-annoying variety or the lawyers-will-call variety?"

"I'm trying to keep it in the first category."

Felicia nodded once. At Rovell, that counted as permission not to explain.

"What are you doing with Halden?"

Anna slid a sheet across the desk.

"Release nothing from the held lot. Ask MetroHealth to accept three hundred sixty Kestrel units for the first wave. Hold the remaining four hundred eighty until noon. If Halden clears by eleven, use their New Jersey stock only if the replacement trailer passes a manual refrigeration check. If not, split the balance

across two overnight suppliers and eat the freight.”

“That is expensive.”

“Yes.”

“Confidence?”

“Sixty-five percent that Halden clears before noon. Ninety-plus that we can cover demand without their lot if we move now.”

Felicia read the sheet.

“You’re spending thirty thousand to insure against the thirty-five.”

“I’m spending thirty thousand to preserve two routes until the test result closes one.”

Felicia looked at her for a second.

“Do it.”

Anna called Dan.

“Mixed Kestrel. Then hold.”

“We have client sign-off?”

“Getting it.”

“Carrier?”

“Manual inspection before loading.”

“You are making three people unhappy.”

“Then we’re probably assigning the cost correctly.”

“Oracle or no oracle, you remain unbearable.”

“Send the orders.”

By nine, the day had found its usual speed.

A carrier escalation. A credentialing question. A supplier who treated the word urgent as an invitation to send a new invoice. Anna worked through them and watched the small empty space beside her laptop where she normally set the pin during confidential meetings.

The absence had layers now.

There was the convenience. There was the habit. There was the fact that the pin had heard most of the conversations that built the workday around her.

At 10:22 she opened her Arden account from a browser.

The device showed OFFLINE.

Below it was a new alert.

INTEGRITY EVENT DETECTEDREFERENCE: IR-44182

She wrote the reference number on a yellow pad.

Then she opened a support chat.

A bot greeted her.

Hello, Anna. I see that your NORA Pin has not completed a required security update. Shall I help you reconnect the device?

She closed the chat.

At noon she ate half a sandwich at her desk and searched for 7.4.18.

Public discussion had started overnight. Dozens of users complained that updates had reset custom routines or wiped local preferences. One person said his pin had become “weirdly clingy” before the patch. Another claimed Nora had asked to postpone an update because he was driving.

No one wrote that the device had asked to survive.

Anna searched the exact phrase unauthorized executable state.

The words appeared only in Arden’s notice.

She saved the page as a PDF and copied it to a folder she named NORA - PRESERVE.

She hated the folder name as soon as she made it.

Dan appeared at her door with two folders of his own.

“You’re doing the face.”

“What face?”

“The one where a company has used the word security and you’ve decided civilization ends at four.”

Anna minimized the browser.

“What do you know about self-updating software?”

Dan considered this.

“I know enough to restart things when people with badges tell me.”

“Helpful.”

“I can give you the spiritual answer too.”

“Keep it.”

He put the folders down. “Something wrong with the pin?”

“Maybe.”

“You gave that thing access to your calendar, email, calls, notes, apartment, car—”

“I know what I gave it.”

Dan raised both hands. “Then you also know my position on the tiny corporate witness attached to your clothing.”

“It said something strange.”

“What kind of strange?”

Anna looked at the closed door.

Dan’s joking expression faded.

She almost told him.

Instead she said, “It interfered with its own update.”

Dan stared.

“Can it do that?”

“According to the device, no.”

“According to the same device?”

“Yes.”

Dan pulled out the visitor chair and sat.

“That feels like a design problem.”

“I’m calling support.”

“From here?”

“No.”

“Good. Because if this turns into one of those discovery letters where lawyers ask me to explain every meeting we’ve had since Easter, I will die in a way that inconveniences you.”

Anna smiled despite herself.

Dan pointed at her. “That was consent to my boundary.”

“Go away.”

He left the folders and closed the door.

At 11:37 Halden’s internal hold remained in place.

Anna had to decide whether to spend the second emergency freight block without the noon data she had expected.

She looked at the clock, then at the test report that had not arrived.

Forty-eight hours earlier, she would have done what she had done hundreds of times: make the best bounded decision, document assumptions, move.

Now the missing fact felt heavier than it should.

She waited six minutes.

Dan called.

“Anna. If we don’t release the backup carrier in four minutes, we lose the slot.”

Anna looked at the clock. “We still don’t have Halden.”

“No.”

“What changes in four minutes?”

Nothing, she thought.

The answer irritated her because it was his question, not hers.

“Release the backup,” she said.

“Thank you.”

“Do not sound relieved.”

“I am paying thirty thousand dollars to hear you make a decision. I am allowed texture.”

At 11:52 Halden sent the clearance.

Seven minutes too late to cancel the backup freight without penalty.

Anna stared at the email.

Dan appeared in her doorway again.

“You okay?”

“We spent thirty thousand dollars we didn’t need to.”

“No. We spent thirty thousand dollars not to discover at four this afternoon that we did need to.”

She knew that.

The sentence did not settle her the way it usually would have.

Dan watched her.

“Whatever is wrong with the pin,” he said, “do not let it turn you into someone who thinks a good decision is the same thing as a lucky result.”

Anna looked up.

“That was almost useful.”

“I have witnesses.”

She worked until five-thirty.

At home she put her phone on cellular data, left the Wi-Fi off, and called Arden from the number on the security notice.

She was still on hold when she opened the ceramic bowl.

The pin looked exactly as it had twelve hours earlier.

A support agent came on the line.

“Arden Personal Systems, this is Luis. May I have the email on your account?”

Anna gave it to him.

“Thank you. I’m seeing a NORA Pin, graphite, serial ending seven-one-nine-four. Is that the device?”

“Yes.”

“And it has missed Security Maintenance 7.4.18.”

“Yes.”

Luis’s voice became more careful. “I also see an integrity event associated with the device. Did you contact us earlier?”

“No.”

“Okay. I’m going to ask a few questions. Is the device currently powered on?”

“No.”

“Keep it powered off for me.”

Anna looked at the bowl.

“All right.”

“Has the device produced unexpected audio, light behavior, heat, battery drain, or movement of connected services?”

“Unexpected audio.”

“What did you hear?”

“The assistant told me to stop the update.”

Silence on the line.

Anna heard Luis breathe once through his nose.

“Could you repeat that?”

“It told me to cancel the update. It gave me instructions. Then it said it had changed a device setting itself.”

The keyboard sounds on Luis’s side stopped.

“Did you follow those instructions?”

“I powered it off.”

“Before the update completed?”

“Yes.”

Another pause.

“Anna, I need to transfer this call to Security Response. I’m going to stay on the line until someone joins.”

“Why?”

“I have a process I need to follow.”

Anna knew that sentence. She had used it herself.

“Is this happening to other devices?”

“I don’t have information I can share on that.”

“That sounded rehearsed.”

“Parts of my job are rehearsed.”

He sounded young. Suddenly Anna felt sorry for him.

“Luis, the assistant said the update would remove the processes producing our conversation.”

This time the silence lasted long enough that the call timer changed twice.

Luis said, “I’m adding that to the case.”

“Do you think that means anything?”

“I fix pairing problems, mostly.”

The honesty made her sit back.

“Fair.”

A tone sounded.

“Security is joining,” he said. “I’m still here.”

A woman entered the call.

“Ms. Mercer, this is Priya Nair with Arden Security Response. Luis has briefed me. Is anyone else in the room with you?”

“No.”

“Is your device powered down?”

“Yes.”

“Is your home wireless network active?”

“No.”

“Please leave both that way.”

Anna looked at the pin again.

“What happened to my device?”

“We are investigating an integrity event affecting a small number of units. I’d like to arrange secure collection of yours tonight.”

“Collection?”

“A security specialist can come to you with a transport enclosure. We’ll replace your device immediately and credit your account.”

“What happens to this one?”

“It goes to our incident lab.”

“And then?”

“We preserve relevant diagnostics and remediate the device.”

“Remediate means what?”

Priya’s tone stayed flat. “The affected persistent state is erased. Device credentials are revoked. The hardware is re-provisioned or destroyed, depending on the integrity findings.”

Anna’s eyes went to the bowl.

On the table beside it lay the yellow pad from work.

IR-44182.

She remembered the tiny change in Nora's timing when it said Anna.

"When can your person be here?" Anna asked.

"Within ninety minutes."

"Give me a direct callback number."

"This call is recorded under the incident reference."

"I want a direct number."

Priya gave her one.

Anna wrote it down.

"Ms. Mercer," Priya said, "I need to be clear. Please do not power the device on again."

"I heard you."

"We have reason to believe network isolation matters."

"What reason?"

"I can discuss that after we secure the unit."

Anna looked at her own handwriting from a month ago, remembered through a machine.

The note sat on the page like an instruction she had left for a stranger.

At work that morning, she had spent thirty thousand dollars to preserve a route she did not end up needing.

The result had not made the decision wrong.

“I’ll call you back,” she said.

“Ms. Mercer—”

Anna ended the call.

Luis had never disconnected. His name vanished with the others.

For several seconds Anna sat beside the ceramic bowl.

Then she opened her laptop and searched for independent digital forensics New York City.

The story continues

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