



Day 1

A Night to Remember

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It all began one June afternoon; I was woken up by my parents' dog, Geno, hopping onto my bed; a rude awakening, of course, but who can be mad at a puppy for too long? The second my eyes opened, I was met with a barrage of kisses.

"I know, I know, I know," I said, my voice still rough from sleep. His little tail was wagging so fast I could swear he was going to take flight before he dove into my covers. He cuddled up next to me, and I tried to go back to sleep; however, that was a losing battle, so I decided just to start my day since it was nearly 11:30 anyway.

In one fluid motion, I leaped out of my bed and ran straight into my bathroom. Geno tried to follow me in, but I was too quick for him and closed the door right before he could get in. I then placed both hands on my lower back and leaned backward, releasing a massive CRACK! Instantly I felt a wave of relief as I headed into my shower, turned the knob to near-boiling, and spent the next thirty minutes in bliss. Eventually, my fingers started to prune up, so I chose to leave the shower and was met with steam so thick it was almost hard to breathe. I kicked myself for forgetting to turn the fan on, something my dad had told me numerous times to do, but I simply opened my door to air out the room.

Soon I was ready to start my day and jumped down the stairs to make something to eat. I entered the kitchen and saw my eight-year-old brother Cameron; he was finishing up a tuna sandwich. His face, a ball of sunshine as always, split into a wide smile when he saw me.

"Good Morn-Afternoon!" he spoke enthusiastically.

I chuckled at his innocence and raided the fridge and freezer for the dough, marinara sauce, and mozzarella, all the ingredients I needed to make pizza.

"Hey, where are Mom and Dad?" I asked, confused because it was odd they weren't there at this time.

He took a while to answer but eventually responded with a pout, "Looking at your new home."

He walked over to hug me and continued, "You're not really leaving, are you Sarah?"

I smiled, got down to his level, and replied, "Yes, and it's all your fault."

That earned me a flick to the face.

"Don't worry, you have me for this whole week and my place is not even an hour away. I'll visit every chance I get." I continued before flicking him in the face in retaliation.

"Okay!" He responded, once again cheerful and bright.

Soon, the two of us were chatting about his latest imaginary friend as I sprinkled the last heap of mozzarella on my pizza and placed it in the oven. Apparently, when he looks out the car window, he sees this "ninja-like person" who runs on power lines, fences, and yards jumping from point to point avoiding the pavement.

While I was taking my first bite with a snowy mountain of parmesan cheese on top of it, I felt my phone buzz. I pulled it out of my pocket to see a message from my group chat with my friends.

"Hey, change of plans, we'll be meeting at the reservation at 8:30 tonight."

"Seriously?" I muttered rolling my eyes.

"What?" Cameron asked as if he had just done something wrong.

"Nu-nothing," I replied, shaking my head and sighing, both at this news and that Cameron always thought people were calling him out on something he unknowingly did wrong.

The reservation was the spot where we would always meet up back in high school. It seemed too obvious and cliché for that to be where we all meet up after all these years, but I guess it was the only place that made sense. The only unfortunate thing was that now I had about

eight hours to kill today instead of five. The reservation was essentially a massive hiking trail next to the middle school and across from the town library. Apparently, there was a flagpole George Washington planted at the very top, but I never bothered to look. Back in high school, we would often meet up there and get high.

It's been too long since I've seen Ryan, David, and of course, Derek.

Ryan was the heart and joy of our group. He would always make light of bad situations. He would cheer me up when Derek and I took a break from each other or make me laugh with the goofy expressions permanently plastered on his pale, blonde head covered in freckles and dimples. When he left for college, his parents moved from our quaint New Jersey town all the way to Minnesota.

Next, there was David, the loveable (and loatheable) curious idiot of our group. He's the type you love to hate and hate to love, but he was always an essential part of our lives and was always trying his hardest to get reactions from everyone around him. Curiosity and a devilish grin never left his tan face for all the years I've known him. I can say without any shadow of a doubt that he was always looking for either trouble, danger, or a way to look tough or cool in front of us. He once decided it would be a good idea to skateboard through the park to scare away the geese. Fortunately for him, the geese did in fact fly away. The only trouble was his favorite black tank top got covered in geese shit.

Another thing about David was he disliked both authority and our town with a passion. This meant each time he came home, he would sneak out without telling anyone and sleep at his cousin's house about three towns away. So I barely ever saw him when I was home.

Then there was Derek, our pack leader, and I'm not just saying that because he's my boyfriend. His dark hair and light blue eyes would win the approval of any girl. We've been on

and off for a few years. It got especially hard when I was in Florida and he was in California. Let me tell you, it's not easy to keep a long-distance relationship going when you're on opposite sides of the country. His parents, like Ryan's, also moved to Minnesota, placing an even worse strain on our relationship. Thankfully, that hasn't prevented us from keeping in contact.

Finally, there was me, Sarah Jones. The one who provided structure and stability to the group while we were in high school. I was the one who made sure David didn't get himself arrested or killed. The one who got us out of dangerous situations before they could get worse.

Not wanting to be a wet blanket, inconveniencing everyone by changing the meeting time and location, I confirmed that I was okay with the change and asked to be picked up. Little did I know, that choice sealed my fate.

Ryan said that that was fine and that he and Derek would pick me up.

Eventually, I headed back to my room to sift through the disaster zone that was my closet in search of a hoodie because it was getting surprisingly cold during the nighttime this summer. I finally uncovered one when I heard my dad yell, "Sarah!" His voice was coming from downstairs, so I tossed my hoodie on my bed and left my room.

"Yeah!" I yelled back as I jumped down the stairs.

I found him alongside my mom in the basement. They were sitting on the couch and asked me to sit down as well.

"Am I in trouble?" I asked out of habit. I never actually do anything wrong, but I always ask out of impulse in fear that I actually did do something wrong. I guess Cameron must have got it from me.

"No, we just wanted to talk about your apartment," My mom said.

Here it comes. I think, fully expecting that she will say she finally found something about it that would prevent me from moving.

"We think it's amazing," She said before telling me how proud she was of me. I let out a sigh of relief before my dad took off his glasses and wiped them with the bottom of his shirt before continuing, "AThe only thing is that although your apartment is good, the neighborhood around it is not the safest, so we bought you this." He extended his hand toward me to reveal a can of pepper spray.

I chuckled and responded with, "Couldn't you have gotten one in purple?" We all laughed and went upstairs. I decided this was the best time to tell them my plans for the night and they glanced at each other nervously. This time, I knew for sure where this conversation was going to go. "Okay," Dad said in the low voice he always used when he was concerned. He then shuddered, "J-Just make sure you stay out of trouble and get back at a reasonable time."

I wanted to roll my eyes out of my skull. I was an adult now and could make my own decisions; then again, they did have a right to be concerned. After all, I was their daughter, and my friends were not always...well...they weren't the kind of people to always make a great impression.

The rest of the day came and went pretty quickly. One minute I was lying on my bed listening to some true crime podcast, the next, I got a text message from Derek: he and Ryan were outside. I jumped off my bed and left my room. Before I could reach the stairs, I was met by Cameron blocking my path.

"Mom and Dad don't want you to go tonight," He stated.

I patted him on the head and told him, "We're just going to hang out, don't worry Cam, nothing bad will happen." Then I whispered to him with a sly grin, "I'm also an adult and can make my own decisions."

The corners of his mouth quickly curled into a huge smile and he said, "Okay. Have fun."

Immediately after, I heard a car horn blare and knew that was my cue. I jumped down the stairs and yelled a quick, "See you guys in the morning!" to my parents as I opened and closed the door in what felt like less than a second.

I hopped into the back of Derek's black Mustang and noticed that it was starting to get dark out. The sky in front of us was a shade of navy blue that only seemed possible in a painting. The view behind us contained gorgeous shades of pink, orange, purple, and light blue. These colors made the sky look like cotton candy.

"So how was the drive?" I asked, clipping my seat belt into place.

"Long," Derek replied, his voice uncharacteristically cold and almost emotionless. I felt a shiver go up my spine. Also, he did not seem excited to see me at all; however, I figured he was probably just tired.

I tried to make more conversation because I was so excited to see him, but it was like Derek was possessed; his focus was narrowed solely on driving and tuning out everything else. Derek felt as cold and silent as a robot. I began to regret my decision to meet up but I tried to push those feelings aside, rationalizing Derek's behavior on lack of sleep or something, so I chose to be quiet for a bit.

Eventually, the silence got unbearable. I was about to speak up, but Ryan beat me to it. "How are you, Sarah?" He said, turning around as far in his seat as he could. Unlike my

boyfriend, he actually seemed happy to see me, and the conversation comforted me enough to lower my guard.

The two of us made some small talk before I felt like I had to address the elephant in the car - or in this case, not in the car.

“So...where’s David? We picking him up?” I asked, and after like five whole seconds of awkward silence, Derek, of all people, spoke up.

“He’s setting everything up,” Derek replied. However, his voice was still robotic and without any emotion. Goosebumps formed all over my body; the way he said that was just wrong. His whole behavior was wrong; something was definitely off.

What is he setting up? Aren’t we just catching up? What’s really going on? Why is Derek acting so strange? All these questions raced in my head, each adding to the pit I was feeling in my stomach.

"Uh, what do you mean setting everything up, aren't we just going to the res?" I asked nervously and tried to cover up my nerves with a fake chuckle.

I then saw a cringe-inducing ear-to-ear smile developing on Derek's face in the rear-view mirror.

"Yeah, we're going to the reservation for a FUN time." He spoke with confidence, mockery, and malice which unnerved me way beyond a reasonable doubt. It sounded like he was talking down to me and the unease I'd been feeling from the start grew worse. And the way he emphasized 'fun' sent a chill down my spine.

"Dude! What the fuck!?" Ryan suddenly shouted at Derek. "What's wrong with you!? You're acting like a total douche! Before we left all you could talk about was her; but now you're acting like a complete ass!" I flinched as he yelled. I'd never seen him lose his temper before.

Immediately, Derek slammed on the brakes and I lurched forward, nearly slamming my head on the seat in front of me. When I looked up, Derek was glaring at Ryan. He looked angry, and yet, that weird smile was still plastered on his face.

"Look, she's my girlfriend, so quit trying to win her over! Do us all a favor and keep your opinions to yourself!" Derek barked with the same mocking tone he used on me. I had to fight the urge to slap Derek across the face and walk home. Ryan was right; Derek was being distant and scary, which is not normal for him. Something was wrong, but it wasn't like I could just run away at that point. Even if I did, who's to say Derek wouldn't have snapped and chased me with his car? I really had a bad feeling about everything at that point, but I couldn't escape. I was trapped.

We eventually arrived at the reservation. The parking lot to the trails was completely empty, adding to the horror of the night. Derek then popped the trunk open revealing small black bags with colored numbers and a wooden board. The board had four protrusions coming out its sides which led to the center. I tried to reassure myself that we were just trying out a strange drinking game or that the bags just held weed, but the more I thought about it, the more I knew that was wishful thinking, and I began to sweat. Only one thought dominated my head: "*You are going to die tonight!*"

Fuck Fuck FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK!!!

I then felt a cold hand on my shoulder. I jumped back and nearly shat myself then and there. I turned and thankfully it was just Ryan.

"I know how this looks, trust me it's not what you think; but, say the word and I'll get you out of here," He said with a completely straight face, and from just the tone in his voice, I knew he was telling the truth.

My fear turned to anger at that moment and my anger to rage as I glared at both of them. “TALK!” I said through gritted teeth.

Derek just ignored me and announced in a booming voice which echoed all around us, “All shall be revealed after you grab those bags.” I bet he thought he was so high and mighty at that moment.

I suddenly remembered the pepper spray my parents just got me and reached into my pockets to grab it; however, nothing was there.

“Fuck!!!” I screamed internally, realizing that I left it in my room at home. I was powerless if Derek pulled out a knife or some other weapon. The only thing that prevented me from breaking down was the fact that I knew Ryan would never let something like that happen.

I grabbed the bags and Ryan grabbed the board, and we followed Derek into the picnic area. We kept walking until we reached the furthest trail to the right, our usual trail. I turned to Ryan, gave him the nastiest glare I could muster, and said once again through gritted teeth “Talk. Now.” My words perfectly echoed the way I must’ve appeared at that moment, pissed and done with whatever bullshit stunt they were pulling.

We began up the trail and Ryan took in a huge deep breath before telling me what was going on.

"You see, ugh, well, Derek...Uh," Ryan stammered.

“Talk. Now,” I repeated.

“Yeah, yeah. So, Derek’s college friends were not really the most stable, and one night, they brought him to the woods just like this. You know, being vague, acting out of character, being creepy. Well, like you, he had no idea what they were doing but apparently, this is some

sort of right of passage ritual which symbolizes the transition to adulthood,” He said. I paused for a moment, digesting that information, before snapping in fury.

“ARE YOU FUCKING SERIOUS?!?!” I screamed at Derek, shocking him into stopping his trek.

“YOU MAKE ME FEAR FOR MY LIFE FOR A FUCKING TRANSITION CEREMONY!!??” I screamed as I ran up behind him and kicked him so hard in the nuts he yelled like an opera singer before collapsing.

I glared at both the sorry lump on the ground that was my boyfriend and Ryan one last time before turning back around and leaving the trail. As soon as I was back in the picnic area, the tree in front of me began to shake and a maniacal laugh echoed from above. A large mass dropped from the tree and I yelped as I fell backward to get away from it, scraping my hands on the rocks below me. It took a moment for me to regain my bearings but I soon realized that it was David, a large doofus smile on his face and clearly high as a kite. I was done at that moment and the second I got to my feet, I wound up and attempted to punch David in his smug, psychotic face; however, he dodged my fist.

“WhoaWhoah there Sarah, it’s just me.” He laughed like the psycho he was.

“I know,” I snapped, pissed.

Suddenly, all of us slapped our necks in unison as the mosquitoesmosquitos bit us. I only mention it because while a mosquito bite is not an odd occurrence, especially in the woods during the summer, I don’t know, it felt weird. Sure, it stung like a normal mosquito bite; however, it also felt similar to how a shot feels when a doctor administers a vaccine into your arm. I don’t know how but that allowed me to compose myself, and I took a deep breath.

"I hate all of you," I announced, unamused, to which David laughed, and everything fell silent. "Well, you assholes took me this far; we might as well get this over with," I said as I walked back towards the trail.

I know, I'm an idiot. I should have left then and there, but my anger bred curiosity as to what this ceremony was and how it could be worth them giving me a panic attack. I walked up that inclined and twisting rocky path, narrowly avoiding loose stones that David tripped over.

About ten minutes later, we reached the entrance to our spot, an old fence blocking a giant stone wall. In front, there was an old, withered sign that said "New Jersey American Water Company." I don't exactly know what the thing was used for, but it was abandoned. It wasn't long before I found the break in the fence and the stone ladder that led up the wall. The boys followed suit, and I made sure to step on Derek's fingers as he climbed beneath me.

Eventually, we made it up to our old hangout spot, a grassy patch; however, the second I saw what was up there, my curiosity once again became fear...no, abject terror is a better way to explain how I felt. What I saw awaiting me were a fuck ton of large candles placed in a wide circle, four stumps surrounding the inside of the circle with knives on each, and another layer of candles making an outline of a square, perfectly sized for the board Ryan was holding. The scene I was presented with was not that of a right of passage ceremony but of a cultish sacrifice.

I immediately turned tail and attempted to get the hell out of dodge but was quickly met with the edge of the wall and the sheer drop ahead of it.

Fuck! Fuck! FUCK!! I just trapped myself with a fucking cult!! I cried internally.

Just then, a hand came crashing down on my shoulder. "You can't leave just yet Sarah, the fun has just begun!" David said, his smile deranged and his voice demonic.

I was hyperventilating at that point and just screamed, "I don't want to be a part of your satanic ritual!" The last of my composure had left me, and all I had was a fear beyond anything I had ever experienced. I was so terrified of not only the situation but that I had an out that I threw away. I always hated how horror movie characters made the most stupid and avoidable decisions; however, there I was. I was even debating the prospects of jumping off the ledge to avoid whatever cult shit they were planning; however, my internal debate was cut short by Ryan.

"The joke has gone too far Derek!" Ryan yelled.

"Yeah, you're probably right," Derek replied, now in a much more calm and less robotic voice. He turned to me, and I could see his piercing teal eyes illuminated by the candlelight. His expression was no longer scary, instead he looked concerned for me. But I knew he wasn't sorry. If he actually cared, he would have never done this to begin with, let alone let it get this far. Even if he was sorry, I had reached my limit and was done with them.

"Come on Sarah, it was just a jo-" David said with his hand covering his mouth, obviously trying not to show his smile, but I sunk my fist into his gut before he could finish, cutting him off as a sharp wheeze left his lungs from shock. I had been switching back and forth from terrified to pissed off, and David finally sent me over the edge into just pissed off.

"Shut up," I snarled. My tone was without fear, and my eyes were full of anger.

They say there are three things all wise men fear: the sea in a storm, a night with no moon, and the anger of a gentle man. Let me tell you, I rarely ever lose my temper, but the line was crossed a mile ago, and I was pissed. Time seemed to slow down for a moment as I contemplated how I could make them feel even a sliver of the fear that I had. Eventually, I settled on ruining their ceremony. All their work would be ruined, and after that, I would never see them again.

I gave them one last haunting glare, which paralyzed them in place. My final shift in demeanor terrified them, which was fine with me. In my mind, they needed to suffer. So I snatched the bags and the board. I slammed the board into the center of the candles, and just as I thought before, it was a perfect fit. I then popped open the bags and dumped all of their contents onto the board, cutting my finger in the process. I didn't even look at what was inside the bags, but I did send my foot crashing down on the board, breaking its protrusions in the process. I turned back at them, and Derek and David's faces reflected utter shock while Ryan clearly understood where my rage came from. Their reactions made me feel a little better. I paused, looked at each of them, and then took a deep breath before beginning what I thought would be my final interaction with each of those assholes.

"Go fuck yourselves," I growled before heading for the ladder. It must have been at that moment when Derek finally realized how royally he fucked up. He ran over to me and grabbed my hands, trying to interlock his fingers with mine, but I wouldn't let him. I wouldn't even look him in the eyes. He begged for me to forgive him, but the damage was done, and all the feelings I had ever had for that man had vanished.

"I love you," Derek pleaded through tears; however, me being in the state I was in, I wanted to drive home how I felt about all of them. I pushed Derek's arms off of my own, stood facing each of them, took a deep breath, and as if nature itself was on my side, I felt a powerful whip of wind pick up as I screamed, "ALL OF YOU CAN GO TO HELL!"

Everyone jumped back at this, almost as if a grenade had been thrown into the center of the space we were in. Suddenly, I felt very lightheaded, to the point where I thought I was about to collapse from exhaustion; I tried to walk away, but the second I took a step in the direction opposing my so-called friends, I was on the ground, and my senses faded as I passed out.

I woke up an unknown time later in utter darkness. My body felt heavy, and instinctively, I tried to breathe, but instead of air, something else entered my mouth, something coarse and black. In fact, I was surrounded by whatever the stuff was. I could barely move and began to panic.

“WHERE AM I!? HOW DID I GET HERE!?” My mind raced in desperation to try and remember while my body frantically moved to try and escape this unknown prison. I flailed my arms around, clawing in every direction all the while. More of the stuff I was surrounded with got in my mouth instead of air as I fought for breath. I started feeling woozy and light-headed, which just added to my desperation and fueled me even more to find a way out. My rampant, frantic thoughts then cleared, and I could only think one thing: *‘I DON’T WANT TO DIE!!’* My muscles were on fire, and my energy was fading. I couldn’t keep this up forever, and my time was running out fast. Finally, my fingers broke through the surface, grazing the cool air above. Nothing else mattered now; I knew which way was out and used every last bit of energy I could muster to escape. I dug faster, widening the gap, until my trembling hands could grip the edges of the hole I just made and forced my head out from the confining darkness. I couldn’t hold it anymore. My mouth dropped open, and I took in more air than I think I ever had before; however, I couldn’t enjoy it as whatever I breathed in below exploded out of my mouth, leaving my lungs and I couldn’t stop coughing. I fought for air between coughs. Everything was staggered at that moment: my thoughts, my movements, my breathing.

I finally opened my eyes, and everything started to spin. The vertigo I felt was the worst I’d ever felt, I thought I was going to throw up. It seemed like forever before everything was centered and I could see straight. Branches obstructed the dim moonlight but it lit up just enough

for me to see. I looked around and saw that I was standing in a hole in the same woods I passed out in. Before I could wrack my brain for how I ended up buried, I had to escape the hole. So with the last of my energy, I tightened my grip around the edges of my grave, bent my knees, and jumped upwards. I got halfway out of that hole and dragged the rest of my body out, sprawling on the ground before collapsing from exhaustion.

I couldn't move. I could only heave out staggered breaths and attempt to regain some energy. I looked up at the sky and tried to think, trying to piece together what had happened. It felt like someone was tightening a clamp around my head but I didn't care. The last thing I could remember was telling the guys to go to hell, and then darkness. So I just laid there, wracking my brain to figure out what happened and how I ended up buried alive; but deep down, I knew what had likely happened; I just didn't want to believe it. My friends tried to kill me. The mere thought that the people who I knew and trusted for so long, the people who I considered my best and closest friends tried to kill me, made me hyperventilate and eventually puke out of terror. There was no other explanation, though. This revelation sent a shock throughout me, and suddenly, all emotions, thoughts, and sensations were gone, and I was left numb and with only one thought, getting home. Call it shock, or me being unable to process everything, but I literally couldn't think of anything else.

I don't know how I managed to get back up or how I made it home; it was all a blur. the next thing I knew, I was back home and in front of my bed. It was then that all the exhaustion really hit me, and I collapsed into my bed. I couldn't even bring myself to take a shower as I was way too exhausted. I told myself that I was finally safe as I drifted off to sleep, not knowing that my nightmare had only just begun.

Day 1.5

Farewell to Normalcy: Descent into Nightmares

“Huh? Where am I? How did I get here?” I asked myself as I found myself floating in utter darkness. I was submerged in an endless void of pitch black. After a few disorienting moments, I realized I was dreaming. It’s odd that you can go right to sleep, become lucid, and forget you are in a dream.

Amidst my drifting through the nothingness, I noticed a line of gray blurs creating a path before me. I swam over to them and realized that they were glimpses into my past, moments I remembered and others I did not. I saw my first day of preschool, which is where I first met Ryan. I watched the memory of my Bat mitzvah, my brother’s birth, meeting both Derek and David, and eventually, the latter half of middle school.

There they were: the worst years of my life. They happened in my town’s public middle school, a place where I was bullied by teachers and basically nonexistent to my peers. Centipedes infested the hallways, and the only thing any adult cared about in this school was preserving the district's image as the best in the state. The memory shifted to all the assemblies of breaking away from labels and everyone ignoring that to sit with their respected labels at lunch. The athletes sat with the other athletes, the nerds sat with the other nerds, and so on and so forth. I didn’t fit into any particular label, so I was a complete outcast. No one gave me the time of day aside from my small friend group. Then the worst parts of the school flashed before me, the teachers. At the time, my ADHD made learning difficult for me as I didn’t quite understand or process what was being taught to me. As such, I needed to ask a lot of questions, and the “solution” the school came up with was to limit me to three questions a day (not per class, per *day*) and giving me death glares if I dared raise my hand. I re-lived a teacher telling me my work sucked in front of the entire class, a teacher telling me they hated me to my face, and days where I would sit in the corner of my room crying and having the lowest self-esteem of my life.

Wanting to move on from middle school, I glided towards the next memory, which was high school, the best time of my life. Unlike middle school, I had teachers that actually cared about my growth and development. Teachers that took the time to ensure I understood the course materials and went the extra mile to make me know that I was not a failure. Instead of teachers that made me feel like I was defective and had nothing to offer, I had teachers that told me I had so much to offer. I smiled as I saw the memory shift to Mr. F, my ingenuity teacher. In his class, if a student had an interest, talent, or passion, the school would provide them a budget and a class period to, as Mr. F put it, “ingenu.” On the first day, he asked all of us what we wanted to do. One kid wanted to build a go-kart from scratch, another wanted to explore 3D architecture software, one wanted to make a gaming channel, and another wanted to create a makeup brand. Finally, he got to me. When he asked me, I didn’t have an answer. However, once he dismissed everyone, he pulled me aside and said, “You said you don’t know what you want to do, so what do you like to do? What are you good at?”

Because my previous teachers had lowered my self-esteem to the point it was basically non-existent, I told him I didn't think I was good at anything. A smile grew across my face when I heard what he responded with. Instead of validating my insecurities, he replied, “I don’t believe you. I guarantee there is something you can do better than anyone else.”

He was the first teacher to have faith in me, and even though his class was an elective, I took it every single semester of high school, developing and perfecting my abilities in digital art and animation. I definitely feel that if it weren’t for Mr. F and my other high school teachers, I wouldn’t be where I am today: a graphic designer with an amazing job lined up for next week. In fact, because of them and their faith in me, I was able to enjoy learning once again and succeed in my academics.

Those memories of high school brought a tear to my eye, but I felt compelled to continue onward. The next memories were my college years and, eventually, my college graduation. I almost teared up seeing how far I had gone, how much I had grown; however, once my past self threw up her graduation cap, time slowed down. The grey blurs containing my memories fizzled out of existence, and a mysterious wave of dread began to wash over me.

I then felt myself slowly falling as if I were sinking in a pool. No, it was like the water was draining from a pool while I was in it. Eventually, my feet touched whatever the ground was in this space, and I just stood there in that black room. Then, I heard a noise akin to the crackling of ice underfoot. The sound only grew until I saw what looked like a crack of pure white light forming above me. It spread and spread, perfectly contrasting the all-consuming darkness of the room until it all shattered. The walls and the ceiling all fell apart around me like glass, and I was met with a blinding light before more darkness. It took some time for my vision to adjust, but as soon as it did, it didn't take long to realize where I was, and I felt like the wind had been knocked out of me. It was the last place I wanted to be. Same setup, same candles, same everything - I was in those damned woods. I saw Ryan, David, Derek, and...and I saw myself. I wasn't in my own body. It was like I was a ghost watching the events of the night go down. Being back in those woods, about to witness my own attempted murder, I was paralyzed with fear. Little did I know that I should have been doing everything in my power to leave, to wake up, because the terror that I felt at that moment was nothing compared to the nightmare I was to witness.

"ALL OF YOU CAN GO TO HELL!" I saw myself scream, and on cue, everything played out as it did before; however, when my past self fell, I saw what happened afterward. Apparently, that was not the moment when I lost consciousness. I saw myself attempting to get back up and Derek tried to help me, but my past self swatted his hand away. The second my hand

made contact with his, all the candles around us were blown out one by one. Once the last flame was blown out, the ground began to shake and suddenly the others were thrown to the ground.. I thought it was an earthquake, but as soon as it started, it subsided.

“*What the fuck?*” I thought before I heard what can only be described as a freight train coming our way. The horn was deafening and had a heaviness to it that I had never felt before in my life. The noise sounded like it was surrounding us and getting closer.

I don’t know why, but my attention suddenly shifted to the board, which began to shake in all directions. It shook so much that I could swear it was beginning to levitate. Then, just as quickly as it began, like the earthquake, the shaking ceased, and with it the deafening sound was rendered silent. I looked back at everyone, and they all exchanged glances that said the exact same thing: *Did that really just fucking happen?*

I thought this scene couldn’t get weirder but I was quickly proven wrong by the board suddenly letting out an ear-splitting shriek. It sounded like a group of people were screaming in absolute agony. I thought my ears were going to bleed from the sheer intensity of that sound. The volume brought me to my knees and forced us all to cover our ears in a fruitless attempt to block out the sound. The shrieking gave way to a series of cracking, popping noises like a bunch of fireworks going off. While still incredibly loud, it was much more bearable than the shrieking. because of that, I could clearly see what happened next. The board had actually begun to levitate. One second it was on the ground, the next it was floating a few feet above us. That’s when the true nightmare began. a geyser of pure blackness exploded out from the center of the board. I don’t know how to describe it other than somehow, the darkness exploding out of the board was darker than black, darker than darkness. It was pure emptiness.

This darkness began to thrash around like a giant tentacle, but there was a horrific elegance to it. It was like the darkness was dancing, its movements almost making it seem like it was a living thing.

“RUN!!! RUN YOU FUCKING IDIOT!!!!!” My brain screamed, but my body was frozen in place. You know how they say in the presence of danger, an individual will react in two different ways: fight or flight? Well, there’s a third option that no one talks about, the one my body chose to take at that moment: freeze. I couldn’t move, I couldn’t speak, I could only watch what was unfolding before me. The blackness began to spiral further upwards. No longer did this thing look like a jet-black tentacle but a tornado comprised of black mist that consumed everything it touched, including light. The winds produced by this thing were tremendous, and it felt like the thing had its own gravity as my body began to feel heavier and heavier the more it grew. My eyes were bulging out of their sockets as the tornado before me split into four. It almost had the silhouette of a palm tree with four leaves; however, these four separations only grew and grew. They twisted around the trees and sky, and as they moved, I noticed that each separation was changing in appearance. They were forming what I can only describe as humanoid shadows whose lower halves were still connected to the board. They each flew above us, dancing around like fairies in the moonlight; it would have been an awe-inspiring sight had it not been so terrifying. Their dance increased to speeds that defied logic, and I felt something wet roll down my cheek. I was crying.

We were all watching these shadows fly for what seemed like hours but it was actually only a few seconds before they each started to nosedive down towards us. They got closer and closer until they each pierced through the chests of Derek, David, Ryan, and my past self. They flew right through our bodies, and from the point of impact, darkness began to consume each of

our bodies. The darkness spread like a virus, consuming our bodies, and everyone clenched their chests, obviously in excruciating pain. Simultaneously, everyone let out the same ear-piercing shriek we heard before as smoke began to exit our bodies as if we were on fire. I then watched in abject terror as we all began to sink into the ground like it was quicksand. I could do nothing but watch as we were all swallowed up by the ground.

I couldn't breathe. It felt as if someone was strangling me. The screams were then suddenly snuffed out, and the silence I was met with was just as deafening as the screeches from before. I could feel a torrent of tears bursting from my eyes as I stared at the now-empty ground, the one that we were all just standing on seconds ago. That was when I felt an icy cold hand plant itself on my right shoulder. It was like instant frostbite, and that cold spread throughout my entire body. I tried to turn around but was stopped short by a raspy progression of breaths. Breaths which sounded like their source's mouth was extremely dry. Each breath was like a blizzard hitting my neck.

My eyes widened even more as I realized that those weren't breaths at all; they were short bouts of laughter, demented, short repetitions of laughter. The nightmare-inducing laughter eventually fell silent, and a new noise flooded into my ears. At first, it sounded like a bunch of incoherent sounds; however, as I listened closer, I realized that it was three voices being somehow mimicked by whatever stood behind me. The voices got clearer, and after a moment, I realized I recognized them. This thing was somehow mimicking Ryan, David, and Derek's voices all at once. My terror only grew when I heard what they were saying. They sounded like they were on a distorted, old record, and I heard them chanting, "You Wwere Llucky...", over and over again. The primal terror inside me grew to a point that I couldn't help but scream. As I did, everything went black. Then, I heard a slam and my dad's voice.

"What's wrong!?" I heard him yell, and with that, color rushed back to the world and I was lying in my bed again. I turned to my doorway with watery eyes and saw my dad in my doorway, worry plastered on his face and a baseball bat in his hands.

This was somehow enough to temporarily distract my mind from the terror I had just experienced and allowed me to come up with an explanation.

"A nightmare," I said, still breathing heavily.

My dad dragged his hand across his face in relief and replied by saying, "Don't fucking scare me like that, I thought someone was in your room...Jesus Christ. Just try to go back to sleep, Okay Sarah." He then breathed a sigh of both exhaustion and relief as he shut my door.

I heard the door squeak closed and was left in darkness. The blackness permeating my room was suffocating and left me shivering. I just sat there in bed, upright and silently crying. I don't know how, but I knew that what had just happened was no dream.

Eventually, my body just fell backward, slamming onto my bed; but instead of the normal comfort of my sheets, there was an audible squish followed by a sharp pain erupting from the center of my back. I felt a wet sensation start creeping down my back and I placed my hand underneath my back, verifying that I was lying atop some sort of liquid. I prayed for it to be sweat or tears but I knew by the viscosity that it wasn't. Horrified, I flew my hand towards the light of my clock, and even in the limited visibility it provided I could see scarlet enveloping my palm.

I did not waste any time, sprinting immediately into my bathroom. The second I flicked that light on, it was all confirmed. My hand was covered in red: red that glistened in the light like a candy apple. I felt more blood trickling down my back and slowly, hesitantly, turned to face the mirror, half expecting there to be demonic, bloody claw marks covering my back. What I saw

instead were what appeared to be two large thorns protruding out of my shoulder blades. I let out a sigh of relief and calmed down a little, and I rationalized that they must have got there when I was underground. I also noticed a bunch of small bruises and cuts that I must have gotten on my way home. My mind at that moment was fixated solely on removing the two splinters from both my scapula because it allowed me to focus on something that wasn't my ever-growing terror caused by this absolute nightmare of a night.

I grabbed my tweezer and began contorting my back so I could both see my reflection and attempt to pull the two splinters out. I placed my right arm across my back and raised it upwards to squeeze the thorn, making scapula wings in the process. The second my tweezer touched that protrusion, all hell broke loose. It felt like all the muscles in my back were tearing and something was pushing on my back, but...from the inside. There was a loud ripping noise, similar to a shirt being torn in half, and sheer agony overwhelmed me as the tweezers slipped from my shaking fingers and clattered to the floor. I could barely breathe or move. Whatever was trying to breach the surface of my back was tearing through each layer of muscle and skin one by one, and soon I collapsed to my knees. It was like a million daggers were slicing open my back, and through the pain, I could feel the blood stream down my skin as I begged God in a silent scream for this all to end.

Finally, whatever was trying to leave my body tore through the last layer of skin and exploded out of my back. It weighed my body backward, and I wasn't strong enough to stay upright, collapsing onto the floor. My back felt like it was on fire, an inferno of agony consuming me from within. The once-familiar sensations of pain had transformed into an indescribable torment, an otherworldly torment that defied all reason and comprehension. My nails dug into the floor, and my teeth were clenched so hard that I thought they might shatter.

“WHY IS THIS HAPPENING TO ME!!??” I cried internally, trying to come up with whatever cosmic crime I might have committed to deserve such torture. I could feel a puddle of blood forming beneath me, and it was at that moment that I thankfully went into shock. That is the only explanation I could give, as all the pain had vanished. However, just because the physical pain subsided, that didn’t mean I was ready to face whatever horror just exploded out of my back and was keeping me pinned to the floor.

When I eventually built the courage to turn my head towards the mirror, I was convinced that I never woke up from that nightmare. Slowly, I got up, my eyes as wide as my mouth was agape. Oh, how I wished I had never opened my eyes. The sight that awaited me through that mirror was the most terrifying thing I had ever seen. If there were a homeless man with a knife, or a demon looking back at me, I would have been less petrified. What I saw in that mirror was the essence stuff of nightmares. What I saw was myself standing weakly in front of my bathroom counter with blood and small pieces of flesh and tissue everywhere. The fact that I did not pass out then and there from blood loss alone still shocks me. But, it was the things coming out of my back that opened a pit in my stomach and nearly caused me to pass out and piss myself in terror. I saw two gigantic wings, similar to that of a bat, protruding from my back. A bat’s wings are the closest I can compare these things to, but in reality, only one word could describe these horrors that sprouted from my back: demonic. I tried to scream in panic; however, the intense and overwhelming sensation of pure terror prevented any noise from leaving my mouth. Once again, my legs gave out, and I collapsed onto the floor. I began to sob into my hands; however, as I did, an intense heat began to erupt from my hands. I looked down and saw a small bluish flame emitting from my palms as if they were a stovetop. The dam had finally burst, and everything just came out. All the feelings of that night came to the surface, and my eyes became a fucking

fountain of endless tears. Tears of pain, tears of absolute terror, tears of fear, and tears for my friends who had just died. It was all leaking out of me like a fucking firehose. All I could manage to utter between sobs and sniffles was one question. "What's happening to me?"

Day 2

Unforeseen Blessings?

I remained in the fetal position, unaware of the passing time, until my eyes grew numb from the deluge of tears. My face stung worse than saltwater on an exposed wound. Once the tears eventually ceased their flow, I brushed away the remnants from my tear-stained cheeks. Slowly, I made my way off the floor, my body feeling like it weighed a ton. My limbs trembled with exhaustion, and my joints protested each movement. I struggled to regain my footing, the sound of chipping and cracking accompanied me—a haunting symphony that reminded me of peeling paint. It was as if the remnants of the gruesome scene clung to me, refusing to let go. Taking one painstaking step at a time, I moved forward. My breathing, though less erratic, still carried the weight of stifled emotions. Amidst the cacophony of racing thoughts, I knew that I had to confront my reflection once more.

Finally, I stood upright and, preparing to once again subject myself to the terror that was my own haunting visage, I closed my eyes and tried my damndest to take in a deep breath; however, one deep breath was not enough to compose myself, so I just stood there, breathing in and out. My breaths slowly became more uniform and the torrent of fear began to fade. But as I prepared to open my eyes, an immense force struck my back as if I had been shot by an air cannon. The impact sent me lurching forward, and as my eyes flew open, I caught a fleeting glimpse of those haunting wings retracting back into my body. The sudden force had jolted me, but surprisingly, the physical pain was almost nonexistent.

Somehow, I was left in more shock than when those haunting wings initially sprouted from my back, and all I could do was stand there, my mind struggling to process everything that had just happened. It felt as if my entire reality had been shattered, leaving me grasping for understanding. I was just in the woods, shadows dragged me and my friends underground, I

somehow survived, and now I had wings and could emit fire, I must have been going insane. One thing at a time though I thought, focusing on the fact that I could still be losing a lot of blood.

With one more series of deep breaths, I turned my back to the mirror, fully expecting to see my back a mess of shredded muscle, tissue, and blood. I was baffled at what I saw, as for the most part, my back was entirely intact. In fact, only two things stood out as abnormal. First, the sheer amount of dried blood that plastered my back. It formed a macabre canvas, a stark reminder of the horrors I had endured. How had I survived such an ordeal without sustaining any visible injuries? Second, were what appeared to be branches that had become fused to my skin. They extended from my lower back, curving upwards toward each shoulder blade. The texture of the outside of the wings reminded me of smoothed tree bark, their surface both smooth and bumpy, as if nature's own artistry had etched intricate patterns upon them. The branches seamlessly merged with my flesh, as though they had always been a part of me. Their color resembled an earthy palette of dark browns and almost gray hues.

My terror was shortly drowned out by an overwhelming desire to touch them. I couldn't resist the curiosity that burned within me, the longing to understand the enigma that now adorned my back. With trembling anticipation, I positioned my arm to caress their textured surface. But as my arm contorted in the unnatural way needed to reach them, the wings unfurled once again; however, this time, there was no searing pain, no gushing blood, and no splatter of torn tissue. Instead, all I felt was a not-so-subtle shift of weight and a gentle rush of air. Strangely, my wings unfurling brought an unexpected sensation of relief and release akin to stretching out a limb that had been confined for far too long.

When observing my wings a second time, my all-consuming fear was drowned out by intrigue. I struggled to comprehend this shift. Did the constant barrage of nightmarish encounters

take its toll and desensitize me? Or was I really going crazy? After a while, my back began to ache as if I had been exercising. Probably because these things were not the lightest and my body wasn't used to the extra weight pulling me back. The wonder quickly faded into discomfort and I wanted those wings to go back inside me. There was just one problem, I had no idea how I got them to retract the first time.

I tried mentally commanding them to retract. Then I tried forcing them in with my hands; however, they just sprung back out when I let go. My mind was overflowing with different ideas on how I could get them back inside that eventually my head began to hurt. So I took a few deep, calming breaths, and like that, they retracted.

The relief that washed over my back was overwhelming, it filled me with an unexpected sense of calm. Yet, even in that tranquility, my curiosity remained insatiable. With a deliberate movement, I once again contorted my shoulder blades, causing my wings to unfurl. Satisfied with their display, I then found a spot to settle down, crossing my legs and entering a state of meditation. As I focused my mind, the wings responded to my serene state, retracting back within me. At that moment, I deduced that making wings with my shoulder blades caused my wings to unfurl, while a clear and composed head caused them to fold back inside me.

Yet, as quickly as the thrill of discovery had come, it was overshadowed by an overwhelming wave of fear. The state of my bathroom, a testament to the horrors I had experienced loomed before me, staining my thoughts with trepidation. Panic seized my mind, and questions raced through my head, "How the fuck am I going to explain this to my parents? How will I clean this up? Oh God look at all this blood!"

These worries consumed me, the weight of the night's events pressing upon my conscience. But amidst the fear and uncertainty, a deeper question emerged, resonating with the core of my being: "Why me?"

I placed my hand on my head as the stress of the situation began to hit me like a fucking truck; however, I soon had to retract said hand because I felt an intense heat building off of it. I gazed at my palm as I witnessed my skin begin to turn bright red. Steam began to seep out of my pores and clustered together into a grayish flame. I was both astonished and horrified, having somehow forgotten that my hand had just been alight with a blue flame.

More stressful thoughts plagued my mind as my discomfort grew and my head felt like a clamp was slowly tightening around it. It was then that I noticed that my stress appeared to be feeding this fire. Rather than a typical flame, this fire moved around like waves in the ocean, flowing around the space of my palm before pooling together into something I did not expect. The gray flames formed a bubble that slowly began to levitate from my hand. As it flew upwards, I made two realizations: first was that the second the bubble left my hand, my stress went down significantly. Second was that there was a bubble composed of fire floating in my bathroom. Images of the house catching fire the second it made contact with my ceiling flooded my mind so I took a chance and grabbed it with my bare hands. I felt a burst of heat inside my hands the second it popped; however, the danger was gone.

Suddenly, the overpowering stench hit me like a freight train, assaulting my senses with a nauseating blend akin to gym equipment, sweat-soaked clothes, and the metallic tang of pennies. The odor pierced my nostrils, causing me to gag and recoil. Desperate to combat this scent, I frantically reached for the can of air freshener tucked away in my sink cabinet. Pressing down on

the nozzle, I sprayed its contents, but despite emptying the entire bottle, the smell was only slightly better.

Realizing what was in store, I mentally prepared myself for the task at hand. Hastily, I threw on a shirt and pants, and quickly and quietly descended the steps to the kitchen, thankful that it was still too early for anyone to be up. Silently, I raided the kitchen sink cabinet, gathering all the necessary supplies: disinfectant wipes, air fresheners, paper towels, sponges, and a large black trash bag. I even grabbed a box of alcohol prep pads and disposable rubber gloves, aware of what this cleanup would entail.

When I made it back to my bathroom, I immediately placed on the gloves and began picking up the scattered pieces of flesh strewn about. The situation made me retch, reminiscent of picking up Geno's poop when we went for walks, as I delicately handled the scattered fragments of my own flesh. Swallowing my revulsion, I collected every remnant I could find, depositing them into the trash bag before puking into my toilet.

Next was the blood. I grabbed the disinfecting wipes and did my best to clean the walls and floor. It felt like I was sanding off a layer of grotesque graffiti. This got the majority of the blood off and the alcohol pads got the rest of it. For good measure, I soaked a towel and scrubbed everywhere. Thank God that towel was dark gray. Before I knew it, that ordeal was over and my bathroom looked like it did before my back exploded. All that was left was for me to deal with the smell so I turned on the fan and emptied two more bottles of air freshener. Honestly, the overwhelming stench of apple cinnamon stung my nostrils just as much as the blood.

Exhausted, I slumped down for a bit, collecting my thoughts while clutching the trash bag and towel. Gathering my energy, I ventured out of my room once more, quietly making my way down the hallway, and placed my towel and some detergent into the wash before starting it.

Continuing my stealthy journey, I reached the garage and removed all the other bags of trash from the can, and discreetly concealed my crime scene cleanup at the bottom, ensuring it remained hidden beneath the cover of the remaining bags.

I had no clue how I was keeping it together after everything that happened. All I knew was that I was tired, sore, and covered in dried blood. I slowly made my way back to my room, noticing along the way that it was almost 6:00 in the morning. Re-entering my bathroom, I was honestly shocked at how normal it looked. After appreciating my work, I took everything off, causing more dried blood to crack and chip. It felt so uncomfortable. Instantly, I turned on my shower and waited for it to heat up.

As I waited, I found myself staring back into the mirror. Without wings or blood obstructing my attention, I noticed how red my skin was, noticed how bruised my body looked, and finally, I noticed that I was once again crying. The moment I locked eyes with my crying reflection, everything returned: all the pain I had felt/been feeling internally and externally, as well as my intense feelings of fear, anguish, sorrow, regret, guilt, frustration, and hatred were all building up inside of me. No, not just building up, they were combining, combining into something dark. I could literally feel a darkness growing inside of me and I couldn't breathe. Steam began to exude out of every pore and without thinking, I jumped into the shower. I shivered at the rush of cold water before I noticed a thick mist was beginning to surround me. It didn't take a genius to realize that my body heat was intensifying rapidly and was boiling the water into steam. My shower quickly became a sauna and it felt like I was being boiled alive. I tried to lower the temperature, but the heat only grew and I was starting to panic.

"Focus Sarah!", but my mind was consumed by a whirlwind of emotions and memories from that night.

My strife was cut off by an unsettling raspy whisper hissing, “Let it out, let your emotions out,” It honestly scared the crap out of my; however, once I heard it, I remembered the bubble that fed on my stress. Once it left my palm, I felt better, so that must have been what I needed to do: channel and release the negativity.

I focused on all the negativity I felt at that moment and imagined it flowing into my hands. Intense heat coursed throughout my entire body as my darkness grew in intensity. It felt as if my own emotions were fighting me, fighting to stay inside. The mental strain was unbearable, and I didn’t know if I could handle any more of it or the heat.

“Push it out,” I heard the whisper say, and it gave me the clarity and mental fortitude necessary to continue.

Following the instructions, I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and slowly extended my hands forward, focusing all my willpower on the idea of pushing the negativity out through my hands. As the heat coursed through my body and down my arms, I mustered the courage to open my eyes. To my astonishment, I witnessed flames slowly emerging from my skin. Each flickering fire was swiftly extinguished as it came into contact with the water, and although the process caused intense itching and irritation, it was undeniably effective. Gradually, a sense of relief washed over me, and I could feel myself starting to regain a semblance of calmness.

The flood of darkness inside of me was leaving my system gradually. The fires continued to appear and get extinguished for another minute or so when finally, the majority of the pain and negativity I felt just vanished. Thoughts and memories still lingered but they were manageable and I was able to think properly without a plague of darkness occupying my mind and soul. The only problem was that this act had taxed me of what little energy I had left and once again, I was

on the floor, drained and exhausted. A waterfall cascaded down my drenched body, doing its best to revitalize me. Despite the pitiful state I was in, laying down in the shower was quite relaxing.

Eventually, it was time to leave my shower and as I began to dry off, something in my mirror caught my eye. I scrubbed some of the fog off and noticed my eyes. I could have been hallucinating due to...well, everything that happened, but in my reflection, rather than their normal brown hue, my eyes were a solid gold shade. I felt a chuckle escape my lips, a rare moment of amusement amidst the horror. Golden eyes were so drastically different from demonic wings and pyrokinesis. In fact, I didn't really mind that change, it was a nice touch and I would go as far as to say that I actually liked that look.

Soon, after a while of gazing into those beautiful golden eyes, I scoured around my body to see if anything else was different. When I stared at my forehead, I noticed my eyes were beginning to darken back into their natural brown hue. With that experience over, and being way too exhausted to continue doing trial and error with my powers, I walked back to my bed and simply collapsed. I managed to fall asleep with very little effort. However, seemingly not long after falling asleep, I was rudely awoken by light bleeding through my blinds and I instinctively hissed, an old habit I had since I was little. I then saw that it was nearing something like 8:15.

I groaned and placed a pillow over my head to shield my eyes from the light as if I were a vampire. The previous night and what happened earlier that morning drained way too much out of me and I only wanted to sleep and forget. Unfortunately, no matter how tired I was, I couldn't go back to sleep so I just laid there, motionless with my eyes closed.

Eventually, I called it a loss and got up. I was still so very tired, drained, and my eyes stung from the torrential downpour of tears, but I knew that no matter how hard I tried, I would not be able to fall back to sleep, so I got dressed.

For a moment, I hoped last night was just some fucked up dream, but when I crawled into my bathroom and smelled the intense aroma of apple and cinnamon, there was no doubt in my mind that not only did everything happen, but that my life from that moment onward could be summed up by one word, fucked.

I pushed myself up on the counter and brushed my teeth with the speed of a snail, all the while wishing that I could just go back to bed and wake up in a reality where that night never happened. I spat into the sink and noticed that in addition to multiple bruises, almost every blood vessel around my face had burst. I was too numb to feel shocked though. I tiredly weighed my options, and chose to put on coverup. It looked convincing enough that no one would ask questions. However, something inside me said that things were only going to get more difficult.

“What will happen if Mom and Dad find out?” I asked myself, not relishing the possibilities. Those thoughts weren’t pretty, so I decided that no one can know of my “condition”, ever.

My train of thought was interrupted by the raspy whisper from earlier hissing, “Easier said than done.” It seriously creeped me out, especially because there was no one in there besides me; however, it was right. To accomplish my goal, I would have to practice using my powers so I wouldn’t end up accidentally exposing myself. Not only was that a whole can of worms that I would rather avoid, but it was also a double-edged sword. I would be practicing with my abilities so no one would know about them; however, even using them would risk my secret being exposed.

As I paced back and forth in my room, desperately searching for a suitable place to practice my abilities in secret, my mind raced through different options. I needed a location that offered enough room for me to practice discreetly, away from prying eyes and potential danger. I

sat down on my bed, frustrated and deep in thought when the idea of returning to the reservation crossed my mind.

The mere mention of it made me snap. I never wanted to go back there.

Soon after dismissing the reservation as an option, another idea entered my mind: the sewers. I briefly considered the isolated and fire-resistant nature of the sewer drains, where I could practice without fear of causing any accidental fires. However, the overpowering stench associated with sewers and potential rats made me recoil in disgust. It was a definite no.

But then, it hit me. A perfect place came to mind. My town had a history of milling, and as a result, much of it was elevated to accommodate streams running beneath. Although the mills were long gone, the passages remained, essentially becoming an underground tunnel. What made this location even more ideal was that hardly anyone ever ventured into them. This meant I could practice my fires in a safe and isolated environment, away from prying eyes, without the risk of starting a fire or enduring a nauseating smell.

I was actually a little excited to see what I could really do with these powers; however, I decided to first practice making my eyes gold again. My thought was that it should wake me up and get me ready for testing my pyrokinesis.

I ventured back into my bathroom, gazed right into my reflection, closed my eyes, and the second I opened them up, I leaned forward and went wide-eyed, fully expecting my eyes to be a different color; however, all I saw in my reflection was me looking like a complete and utter sped. I then closed my eyes and imagined them turning golden to the same result, nothing. Eventually, I opted to just make faces in the mirror to see if that would work. After about a minute of different faces that not even a toddler would make, I realized how ridiculous I looked

and quickly stopped. I sat down on my toilet, using it like a chair, trying to deduce how I even caused my eyes to appear in the first place.

Then a thought entered my mind, maybe my eyes and my fire were connected. Trust me, I knew it was a bad idea; however, you know what curiosity did to the cat. So I took a deep breath and prayed that at the very least, I didn't set off my smoke detector. The emotion I felt most at that moment was the frustration of not being able to turn my eyes gold, so I focused on it, letting the negativity grow and grow. I felt a pit form in my chest and from it, a pool of negativity began to spread throughout my body. Straining my thoughts, I began to direct this darkness toward my hands like before. Soon, my palms started to glow red as I began to emit steam. As the steam grew, I returned my gaze to the mirror; however, my eyes were still brown. I growled in frustration causing my hands to ignite with flames that were dark green in appearance. Realizing how absolutely stupid this plan was, I frantically shook my hands every which way, and luckily that rapid movement extinguished the fire.

"Need to be more careful," I murmured, a mixture of relief and frustration lingering in my voice. Despite successfully extinguishing the flames, the realization of the potential danger I had just narrowly avoided weighed heavily on my mind. The thought of inadvertently setting my house ablaze left me with a sense of unease as I realized how stupid throwing caution to the wind was. I ran my hands through my hair, pushing it back from my face, and rolled my eyes.

"Ugh, why is this so hard?" I asked myself, thinking that it might have been a hallucination after all; however, when I opened my eyes, they were gold.

"Seriously?" I asked the world skeptically, rolling my eyes again which caused them to revert to their natural brown color.

“Really?” I asked confused. I was baffled, slightly annoyed, and impressed all at once. It couldn’t be that simple. But I had to try and once again, I rolled my eyes and they became gold. I did this over and over before realizing that I was once again just making goofy faces.

Suddenly, the question of why gold and not black began to gnaw at me. After all, demons are almost always portrayed as having jet-black eyes, well, as far as I knew. It wasn’t like I was a demonologist nor was I sure if this was demonic to begin with. Then again, with all that happened the previous night, and because of the appearance of my wings, demons were the only possible answer. My mind then returned to the events of the previous night, particularly the black shadows piercing through each of us, the searing pain, and us sinking.

“Wait!” I frantically screamed, realizing something that left me even more scared: those demonic shadows pierced through each of us and we all started to sink; however, I was still here. How was I still here? Why was I still alive? Why weren’t my friends still alive? Why did only I survive when everyone else was dragged down to hell?

Their screams of fear and terror filled my head and I felt the darkness pulse inside of me. Thinking quickly, I splashed cold water on my face and arms in an attempt to calm myself down and prevent me from self-immolating.

It took much longer than I wanted, but eventually, I could once again think clearly. In my state of clarity, I chose to push down those thoughts deep inside me, ignoring them for as long as I could. I didn’t want to deal with the pain, the trauma, and the dangers of letting them bubble up to the surface.

Taking a few deep breaths to calm myself down, I soon rose my head and was instantly entranced by my golden eyes: it was like they were peering into my soul. Something about those eyes consumed me with a comfort that I never felt before. Then, my sight began to trail

downwards causing me to notice something truly shocking. When my sight lined up with my chest, I noticed that it was slowly fading and becoming translucent. I was both stunned and paralyzed, it was like I was becoming a ghost. But soon, it appeared, from the semi-transparent mass that was my torso, something was taking form. It became more and more visible to the point where I was able to make out discernible features. I can only describe it as a lotus flower, a massive, multicolored, lotus flower. Its immense size demanded attention, and its petals unfurled with grace and majesty, radiating all different spectrums of colors like a luminous celestial fire entrancing me in its beauty. In the center, where all the fantastically colored petals convened was a circle of gold, the exact same shade as my eyes. Its brilliance was interrupted by what appeared to be small speckles of black, like flies on the center; however, I was rendered a mere slave to the sheer perfection, the absolute beauty of this divine flower before me. I felt a profound connection to this flower, not like it was a part of me, but like that flower was me. I then instantly knew what I was looking at...it was my soul.

Tears flowed down my face as I became entranced by the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. I wanted to stare into it forever; however, my fixation was broken by Geno scratching on my door trying to get in.

I wiped my tears, getting a decent amount of coverup on my hands, and placed another layer on, all the while, I could not get that image out of my head, it was incredible, something too beautiful for words to do justice. I wanted to draw it; however, I knew that I didn't have time. I had to leave and stop getting distracted. I knew though that my parents would question where I was off to and what happened last night, so I played out the conversation.

Emulating my dad, I said in a gruff voice, "Where are you going?"

“Into town.” I confidently replied to myself before I was cut off once again by the raspy whisper from before, with a chuckle I heard it say right in my ear, “Going to see your friends?”

My blood turned to ice and I instantly tensed up. Goosebumps consumed my body as I whipped around trying to find the source of that haunting remark.

“What the fuck?” I shouted, very much on edge. I could feel eyes digging into me, and knew that I had to leave the room. Quickly, I scoured the room for everything I needed: my phone, wallet, headphones, a portable charger, and some scissors. I was about to leave when I spotted the bottle of pepper spray my parents gave me the previous day. It was like I was calling to me, so I pocketed it as well before leaving.

Once I made it to the stairs, I was about to hop down them like I’ve done a million times before; however, just before bracing myself, I felt an intensely cold breath on the back of my neck. The shock almost caused me to trip and fall down all those stairs, but I managed to grip the railing at the last minute. Once again, I turned only to be met with nothing. I swear that I must have been losing my mind. I looked at my hand and it was gripping the banister so tightly that my knuckles were as white as snow and I thought I was about to crush the wood. Slowly I made my way down the steps, all the while, an overwhelming sense of dread hung above me, one that I couldn’t escape. It occupied my every thought to the point where I simply ignored my parents and left the house, not bothering to offer an explanation as to what happened the previous night or where I was going.

It took me almost an hour before I reached the middle school and the entrance to the downtown area. Instinctively, I flipped off the middle school for all the trauma it caused me. God I hated that school, so much that I felt the pit growing and heat rising; however, like with my wings, I took several deep breathes and the pit subsided; I knew I couldn’t release those flames

out in the open. So I turned my back to the school and crossed the bridge to the fields. My destination was in sight: a secondary bridge where, if you were careful, you could scale down the rocks and enter the tunnel. I scaled the small fence and was about to jump; however, I felt that same cold breath followed by a raspy “look”.

Swiftly, I turned and was met with the local library and...and the entrance to the reservation. The second I saw it, I felt like I was going to throw up so I turned away, but the unease, the dread, it did not cease, it was as if those woods were a physical person boring its eyes into the back of my head like a drill. So I jumped down the embankment, nearly slipping along the way and landed with such force that water splashed into my nose. Before me stood the tunnel, even in the daytime it was dark, so I clicked on my phone’s flashlight and began trekking inside. Despite wearing boots, I opted to stick to the sides of the tunnel as it was the most shallow and less rocky; however, I refused to touch the walls, avoiding any bug or spider that made the place its home. It smelled absolutely rank in there and the sound of my boots sloshing in the litter-filled water did not help. Eventually, I made it so far into the tunnel that light was basically non-existent and the smell only got worse; thankfully, after a few minutes, my nose got used to the smell.

When I could finally breath, I felt both excited and terrified to see what I could do. With a deep breath, I released the locks of my mind, opening the floodgates and allowing every fragment of negativity to overwhelm me. The pit grew and grew, spreading through my body like a virus. A massive strain engulfed my muscles, making it increasingly difficult to move let alone think. I could feel the sweat flowing down my body as my skin began to glow a luminous pink before I regained my focused and said the word ‘release’. The smoke began to erupt from my flesh and all my negativity began to flood out. Unlike the previous times, this fire was a normal

color, it was not grey, or green, or blue, it looked like an average flame. The fire soon spread and it wasn't long before I was completely engulfed in fire; however, despite its intensity, it didn't feel like I was being burned alive, moreso that I was submerged in really hot water. At first it felt unbearable but strangely the heat cooled down ever so slightly making the experience just teeter on bearable. I didn't understand how my clothes were still intact, but I didn't question it; After all, I had more pressing issues, like being on fire.

The longer the flames burned, the more pain I felt mentally, which only fed the fires. I wanted the fires to leave me, so I chose to do what I did in the shower: I slowly pushed my hands forwards, and pictured the flames leaving my arms like a flamethrower. That mere thought actually worked and the flames left both of my hands like water out of a firehose. The fires sprayed and whipped in every direction, illuminating the bats above me and had them fly frantically away from the two massive streams of fire. I felt exhausted after those flames were no longer in contact with my body; however, nothing would prepare me for the terror rapidly approaching me. The two streams of fire were coming right back like a boomerang. Before I could run, both made contact with me and began encircling my entire being. Unlike before, the flames were unbearable and my pain only served to intensify the already unbearable heat. I was not in control at all and I was terrified. In my fleeting moments of coherent thought, I enacted a risky idea. Knowing my powers seemed to be tied to my emotions and mental states, I looked down to the water beneath me and rolled my eyes turning them gold. I began panicing when nothing happened; however, at the last second, I saw my soul slowly reemerge and with it, the flames began to fade...no, it was more like they were being absorbed by my body.

In addition to the pain, I felt physically ill and weighed down by the negativity that came back tenfold. Covered in sweat and struggling to maintain my own balance, I shone my phone's

flashlight and saw that my shirt had some burn marks but somehow, it was still in one piece.

Also, my skin looked and felt severely sunburnt. I wanted to quit at that moment; however, the raspy whisper from before encouraged me, “Can’t stop now. Hard part over.”

“How?” I asked, pissed off at the disembodied voice. I honestly wasn’t expecting a reply, still fairly certain I was just going crazy; however, I caught a fleeting “Embrace it.”

“Embrace it?” I screamed. How the fuck was I supposed to just embrace self emotion and the physical and mental torture that went with it. Fuck that, I was going to find another way to control these powers. I was pissed off and the pit formed in my stomach, so I popped in my headphones to try and to remove myself from my emotions. But as I pressed play, my ears rung by the sheer intensity of the heavy metal playing. As I attempted to trudge out of the tunnel, I felt the heat rise and the pit continue to grow. I then thought of what the voice said, perhaps it meant embrace the emotions rather than the pain, perhaps, rather than remove myself from the emotions, I should work through them.

Now I wasn’t an idiot, I immediately rolled my eyes just in case things turned south as I raised the volume and focused the heat to my palms. The fire soon formed and it was scarlet, the color of blood and rage. Suddenly, the flames formed two spheres in my hands that resembled baseballs. Without thinking, I threw them and they launched forward at incredible speeds and thankfully, they did not come back. Once those two fireballs were out of sight, I still felt the rage inside me; however, the intensity of it appeared to be quelled for the moment.

Music then became the conduit for my inner turmoil so I geared up a playlist of songs fitting different emotions to see what would happen. First was a song that brought out my inner frustration and that caused a dark green flame to shoot forward and trail off in every direction like a firework. Next was anxiety which was a yellowish fire that flew forward and exploded.

After that was sadness, a light blue flame that corkscrewed forward. Once that was over, my hands were enveloped by an orange fire that appeared like gloves; they were really itchy and I believed they were associated with regret. Stress was next and it created those exploding bubbles from before. Next was doubt and guilt which combined and formed what looked like a whip. I swung my hand around and the fires moved exactly as I'd expect a whip to. I was starting to feel better when a song that brought out my inner worthlessness began to play. Dark purple fires shot out from my hands and began to wrap themselves around my entire body. The flames burned; however, I couldn't move. I was being cocooned by the flames and consumed by grief and worthlessness. Tears fled from my eyes as my inner demons began to scream my deepest insecurities. The voices only grew louder before, somehow, the music also grew in volume. Eventually, all I could hear was the music and the lyrics "When your life feels darker than the nighttime, all you need is a little hope! When you're falling apart from the inside, all you need is a little hope!" These strong words broke me out of this trance of hopelessness and worthlessness and a bright white light exploded out of my purple straight jacket causing it to vanish from existence before the light faded as well. The voices were gone and I could breathe, I paused my headphones and collapsed to my knees. That did a number on me, I was scorched, in pain, and my hands and knees were in the grimy water; however, I just had no energy to get up.

Eventually, when I regained my bearings, I turned on my phone to see what song broke me from my stupor. Song for Hope by Jake Clemons. That name sounded familiar and then it hit me, he was the saxophonist for the Estreet Band. I slumped myself on the wall and tried to force my insecurities back down; however, those purple flames appeared to make them more talkative. I needed a break from this, so I put on my sweatshirt to cover my scorched top and headed out of the tunnel to grab a bite to eat.

I sat down at the local diner and ordered my usual: french toast and mozzarella sticks. Yes, I know it's an odd combination but I like it. It was delicious and just what I needed to get out of my stupor, at least temporarily.

Eventually, I made it back into the tunnel and resumed my training. I began by testing to see what other emotions could trigger fire; however, it appeared that only rage, guilt, doubt, anxiety, worthlessness, sadness, regret, frustration, and stress could create fire. As such, I repeated the cycle again; however, I made certain to remove songs that brought out feelings of worthlessness. After a few cycles, I felt like my old self again. It was weird, I mean earlier that morning I was cowering in the bathroom terrified, and there I was, not even a full day later and eager to try and master these powers.

I jotted down what each flame did, how they felt, what they looked like, and what emotions they were associated with as I became more and more comfortable with my fires. Eventually, I looked at my phone and noticed that it was already nearing 4:00. It honestly did not feel like I was down there for that long, but it is what it is.

I decided that I played with fire enough that day so it was time to see what my wings could do, so I made my way to the library. Once inside, I made my way to the computers to look up books on aerodynamics and birds. I skimmed through each book, jotting down details I felt were important, and left.

Unfortunately, as I exited the library, I was left facing the entrance to the reservation. My body immediately began to tense up, my breathing became rapid and heavy, and I was filled with an overwhelming sense of dread. I felt all the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end and I felt nauseous and lightheaded. Then I felt something inside me explode. It was like a wave of darkness was consuming me from within. There was no heat, just darkness, it felt like something

I can only describe as evil was clawing its way from inside me. I collapsed on the ground and could barely hold all the negativity inside me from exploding out. That was when I heard a concerned voice ask me if I was okay. I looked up and it was an elderly crossing guard. This temporarily got me out of my stupor and I told them I was fine, just dealing with shit. I then turned my back to the reservation entrance and left, wanting to be as far away from there as possible.

I still felt light-headed so I sat on an old wooden bench next to the train station. Gradually, the feeling went away and I began to debate on where I should practice flying. The tunnel was too narrow, the woods would probably kill me, and the high school fields probably were hosting a little league game. I scoured through my thoughts in order to figure out the best spot but just could not think of anything. Lost for ideas, I pulled up a map on my phone and saw the ropes course. I almost completely forgot there was one nearby as it was always overshadowed by the zoo and ice rink. I then looked the place up and to my delight, the place was closed that week. This meant, I could sneak in and practice in secrecy, especially because it was an old ropes course that didn't have surveillance.

I was not going to schlep the almost 4 mile trip on foot so I called a Uber and was off. When I got out, I was flooded with memories of my childhood: birthdays at the zoo, charity skating and hockey practice at the rink; I wished at that moment that I could When I get there, I go back to that point in my life; however, I had work to do. I passed the zoo and encountered a small beaten up trail that led to the back of the ropes course. I scaled up the fence and made my way into the ropes course and searched for the harnesses. I thought that the harnesses would be difficult to obtain as I expected them to be locked in a shed, but instead, they were in a giant blue bin on the side of the main building. Once I found it, I set my plan into action: first I took off my

shirt and used the scissors to cut two lines down the back of the shirt before putting it back on. Next, I put on the harness, gloves, and carabiners. When I arrived, I decided I would just do what birds do, jump, and hope I take off; however, I would be doing it somewhat backwards, and with a safety net.

It has been a long time since I'd been on a ropes course so getting to the zip line was not easy. The entire time, my feet were trembling, the rope was shaking, and I almost fell three times. Once I got to the zip line, I placed my hands on top of the wires and carefully leaned off the ledge. I traveled at a small downward angle for maybe ten seconds when I reached the lower platform leading to the next section of the ropes course. I unhook myself from the wire and turned around before re-hooking back onto the wire. Now I was facing the top of the zipline rather than the end.

The stage was set and I crossed my arms behind my back. I could feel my wings unfurl, and their weight offset my balance. Luckily, I cut my shirt in the exact right spots to ensure my wings did not rip it. I tried to mentally command the wings to move; however, nothing happened. It was not like I could move them like I normally move my arms and legs. I tried swiveling my shoulders and that caused them to move slightly but I wanted them to flap. Impatient, I jumped hoping that my wings would just start working; instead, all I got was a nasty tugging feeling caused by the harness squeezing tightly into my crotch and I was back where I started. I tried again and again but nothing worked. I then attempted to jump with a running start, I made it about a fourth of the way to the other side before gliding back down to the starting line again. I kept trying this and eventually, I made it the the halfway point and I tried everything in my power to make them move and I actually feel them moving slightly. But this is shortly lived as I begin to feel an intense pain in my back. I decide to suck it up but my wings stop moving. I can

feel myself gliding back to where I started from again and I decided that I have had enough. I threw a tantrum and freaked out. I just wanted those damn wings to work. I shook my body in all directions and began to feel a breeze hitting my back. I turned my head and saw my wings flapping. But, the second I stopped acting like a crazy person, they ceased all movement.

Frustrated, I take in a deep breathe and jumped once again. This time, I decided to contort my back as I moved, and I heard a popping sound, like when you move your legs for the first time in hours. After that noise, I heard and felt my wings flapping and I managed to get to the top. Pain shot through every inch of my back; however, I succeeded.