

Williams

SUBURBAN HIGH BOOK FOUR

RESOLUTIONS

Manuscript Preview
By Talen Williams

MEET YOUR NEW BEST FRIENDS.

WILLIAM MOON – Age 14

With his past life behind him for good, Will looks forward to the new millennium. Backed by his friends, and guided by the Vision, Will begins his journey as an artist.

ASHLEY BAKER – Age 14

Ashley puts her quest for knowledge on hold and instead begins her quest for independence. She plots against her parents to get herself rejected from the private school they want to send her to.

NATHAN STONE – Age 14

Ever the loyal friend, Nathan juggles between the band, his new girlfriend, and pushing Will and Ashley to becoming more than just friends.

KRYSTAL HARPER – Age 15

Krystal realizes the only way to change things at Washington High is to become student council president. But her opponent has a ton of influence, and a looming scandal might ruin everything.

LESLIE TAYLOR – Age 14

After her downfall, Leslie found redemption through the drama club. Now she wishes to apologize to those she hurt the worst. She'll learn that some people aren't that forgiving.

NATSUKI YOKAZE – Age 15

To protect her friends and the bullied, Natsuki pledges to master her family's art of Ijōna-ken. To do so, she must prove herself worthy by surpassing her mother.

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JESSICA NEVILLE – Age 16

Jessica wants to make a name for herself in the rock world. That opportunity presents itself in the form of the upcoming Battle of the Bands at Random University.

VINCENT NEVILLE – Age 14

Vincent writes a song that he's confident will win over the crowd at Battle of the Bands. But the lyrics delve too deeply into a past his sister Jessica would prefer to stay buried.

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PROLOGUE

Monday January 3, 2000

At 4:23 A.M, 48-year-old Gilbert Grissom stood in front of his bathroom mirror. He tightened his tie and made sure it was lined up perfectly. He made one last pass at his tailored suit and brushed off a piece of lint clinging on to his left shoulder. Then, he moved his hand through his thinning hair hoping to cover the gray streaks with the few brown strands he had left. After two minutes, he accepted that was a lost cause and left the bathroom.

He walked past the bedroom where his two children were still sleeping peacefully and down the staircase. His wife waited for him at the front door with a smile warm enough to melt any frozen heart. She kissed him on the lips and gave him a tumbler filled with his favorite blend of coffee.

She gave him some words of encouragement, “Give them heck.”

With a smile almost as big as hers, he responded, “Don’t I always?”

As he headed to the driveway, Grissom waved to his neighbor who was about to plant a Gore 2000 sign in their yard. Grissom’s was the only yard in Barley Peaks that didn’t have a sign endorsing a presidential candidate. Though he hadn’t endorsed a candidate yet, he was sure his pick wouldn’t be a Democrat. That said, Grissom was never one to let political lines sever his ties with longtime neighbors and friends.

In a friendly tone, Grissom asked his neighbor, “You’re still on for a round at the club this Sunday?”

The neighbor answered, “Got a new set of clubs for Christmas. I’ve been dying to break them in.”

On the highway heading south toward Ingram Park, Gilbert listened to a talk show on the radio.

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“We’re back on 92.6, your home for the truth. If you’re just tuning in we’re talking about the sudden resignation of state prosecutor Gilbert Grissom. Caller, you’re on the air. What are your thoughts?”

The caller, an elderly man, sang Grissom’s praises.

“A crying shame he left. We need more good men like him to keep these punks and corporate crooks in line!”

The next caller, a young woman, was not so pleasant.

“That piece of <beep> sent my brother away for 35 years! I hope he’s dead. And I hope he’s burning in hell!”

Grissom kept listening to the program as he drove into town. He turned it off when he reached his destination, the faculty parking lot at George Washington High School. Carrying his briefcase, he walked onto campus.

The trees, the tables, and the statue of George Washington were covered in toilet paper and egg yolks. Broken and rotten eggshells littered the ground, and their stench polluted the air. Open condoms were stuck to the benches.

The chaotic sight was enough to break any new faculty member. It would’ve made them regret ever wanting to be an educator. But the new vice-principal wasn’t disturbed by the rampant vandalism in the least. Seventeen years as a prosecutor had prepared him for it and much worse.

With a grin, Grissom said to himself, “Looks like I got here in the nick of time,” before heading to his new office.

LESSON ONE:

CONVICTION

A strong persuasion or belief

At 5:38, Vice-Principal Grissom was hard at work setting up his new office.

A Geo Metro parked into the student parking lot. Junior Eddie DeWitt III and his girlfriend, sophomore Krystal Harper sat in the quiet car. Krystal's eyes were closed as she mentally prepared for the task at hand. Not wanting to break her concentration, Eddie simply looked over at Krystal and smiled. With her eyes closed, Krystal was deep in thought. Her peaceful state made it appear as if she were sleeping. Five minutes was all the time she had to prepare herself. That was if she wanted to get done what she wanted before the campus was flooded with returning students and faculty. When those five minutes were up, Krystal opened her eyes and broke the silence.

"I got this," she said in a calm and hopeful tone.

Eddie put his hand on top of Krystal's and added, "We got this."

Krystal turned to Eddie, leaned in, and kissed him on the lips.

The two got out of the car headed to the trunk. Eddie unlocked the trunk and it flew open, revealing two white cardboard boxes. They both grabbed a box from the handles on the sides. Krystal slightly struggled with her box. Eddie didn't have a problem with the left side of his box. His right arm did sting a little from when it was injured in a football game months ago. But he wasn't going to let that stop him from keeping up with Krystal.

To keep themselves warm in the chilly January morning, Krystal and Eddie wore heavy winter attire. Eddie sported a denim jacket on top and Krystal proudly wore his varsity jacket. They didn't wear gloves; it wasn't cold enough to be at risk of frostbite.

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Neither one of them wanted to cover up the matching silver band rings they were wearing. The bands were late-Christmas gifts Krystal and Eddie bought for each other. They weren't overly expensive but to afford them, they both sacrificed a lot of free time during the holiday break. Eddie put in a lot of hours at his grandfather's RV lot and Krystal babysat the local children almost every night. The couple didn't have much time to spend with each other over the break, but the rings were a symbol that their relationship was as strong as ever. Their families believed so too. To them, it was like Eddie and Krystal exchanged engagement rings.

Neither Krystal nor Eddie spoke about the vandalized quad. They didn't have a second to question who was responsible or why. They internally chalked it up as someone taking advantage of the lax security. They lifted up their undershirts to cover their noses and then walked over to an empty bulletin board that was mounted on the wall near the cafeteria entrance. Normally, the bulletin board would be completely covered with flyers for tryouts, campus events, odd job postings, upcoming career fairs, and other happenings. They were all taken down during the break but it wouldn't be long before new ones took their place. Krystal and Eddie came on to campus early to secure a space for their flyer before that happened.

Krystal sat her box down on the floor in a section that was clear of eggshells and other debris. Then, she dug into her coat pocket and pulled out a set of keys. These keys were to various locks that only student council members had access to, one of which was the bulletin board. After unlocking the left glass door, she opened the lid from the box Eddie was carrying and pulled out a flyer and a box of thumbtacks.

Front and center on the flyer was a professionally taken photo of Krystal, standing proudly with her arms folded and with a confident smile. The words "Vote Krystal Harper for Student Council President," were printed in bold font above her. Her campaign slogan, "I Got This!" was printed boldly and proudly at the bottom of the flyer.

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The couple went all around campus posting flyers using thumbtacks and tape where appropriate. They chose very specific spots to post the flyers, ones where they believe the most students would see them. The atmosphere of the dark, quiet, empty halls would've creeped out anyone else. But Krystal had walked the A-building halls countless times - early student council meetings and late-night post council sessions – so she'd gotten used to the dark. And Eddie had watched way too many episodes of *Scooby Doo* with his kid brother; he knew what spots to avoid in the dark.

When they came to certain classrooms in every building, Krystal was hit with a short feeling of dread. She hadn't had any classes in those rooms but she was all too familiar with them.

Standing close to room C-103 she said, "This is where the macramé club used to meet, until they had to shut down," as Eddie posted a flyer on a wall nearby.

Next to room D-114, she said, "This is where the German club was when they still had funding."

Next to room G-121, she said, "This is was the art club's room, when there still was one."

And, in front of room E-108, she said, "We used to hold our black student union meetings here, until people just stopped showing up." This one hurt Krystal the most. As a member of the black student union, she had to watch it die from the inside and out.

Krystal gave an eulogy for every fallen club she and Eddie came across. The look of sorrow on her face made it seem she was burying a loved one. She spoke the name of each club, even the ones she wasn't a member of, and gave them all a fond farewell. There were too many farewells for her liking.

There were so many things Eddie could've said to Krystal in those moments. He could've agreed with her that it was messed up that some extracurriculars were funded whereas others weren't. But he was on the football team, one of the extracurriculars that was massively overfunded. He could've reassured her that she did everything in her power as treasurer to save the clubs. But he knew that she knew that already. He could've told her that she was going to win the election. But he'd told her that every time they were

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together during the break. So he said nothing; he silently taped the flyers to the wall while Krystal lamented the clubs she couldn't save.

Krystal's mind was split down the middle. The left side was filled with guilt. After all, she was part of the student council that failed to keep those clubs running. The right side was filled with resolve. She was determined to not let another club die. Which brought her and Eddie to the Performance Arts Center at the back of campus, home to one of the last remaining extracurricular clubs, the drama club. Inside there was a bulletin board with a single flyer posted, an ad for the upcoming play, *Everything's Fine and Dandy (Thanks For Asking)*. Krystal took a look around and noticed that the lobby was in a worse condition than it was when she was last there in October.

Both the building and the club itself were hanging on by a thread. Both were given a lifeline last December. The theater received some renovations thanks to Rob's schemes. And the club got to live on a bit longer thanks to Leslie's stellar performance bringing in some much needed cash. Krystal knew that those miracles only delayed the inevitable and that the drama club wouldn't survive for long if her opponent, Vanessa Neuendorff, won the presidency.

Krystal remembered vividly the looks on the drama club member's faces on that afternoon she told them their funding was cut a third time. She remembered their complaints about how some clubs got gutted without a second thought while others were always spared and even given more. With their anguished looks and loud complaints fresh in her memory, she turned to Eddie and requested, "Give me a flyer." Eddie gave her the last flyer they had and some thumbtacks. With a feeling of conviction taking over, she repeated her slogan, "I got this," and posted the flyer on the bulletin board.

Showing his full support again, Eddie held Krystal's hand, kissed her on the cheek and said, "No babe, we got this." Knowing she had at least one dedicated supporter on her side put a smile on her face. She was more confident that they did, in fact, have this.

REVITALIZATION

The process of supplying something with a new energy.

At 6:01, Will woke up and looked to his alarm clock radio.

It was tuned to 96.3 FM, a station he knew for sure he didn't have set to the night before. The DJ spoke with a smooth, charismatic voice.

"It's another beautiful morning and you're tuned into K-LAS 101 FM, your home for old school. I'm your host Mack Love, and I'm going to get your morning started off right. Here's Weldon Irvine's 'Morning Sunrise,' only on K-LAS."

Will was unusually clear-headed. That was because for the first time, his dream wasn't filled with nightmares or visions of his past clashing with his present. He hopped out of bed with a feeling of enthusiasm that was uncommon for kids having to return to school. He got dressed in the new clothes he got for Christmas. Then, he grabbed his backpack out of his pocket and packed two important books into it: his sketchbook, and a computer programming book Ashley asked him to bring. He tucked his portable CD player, his most essential item, into his coat pocket with the earbuds plugged into the headphone jack.

Before leaving his room, he stepped in front of the mirror on his dresser. He looked down at his chest and placed his hand firmly over his heart. He felt a familiar warmth come over him; it was the spirit of April that he carried with him. He said to himself, "It's going to be a good day today, I can feel it." Will knew April wouldn't appear by his side anymore, but he smiled knowing she'd always be in his heart, pushing him in the right direction.

As Will walked closer to the staircase, his nose was assaulted with the smell of hair gel seeping from the closed bathroom door. He heard his brother Marcus singing the Soul Glo jingle from *Coming to America* from inside the bathroom. Coming down the stairs, Will heard his sister Rosetta spelling the word restaurant incorrectly. At the bottom of the staircase, Will helped her out, "There's an A in there somewhere." Rose opened her eyes and looked down at her vocabulary sheet. She moaned, "That's stupid!"

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Will's parents, Anthony and Elizabeth were in the living room watching the local news covering the presidential elections.

"The race for 43 is underway. With so many hopeful Democrat, Republican and Independent, candidates, the big question is, who will Donovan Taylor endorse?"

The news showed photos of Donovan Taylor shaking hands with potential candidates of all parties. Liz commented on Donovan Taylor's influence. "Hmmp. That man sure does have his hands in a lot of things for someone who sells appliances."

Anthony replied, "Including the mortgage on the house and my retirement. Far as I'm concerned, for the next 30 years, that man can have his hands on anything and everything he wants." Afterward, he went to drinking his coffee from his TaylorCorp mug. Liz couldn't disagree with Anthony's logic.

Will said good morning to his parents. He didn't question why Liz wasn't cooking one of her healthy breakfasts. It meant he didn't have to come up with an excuse to not wanting to eat it. As he made his way to the front door, Liz warned him, "You better be behaving when you're over at Mrs. Judith and Mr. Steve's house, William. Don't let them tell me you're over there acting up."

Anthony gave Will an order too, "And don't be eating them out of house and home either, you tracking, boy?"

Will froze in the middle of grabbing the doorknob. He thought he was careful with sneaking over to the Neville's in the morning. He never once considered that Jessica and Vincent's parents would've ever talked to him. For a very brief moment, he wondered to himself what his strict parents and two former hippies would even talk about. There was no further point in him lying about why he skipped out on Liz's breakfasts. He simply complied to his parents' demands, "Yes ma'am. Yes sir"

Will crossed over the cul-de-sac to the Neville's house. He stepped on the doormat and took off his sneakers. Before he could press the doorbell, the door opened and Vincent was on the other side. Vincent rubbed his eyes and grumbled, "William." His usual dry tone was even more grim from him still trying to wake up.

Will entered the house and followed Vincent into the living room where Jessica and Nathan were sitting on the green sectional

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couch in the living room. Jessica had her feet planted on the square-shaped ottoman next to the couch. They were watching music videos on MTV. They both greeted Will with their mouths stuffed with cereal and milk dripping from their lips.

Instead of eating one cereal, they were sampling several boxes of brand new cereals. Some of the cereals hadn't been released to market yet. Nathan savored the taste of the Cinna Cluster Raisin Bran. Jessica was disgusted by the taste of Koala Crisp. Vincent sat at the opposite end of the couch and taste-tested the Mystery Volcano Crunch cereal. After some awkward bites and weird expressions, his only review of the cereal was him shrugging his shoulders and saying, "Eh." No one knew what to take from that.

Jessica handed Will a box and requested, "Will, try out this Pokémon cereal. It's not supposed to hit the shelves until May."

Will turned Jessica down, saying, "If I wanted a science experiment for breakfast, I would've stayed at my house. I'm getting Frosted Flakes." He went into the pantry for his favorite cereal.

Will came back with a bowl of cereal and sat on the end of the couch closest to the kitchen. Midway through Jay-Z's newest video, Jessica sat up straight, muted the TV and said, "Let's get this band meeting started." Will wasn't an official member of the band, but he and Vincent gave Jessica their full attention. Nathan divided his attention between Jessica and the women in the video.

"Battle of the Bands is in 4 months. That's 4 months to get a new guitarist, 4 months to come up with a kick ass new song, and 4 months to rehearse it. Speaking of new song..."

Jessica turned to Vincent, who shrugged his shoulders and said, "Nothing."

Jessica rolled her eyes and continued her meeting. "Well while you work on turning that nothing into something, we're gonna be hosting auditions after school. You gonna be there, Stone?"

Nathan didn't answer; he was too occupied ogling over the sexy ladies in the music video. Jessica shouted, "Hey, jackass!" before hurling a couch pillow at him to get his attention. His signature knit

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beanie absorbed most of the blow, but he felt enough of an impact to give Jessica his full attention.

“Dude, what the hell?” Nathan shouted before throwing the pillow back at Jessica. He answered Jessica’s question, “Can’t be there for the auditions. Will and me got a double date after school.”

Will asked, “Who am I going on a date with?”

Jessica tilted her head toward Will and sarcastically answered, “Yeah like you don’t know.”

Nathan bluntly said, “Ashley.”

Visibly annoyed, Will said, “Look out man, I’ve been telling y’all all Christmas break, me and Ashley are just friends. Y’all gotta get that through your heads.”

Nathan, Jessica, and Vincent looked at each other with disbelief. They weren’t convinced of what Will said the first time he said it, and they weren’t convinced the seventeenth. Nathan said to Jessica, “Well me, Natsuki, and the ‘just friends’ have a meeting after school over some Pizza Baron pizza. We’re putting together a plan to get Ashley out of that private school her parents wanna ship her off to.”

Jessica replied, “Cool we’ll need her.”

Will asked, “What for?”

Vincent answered, “ID.”

Jessica clarified, “Battle of the Bands is only for Random University students. We’ll need your ‘just friend’ to whip us up some student IDs or they’re not letting us get on stage.”

Will grew more annoyed each time the others said, “just friends,” and the mocking manner in which they said it. After finishing his cereal, he stood up and walked over to Jessica. He slipped her a few bucks. In exchange, she pulled out a jewel case from her jacket’s pocket and handed it to Will. Inside the case was a burned CD named *Songs A Dork Like Will Would Like*. He told Nathan, “C’mon, we gotta get going.”

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Nathan didn't acknowledge Will. He was busy staring at Mandy Moore on the TV. Jessica gave Will a pillow and he chucked it at the same spot on Nathan's head that Jessica hit earlier.

"Okay jeez, dude I'm getting up," Nathan moaned as he massaged the sore spot on the back of his head. He stood up, joined Will, and the two made their way out.

It was still far too cold for Will's liking but he was getting used to the weather. He put in the left earbud, loaded his CD player with his newest mix CD, and started playing it from Track 1, Macy Gray's "I Try." His mood elevated with each new song he was introduced to. Jessica was right, the songs were ones a dork like him would like. With his right ear free, he could hear Nathan and have a conversation with him.

"Who you got in the Royal Rumble, dude?"

After considering every confirmed entrant, he gave his prediction. "I'm thinking Chris Jericho. Who you got?"

Nathan answered, "It's gotta be Kane!" Imitating the wrestler's entrance in the ring, he raised his arms up and threw them down. "Boom!" he shouted, copying the pyro that went off on the ring posts.

The two continued discussing the upcoming pay-per-view, running down the card and who their favorites were to win each match until they reached the convenience store. The usual group of loiterers: Charity, Vicks, Wedge, and Casey were standing outside the store smoking cigarettes.

Casey greeted them on behalf of his group. "'Sup Nathan? 'Sup, Nathan's Friend?"

Being called Nathan's Friend reminded Will that this wasn't Salem. He wasn't just Marcus's Brother any more, and he was done living in anyone else's shadow. He corrected Casey, "Will. My name's Will."

Casey acknowledged, "Right. Will. 'Sup Will?"

Inside the convenience store, Nathan went up and down the aisles, picking up as many snacks and soft drinks as he could carry,

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dropping them off on the cashier's counter, and going back for more. Meanwhile, Will stood at the magazine rack with a blueberry muffin for Ashley in one hand, and the latest issue of *PSM* in the other. He skimmed through the PlayStation 2 feature, noting that there were only 8 months before it launched in America. After seeing the screenshots of the games, and the huge upgrade in their graphics, he made it a goal right then and there to save up enough to buy one on release day.

10 minutes and 27 dollars later, Nathan left the store with a backpack so packed with snacks, the zipper wouldn't close all the way. A bag of chips fell out, and Will picked it up from off the ground. He tried to put it back into Nathan's backpack, but he gave up and just handed Nathan the bag. Nathan tore it open and ate from it during the rest of the walk to school.

Will asked, "Sure you got enough?"

Nathan answered, "Gotta compensate, dude. Rob usually hooks me up with the good stuff after lunch, but he's on ice for another week."

When Will and Nathan arrived on campus, both the student and faculty parking lots were full. There was already a line of cars at the drop-off point that went all the way out to the road. One vehicle near the end of the line stood out to Will, the Ford Explorer belonging to the Bakers. Will caught a quick glimpse at the car and saw Ashley in the back seat. Her parents, Benjamin and Jazmine both looked back at her and took turns lecturing her. Ashley looked distracted; she ignored her parents, but the look of misery on her face suggested their words were getting to her.

Suddenly, time froze and the world around Will became silent and dim. Will's Vision kicked in. The car disappeared and Ashley stood in front of parents like a defendant stood in front of a judge. Benjamin and Jazmine morphed into demonic figures. They towered over Ashley with their claws and fangs out, closing in to devour her. What stood out to Will the most, what he couldn't look away from, was Ashley's expression. She looked exhausted, as though she fought with everything she had. But in the end, she couldn't change her fate.

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The Vision ended as quickly as it started. Will was back in reality and time moved forward again. He looked forward toward campus but he wouldn't soon forget the look of misery and powerlessness on Ashley. He hated that look on her, perhaps more than she hated feeling it. He looked down at the muffin he was holding, remembering it was one of the things that made Ashley happy. It was then that he remembered the resolution he made for himself: to see his best friend Ashley smile. And he'd do whatever it took to make that happen.

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LESSON THREE:

STIRRINGS

The earliest beginning of an emotion

Forty-five minutes until homeroom and the quad was alive with students.

Skaters, goths, preps, jocks, brains, nu-metalheads, and all the other cliques assembled in their respective groups throughout the quad. All of them in brand new clothing and hairstyles that came out of the pages of the magazines that pandered to their respective subcultures. The janitorial staff was also in the area, cleaning up the remaining toilet paper, eggshells, and condoms that littered the quad. Adding to their workload were some of Krystal's flyers, which already found their way on to the ground and under the dirty footsteps of students.

Will and Nathan looked around and observed the mess. Still thinking about the Vision, Will wasn't concerned about the vandalism. Nathan, however, wasn't happy about it. "Dude! Who messed up the school?" He threw his hands up and loudly continued, "And why didn't they call me to help?"

Erin, a girl who shared some classes with Nathan last semester, overheard him. Without seeing him, she recognized him by his voice and his excessive use of the word "dude." She broke away from her group of preps and walked up to Nathan. She blushed and greeted, "Hi, Nathan."

With a smooth smile, Nathan poured on the signature Stone charm and greeted back, "Hey, Erin."

Erin twirled her hair and swayed her body in a flirtatious manner. She said, "I hope I'm not being too forward, but I was wondering if you'd want to go out with me Friday night."

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Six months ago, a girl as attractive as Erin coming up to Nathan and asking him on a date would've been his dream come true. Days before the homecoming dance, he would've settled with any girl approaching him like that. But on New Year's Eve, something happened that made him have to gently turn Erin down. "Sorry, dude, no can do." He pointed his thumb to his chest and proudly announced, "I've got a girlfriend now."

Nathan saw the disheartened look on Erin's face and quickly came up with a solution. "But if you're still looking for a date Friday night..." He pushed Will closer to Erin and continued, "My bro Will's free!"

Erin gasped, going from disheartened to offended. "Nathan Stone, you huge jerk! I can't believe you'd try to hook me up with Will knowing he's going with Ashley! What is wrong with you?"

"We're just..." Those were the only words Erin heard Will utter as she stormed off back to her group.

"...Friends," Will said to himself. Though he was surrounded by his peers, he was the only person who heard himself say that.

He turned back toward Nathan and angrily asked, "The hell was all that about?"

Nathan arrogantly answered, "What can I say, dude? The chicks think I'm hot all of a sudden. Now that Natsuki's dating me, I guess I've got this aura about me that makes other chicks wanna date me too. Something about them wanting what they can't have. I dunno, dude. I think it's biology or something."

"That's not what I'm talking about."

"Oh you mean setting you up with Erin? Well somebody's gotta go out with the chicks now that I'm off the market."

"That ain't what I'm talking about either."

"Oh you mean the thing about you and Ashley going together? Yeah dude, that rumor's been spreading like wildfire lately." Feigning ignorance, he asked, "Wonder who started it?" He shrugged his shoulders and answered his own question. "Guess we'll never know."

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Will and Nathan sat at one of the tables and waited for Ashley to arrive. Nathan sat across from Will but was turned in the opposite direction. He scoped the area, particularly looking at all the girls he couldn't flirt with anymore. Will listened to his CD player, now with both earbuds in to drown out all the noise. With his sketchbook placed firmly on the table, he opened to a blank page and practiced his drawing.

This time, he started sketching what he saw in the Vision. Combining what he learned from Raphael about figure drawing with the cartoons he watched, he drew Benjamin and Jazmine as demons. He started with their heads and making it to their torsos. He made sure to emphasize an ominous look of disapproval in their eyes. As demonic beings, Will purposely drew their body proportions and facial compositions to be twisted. The sloppy linework, the eraser marks, and the way in which they were drawn showed both two things: Will's true thoughts of Ashley's parents and that he still had much to learn about drawing.

Seven minutes later, Ashley arrived and sat on Nathan's side. She leaned in, took a peek at Will's drawing, and was intrigued by what she saw. She asked, "What's that supposed to be?"

Will was alarmed by Ashley's sudden presence. "Ashley! How long have you been here?" Feeling guilty for not noticing her earlier, Will scrambled to grab his backpack and tossed it on the table.

Ashley answered, "Just now. Actually, I've been here for about 20 minutes. I would've met up with you guys earlier, but mom and dad saw the mess somebody made of the place as soon as they pulled up on campus."

She turned her head to Nathan implying she thought he had something to do with the vandalism. Nathan pleaded his innocence by grudgingly saying, "Don't look at me, dude. I didn't do jack, and I'm pissed that I didn't get to."

In an annoyed tone, she continued, "Well thanks to whoever did do it, I got to listen to them go on and on about how this school's full of savages, and how they can't wait until I'm at Perryton with the more..." She rolled her eyes and finished, "...sophisticated students."

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Will pulled out the programming book from his backpack and placed it on the table. Then, he put the blueberry muffin on top of the book and slid both over to Ashley. Her attitude shifted from annoyed to delighted. She was pleased to have the book, and even more happy to have one of her favorite muffins. She tore open the packaging and devoured it. There were some crumbs stuck around her lips. Will commented, “Oh, you’ll fit right in with all the sophisticated students.”

While she turned to the page of her book she wanted to read, Ashley asked again, “So what’s that drawing about? Doesn’t look like anything like your other ones.”

Will truthfully answered, “It’s your parents.” Somehow, he knew she wouldn’t be offended by that.

Sharing Will’s feelings toward her parents, Ashley smiled and suggested, “Make their horns bigger. And give them long devil tails too!” That smile was the one Will vowed to keep on her. In return, he smiled back and went to work implementing Ashley’s suggestions.

Some students from various cliques and groups observed Will and Ashley talking to each other, and more specifically their smiles. They also noticed there was a third wheel at their table. One-by-one, those students motioned for Nathan to get away from the table, so that Will and Ashley would be alone. To do that, Nathan faked a phone call. He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and pretended to press the answer button. “Hey, Natsuki! What’s that? Can’t hear you, you’re breaking up, dude.” Pretending he needed to go elsewhere to get better reception, Nathan got up and walked away while carrying on his fake conversation.

The 9th graders hoped to see Will and Ashley get romantic with each other. Those hopes were dashed when all they saw was Ashley reading her programming book and Will drawing in his sketchbook. Neither talked nor made eye contact. That was until Will momentarily looked up and noticed that there were still muffin crumbs on Ashley’s face. She was so absorbed with the book she didn’t notice or care until Will pointed it out.

“You...uh...saving those crumbs for later?”

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That's when Ashley looked away from her book and tried to wipe away the crumbs. She managed to get a few, but there were still some that stubbornly stayed stuck on her. Will directed her to where the remaining crumbs were. "Top of your lip. On your left. No, your other left. A little bit more up. No, you're going to the right again." There was still one small speck of muffin that Ashley couldn't get despite Will's directions.

"Here, let me get it," Will said. He leaned in closer to Ashley and used his thumb to wipe away the crumb. Part of Will's thumb touched the tip of Ashley's lip. For them, it only lasted two seconds. For everyone watching, seeing a part of Will's skin touching a part of Ashley's was a moment that lasted for eternity. They looked on with anticipation, waiting for Will to take it further. A girl smiled, put her hands on her cheeks, and squealed, "That's the cutest thing ever!"

To their dismay, that's how far Will and Ashley would take things. The two realized that about a dozen pair of eyes were on them. They both felt a pressure put on them that was never there whenever they were on Fate's Hill or Will's porch. Will quickly pulled back to his side of the table. Both stood up and shoved their books into their backpacks. They each came up with convenient excuses to leave.

Will looked off to the left and said, "I...um...need to go to the art room to...um...see if they got in some red paint."

Ashley looked off in the opposite direction and said, "And I...uh...need to go to the library to...uh...check some emails. Yes, some emails."

The two went into campus in two different directions, unaware of what was being said about them. The music coming from Will's earbuds drowned out all the talk. Ashley purposely took a route with the smallest number of students. While they were able to ignore the conversations about them, they couldn't stop the text messages.

"They're totally hooking up."

"He fought Shawn over her, of course they're hooking up."

"He's kinda geeky looking, but she's not a looker herself."

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“Those two are feeling each other for real.”

“They’re so hot for each other.”

Will made it to the art classroom and Ashley made it to the library. Will didn’t do anything art wise, and Ashley didn’t even go close to the computers. Instead, Will sat on the stool he was assigned to and Ashley stood against a stack of books in the furthest end of the library. They both wanted absolute quiet to hear something, and it wasn’t long until they did.

They heard the beats of their hearts thumping rapidly and loudly and had the same reaction to what was happening. They reassured themselves, “We’re just friends.” Before either could think about that any further, an announcement came from the intercoms.

“Attention all students and faculty, this is Principal Terrell. Please report to the new gym for an assembly.”

Williams
LESSON FOUR:

SPECTERS

The hauntings of one's past mistakes.

At 7:32, Leslie sat in the back seat of her family's Mercedes.

It was parked on the curb outside the Dallas's house in rural Boswell. The Backstreet Boys played on the radio at a volume low enough that Leslie could hear but didn't disrupt her driver, Darrell, from his reading. Darrell was reading the *Livingston Post's* lead article "The Neverending Rise of the Dot-Com Bubble." Underneath were articles about the end of the "Peanuts" comic strips, and a local business owner facing federal indictment.

Leslie looked out of the window and at the front porch. She watched the Dallas children pour out of the house and race each other for preferred seating in the Plymouth Voyager. Their mother, Ruby Ann, came out with them carrying the newborn Arlen. The last one out was Abilene, who was carrying a Lisa Frank folder filled with papers. Abilene didn't follow her siblings and mother to the Voyager. Instead, she walked across the yard to the Mercedes.

Leslie slid over to the other side to give Abilene room to enter the car. The instant the door was closed and Abilene was sitting, Leslie lunged over and hugged her friend as a way of welcoming her. After letting go, Leslie complimented Abilene's fashion.

"Oh my God. You look marvelous."

"Aww, thank you, hun. I was up all night putting this together. I knew you'd love it."

"I totally do."

Abilene's attire, from her white fitted jacket, pink pleated plaid mini shirt, pastel pink skirt, and white platform loafers and legwarmers, along with her space buns hairstyle was in stark

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contrast to Leslie's. Leslie gave up trendy fashion for a more modest look, one that wouldn't make her stand out in a crowd. She donated all of her designer fashion and accessories to Abilene who, in turn, created an unique style.

On the way to school, Abilene opened her folder and showed Leslie the pages she printed off the internet, pictures of teenage boys and girls in 1950s fashion and hairstyles. "I looked up 50s fashion on the internet and found these."

Leslie thumbed through the pages while Abilene kept speaking. "I've got some great ideas for your character Norma's costume." She squealed in delight and said, "Ooooh, I can't wait to get back in wardrobe and start putting things together." In her normal tone she continued, "And I bet you can't wait to start running lines with your cute co-star, Matt."

Leslie blushed and smiled coyly; she didn't deny what Abilene said about her and Matt.

Abilene asked, "Have you heard the rumors?"

Leslie answered, "Come on, Abby, you know I don't follow rumors. That's not who I am anymore."

Abilene responded, "I know I know, but this one's about your old friend Ashley."

Suddenly, Leslie was all ears. She pleaded, "Tell me!"

Abilene happily complied, "You know that boy she's always hanging around? The one who got into that scrap with Shawn Franklin?"

Leslie answered, "Will?" That was the first time she referred to him by his actual name. During her rise, she called him Nobody. During her fall, she didn't call him anything. As a friend of Ashley, Leslie went out of her way to avoid him.

Abilene continued, "Yeah him. Word is those two are dating." She pulled out her cell phone, put it in Leslie's face and scrolled down the list of text messages she received from various

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friends including fellow drama club members. “Everybody’s been talking about them.”

Leslie watched the barrage of messages scroll on Abilene’s phone and became more devastated with each new message. Even if the rumor swirling around Ashley was just that, a rumor, there was once a time Leslie would’ve been the first to know about it. That was because Ashley would’ve around to tell her about it directly.

Abilene noticed Leslie’s sadness and put her phone away. She reassured Leslie, “Don’t you worry none, hun. You’re gonna make that apology. Ashley’s gonna forgive you, and everything’ll be right as rain.”

Abilene reminded Leslie of the New Year’s resolution she made. That gave her back the confidence she needed to see it through. “Thank you, Abilene.”

Darrell dropped the girls off in front of campus. They saw a mass of their classmates, teachers, and staff filing into the cafeteria. When they got closer to the mass, Abilene asked a student, “What’s goin’ on here? Where y’all going?”

The student answered, “Terrell called an assembly and he’s making everybody go.”

Leslie and Abilene merged into the mass and followed it into the new gym that connected to the cafeteria. No student knew what the impromptu assembly was about and no student cared.

There was a podium in the middle of the gym with the Washington High emblem on front of it and a small microphone connected to it. Principal Terrell sat in a folding chair next to the podium and Vice-Principal Grissom sat next to him. Coaches Gibbs, Peony, and Kirkendall stood in front of the bleachers and ordered students to hurry and take the first open seat regardless of grade or social standing.

As they walked to the first available seat in the bleachers, Leslie caught a glimpse of Ashley sitting one of the middle row of bleachers sandwiched between two random students. Ashley was

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looking around in search of Nathan and Will, so she didn't notice Leslie looking at her.

In that very short period of time, the world around Leslie went dark and silent. A spotlight shone on her and she realized she was standing on a stage. There were no other actors or actresses on stage and the only person in the audience was Ashley. Leslie knew the words to the script; she rehearsed them every night in her room for weeks. She opened her mouth to recite the apology she wanted to give Ashley. Her lips moved, but the words didn't come out. She tried and tried again, pouring more and more of her heart into each recital, but there was only silence. Ashley, looking bored by Leslie's performance, got up from her seat and walked up the aisle to the theater's exit. Leslie reached her arm out in Ashley's direction and cried out, "No wait! Come back! Please! Ashley!" Those words echoed all throughout the theater but they didn't reach Ashley's ears.

"I found us some seats!" Abilene's call brought Leslie back to reality. Leslie looked away from Ashley and to the empty seats Abilene pointed out at the bottom row.

A girl in the row above Leslie leaned in closer to Leslie and whispered, "You kicked ass in that play, Leslie." Leslie smiled; it was the acceptance she yearned for, the admiration of her peers that came organically and not simply because of her name. She faced the girl, marking the first time she made direct eye-contact with one of her peers outside of drama club in months. Then, she replied to the girl with a very humble, "Thank you."

Principal Terrell walked up to the podium and tapped on the microphone. The feedback caused all the commotion to stop. He spoke, "First, let me welcome you all back. I hope you had a good break. With that out of the way, let me address a concern some of you may have. No, we haven't found Mr. Caine, and it doesn't look like we're ever going to."

From the silence and looks of disinterest coming from the student body it was evident that nobody was concerned about the former principal's whereabouts.

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“That said, the district has named me your new principal effective immediately.”

Again, the students didn’t care. The teachers and faculty clapped.

“Now, let me introduce you to your new Vice-Principal, Mr. Grissom.”

Grissom stood up and took Terrell’s place at the podium. The two exchanged a firm handshake; it was a symbolic welcoming into the Washington High faculty with the entire school there to witness.

In an authoritative tone, Grissom addressed all of Washington High. “Thank you, Principal Terrell.” He placed his hands behind his back and took a commanding posture. He continued his speech by listing off his resume and accolades. “I spent the past 17 years as a prosecutor for the state. In that time, I handled cases mostly involving young offenders around your age. I oversaw 32 major cases, 30 of which led to conviction.”

The students reacted to Grissom with eye rolls, quiet conversations among themselves, mockery, and overall apathy. To them he was just another suit that told them what to do and where to be. He was no different from Terrell and Caine before him. It was what Grissom said next that gained their full attention.

“14 of those convictions resulted in a life sentence, and 2 resulted in the death penalty.” The students gasped. Grissom’s claim was too outrageous to be unbelievable. “That’s how committed to the pursuit of justice I was and still am. Which brings me here to George Washington High. My aim is to instill discipline in you today so that you don’t become convicts tomorrow.”

“On that note, this morning our school was vandalized. Principal Terrell informs me that it was most likely a senior prank. I want those responsible to stand up and confess to the crime.”

Naturally, nobody confessed, and the gym remained quiet.

Grissom smiled deceptively, he knew he was in the exact element where he thrived. In his mind, he was back in the

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courtroom. The entire student body was on trial, they were on the stand, and he was about to make them sing like birds. “No one wants to come forward. Fine, until someone does, your senior prom is cancelled.”

Outraged, the seniors protested, “You can’t do that! That’s not fair! We didn’t do anything!” Their cries of injustice didn’t move Grissom. He remained stoic knowing that he had the entire senior class right where he wanted them. It was only a matter of time before somebody came forward.

Sure enough, somebody did. Jason Hall, a 19-year-old senior with short, blonde hair that looked like he ran his hands through it, stood up. He was wearing two beaded necklaces, a pair of tan camo pants and a shirt that read “Class of 1999,” suggesting that he should’ve graduated last year. That, and the fact that was voted class clown two years in a row.

Jason proudly proclaimed, “I did it!” loud enough for everyone to hear. “It was me, all me, and nobody else but me.” His confession earned him thunderous applause from his fellow seniors. He took a bow and accepted high-fives in every direction.

Grissom commanded, “Be quiet!” which immediately brought the clapping to an end.

Then, he addressed Jason directly. “You think you’re some kind of hero for defiling these hallowed halls? Some sort of legend they’ll talk about for years to come? Let me assure you, young man, you are not. No, what you are is nothing more than an example, an example of what will happen to anyone who breaks the rules here moving forward. You’re expelled.”

Jason wasn’t moved by Grissom’s sentence. He remained standing, calling the vice-principal’s bluff. Principal Terrell whispered in Grissom’s ear, reminding him of the power he had as vice-principal. Grissom’s face scrunched up, indicating that he did not like what he was being told.

Grissom’s body tensed up in anger. He cleared his throat and spoke again, now with reluctance, “Ahem, I’ve been informed that I’ve overstepped my boundaries as your vice-principal. You won’t be expelled, but you will be spending three weeks in detention.” As

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a prosecutor who always pushed for the maximum allowable sentence, he wasn't happy to have settle with a lesser punishment for Jason.

He went back to addressing the rest of the student body. "Now then, as for the rest of you, you have exactly 15 minutes to leave my gymnasium in an orderly fashion and go directly to your first period classes. Anyone caught in the hallways after those 15 minutes are up will join your hero in detention."

With a newfound fear of their vice-principal, the students did as he ordered, leaving the bleachers row-by-row and the gym in a much more orderly manner than they entered.

Grissom left the students with words for them to think about, "It's a new era, students, a new era."

After the assembly, the first three periods of the new semester went surprisingly well for Leslie. Reception of her in the hallways was much warmer than it was last semester. There weren't any vicious mentions of her and no obscene words written about her on the bathroom walls. In fact, nobody said anything to her or about her at all. They were all unaware of her presence and she preferred it that way. Relieved to no longer be the target of their hatred, Leslie walked down the hallway with a spring in her step and a smile on her face. She was truly confident that this semester would be different in a positive way.

Leslie walked into class looking straightforward, not with her head tilted up in smug arrogance or lowered in crushing rejection. For her fourth period class, the seats were already assigned as shown by everyone's names written on tents and placed on each desk. Hers was directly in the middle of the classroom so she couldn't hide away in the back of the class. Nor could she avoid the classmates that already took to their desks surrounding hers.

Mrs. Wallace, the middle-aged Geography teacher called attendance. When her name was called, Leslie's hand sprung into the air and she cheerfully announced, "Present!" Not since her initial arrival at Washington had she been so joyful. Her sunny mood would soon turn bleak when Mrs. Wallace called the next name on her attendance sheet: Collette Neal.

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Nobody in the classroom answered to that name. Only when Mrs. Wallace called Collette's name again did a phony "Here," come from a girl standing in the doorway. She blew a huge bubble out of the bubblegum she was chewing until it popped on its own, then she entered the classroom. Collette stood 4 foot 2 inches and weighed around 80 pounds. She sported a messy, black pixie-cut and heavy eyeshadow in the style of racoon eyes. She wore a black t-shirt with the sleeves torn off, ripped denim jeans, combat boots and a flannel shirt around her waist. Her accessories included black leather bangle bracelets on both wrists and a black string necklace with her house key attached to it. From her appearance to her attitude, it was not the Collette that existed before her stint at the Warren G. Harding Alternative School.

Mrs. Wallace wasn't affected by Collette's rotten attitude. She dealt with at least one Collette every semester of her 24-year career. She commanded, "Spit out the gum." Collette approached the trash can next to the teacher's desk but didn't do as she was ordered. She walked down the middle row of desks and swallowed her gum instead.

As she strolled down the middle aisle with her hands in her back pockets, Collette kept her eyes trained on Leslie. Shivers ran down Leslie's spine when Collette walked past her and she was overcome with a feeling of dread. Collette did not avert her gaze from Leslie even after taking her seat and opening a new stick of gum to chew on. She stared daggers that went through the boy that sat between them and right into Leslie's back.

Leslie felt those metaphorical daggers stabbing her all period. They stung like tiny needles rapidly poking her, not painful but too irritating for her to ignore. She didn't hear a single word Mrs. Wallace said all period. All she heard was the lie she told the former principal that got Collette sent to Harding in the first place.

"Collette's been threatening to hurt me, Principal Caine. I just don't feel safe with her on campus."

Those words repeated all period long, reminding Leslie that Collette's transformation was entirely her fault. The only thing that could stop the words ringing in her head was the bell ringing to dismiss the class. Leslie leapt out of her desk and made sure she

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was one of the first students out of the classroom. She wasn't quick enough; she was only able to take a few steps out in the hallway before Collette stopped her.

"Hey princess, don't run away. I wanna talk to you."

Ignoring every neuron in her brain telling her to keep walking, Leslie stopped, turned around, and faced Collette for the first time. Though Leslie had to look down at Collette because of their height difference, it was Collette that was the terrifying one. With her hands in her back pockets, Collette walked up to Leslie, forcing her to back up against the lockers.

Leslie was a cornered mouse, seconds away from being devoured by a fox. She pressed her hands against the lockers to keep herself from sliding down to the floor and curling into a fetal position. She was being weighed down by the guilt of what she did to Collette. While loudly chewing her gum, Collette leaned in and inspected Leslie from the bottom up. She noted Leslie's body shaking and how Leslie looked away from her. To intimidate Leslie further, Collette took a long whiff of Leslie's hair.

With a deceptive smile, Collette asked, "What's the matter, princess? You're not scared of little ol' me are you?"

Collette's smile disappeared. "No, you're not scared. You don't know what it's like to be scared. You don't know what fear is until you're crying and pissing yourself at the same time." She pointed at herself and angrily finished with, "That was day one for me at Harding."

Perhaps apathy wasn't preferable to hatred. If Leslie's peers still hated her, they would've torn themselves away from their own conversations and at least witnessed her being hassled by Collette. Instead, it was no different from a nerd being shoved into a locker, business as usual in the Washington High hallways.

Leslie was able to stutter out, "I...I...I'm..."

Collette interrupted, "Save it, princess."

She put her right index and middle finger up to Leslie's face and said, "Two things kept me alive in that hellhole. First, getting in good with the toughest clique there. I'll spare you the details of

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what I had to do to make that happen. I wouldn't want to corrupt your pure ears."

Collette brought down her index finger, leaving only her middle in Leslie's face. "Then, there were the thoughts of what I was going to do when I saw you again."

She leaned in close to Leslie. "I thought up so many different ways to destroy you and jotted them all down in my diary." She leaned in even closer, leaving next to no space between the two. "And I read them to myself. Every. Single. Night"

Collette, smiled devilishly, let out a quiet, yet maniacal laugh and continued, "Right now, I could just..." With every bit of strength in her body, she slammed her open hand into the locker next to Leslie, and continued, "...Mash your pretty little face into this locker."

There wasn't any visible marks on the locker made by Collette. The sound of the slam was intense, but not loud enough to gain anyone's attention. There was a vibration, one that caused Leslie to jump and whimper in fear. Leslie's frightened expression made Collette's sinister grin grow larger. She took a few steps back, creating enough space for Leslie to escape, that was if she weren't too horrified to do so.

"But that would be too easy. I wouldn't get any satisfaction out of that. No, princess, I want you to suffer slowly."

Collette leaned in closer to Leslie again. She ran a finger through a strand of Leslie's hair and whispered, "You took four months from me. I'm taking the next four years from you." She blew a bubble big enough to pop, but not big enough for any gum to get stuck in Leslie's hair.

She moved away from Leslie, and in a somewhat seductive tone, she said, "Be seeing you around, princess." She dug her hands into her back pockets and walked away.

Leslie remained at the locker frozen in fear. Every ounce of confidence she gathered through the day was drained from her body. Abilene arrived at Leslie's time just in time to see Collette walking away. She asked, "Who was that?"

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There were so many different ways Leslie could've answered Abilene, so many different words to describe who Collette was, none of which were positive. But Leslie remembered it was how she described Collette to the former principal that landed her in this predicament to begin with. With that in mind, Leslie softly described Collette as, "Another one of my old friends."

Given Leslie's history with her old friends, Abilene understood why Leslie was shaking against the locker.

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CHAGRIN

The feeling of disappointment caused by one's failure

At the Perryton Preparatory Academy, Natsuki sat at her desk and stared at the clock above the whiteboard.

To her, Dr. Hilcock's Physics lecture sounded like static, and the equations and diagrams on the whiteboard looked like squiggly lines written in an alien language. Her classmates took notes at breakneck speed and absorbed every word of the professor's lecture. Her focus, however, was squarely on the clock, waiting for it to strike 3:00.

When it did, and a chime rang, she grabbed her messenger bag and dashed out of the classroom. Dr. Hilcock said to his students, "Remember, your first exam covering chapters 1 through 5 is Friday. I expect all of you to be prepared." Natsuki didn't hear any of that. She rushed down the hall of the sciences building and westward across campus to Chatswell Hall. She would've made it there a minute sooner if her loafers didn't slow her down.

Natsuki didn't stop running when she was inside Chatswell Hall. She didn't wait for the elevator to get to the third floor. She ran up the stairwell, and then down the hall to her room. Halfway, she bumped into a girl who was kissing a boy who wasn't allowed in the building. She turned around and frantically yelled, "SORRY! SORRY!" while running backwards.

Waiting for Natsuki was her dormmate, Rachel Lockheed, a fellow 1st year student with frizzy, orange hair, oval-shaped glasses, freckles, and a retainer. The floor of Rachel's side of the room was cluttered with stacks of manga and fantasy novels that buried her actual textbooks. Every inch of the walls on her side were covered in posters of handsome anime men embracing each other romantically. On her desk was a small TV with a built in VCR. Next to it were a stack of anime movies on VHS. Her side was a disorderly shrine dedicated to the all the things she obsessed over.

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In contrast, Natsuki's side was clean and organized. There was an exercise mat placed next to Natsuki's bed. Her stuffed turtle was placed on the pillow of her perfectly made bed. Her textbooks were placed in a neat stack next to her desk in order from thickest to thinnest. The only thing on her desk was a photo frame. Inside was a photo from 1989 where a four-year-old Natsuki stood with her mother Mitsuyo and her late father Takeru. Mitsuyo and Takeru were wearing gis and Takeru was holding a large trophy.

Rachel sat cross-legged on her unmade bed and wrote in a notebook labeled Fanfiction. She read aloud what she wrote, "Ron and Draco gazed deeply into each other's eyes and..."

She was cut off right at the romantic climax of her fanfiction when Natsuki came bursting through the door and asked, "How much time do I have?"

Rachel looked away from her notebook and at her green Powerpuff Girls watch. She answered, "19 minutes! You're running behind! Go, Natsu-chan! Go! Go! Go!"

Natsuki dashed over to her closet and changed into her tracksuit. With each piece of the tracksuit she changed into, she threw a piece of her uniform to a random place behind her. Her stockings landed on Rachel's head. When she was fully dressed, she went into the bathroom and quickly freshened herself up. Before zipping up her jacket, she took a quick whiff of her armpits and decided a fresh coat of deodorant wouldn't hurt. She tightened up her ponytail with the ribbon her mother gifted her and rushed back to the door.

Before Natsuki left, Rachel said, "I want all the deets as soon you get back." Natsuki nodded and closed the door behind her.

With 14 minutes left, Natsuki ran to the other side of campus and toward the TRAIL station. She was much faster in her tennis shoes. At her current pace, she would've made it to the station with plenty of time to spare. That was until she came across something that made her come to a sudden stop.

Nina Mossbury, a 1st year, was sitting on a bench when a group of older students surrounded her. They knocked the library

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book out of Nina's hands. When Nina told them to stop hassling her, they mocked her British accent.

The bullies continued their harassment with pulling Nina's hair. They poked her stomach and called her Mossbury Dough Girl. The poor girl swatted their fingers away but they came back and poked at her more aggressively. At some point, Nina gave up fighting back and let the bullies pick on her. She figured she'd endure their harassment until they got bored with her. They took turns mocking her looks, her family's status, and the mustard stain on her blazer. Taking things way too far, they told Nina that the world would be better off without her in it. Each insult hurt more than the one before but it was their collective laughter that stung the worst.

The bullies' uniforms were similar to the other students in color and design with only one minor difference. There was a gold star buttoned on their lapels. The gold star indicated their status as elite students, which allowed them to torment the girl without fear of repercussion from the faculty. Or so they thought at the time.

Natsuki remembered who Nina was after examining her looks and body shape. Seeing Nina crying as the others teased her reminded Natsuki of the times when Leslie Taylor was the one bullying her. Natsuki resented standing by not stepping in and stopping Leslie. She was not going to make the same mistake twice. She took a quick assessment of the bullies from their body frames to the way they stood. She came to the conclusion that despite them all being older than her, she could easily take them all if it came down to it. With that settled, she clinched her fists and walked over to them.

A 3rd year girl was pouring water on Nina's head. Natsuki grabbed the girl by the wrist and flung her entire body away from Nina. Then, she positioned herself in front of Nina to shield her from the bullies.

One of the 2nd year boys threatened Natsuki, "You got some kind of death wish?" He pointed to his gold star and asked, "You know who we are? You know what we can do to you?"

Another 2nd year boy demanded, "Walk away and act like you didn't see anything."

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Natsuki wasn't intimidated, but she was on a tight time crunch. She had to end the conflict quickly. She fired back, "I do not care who you are and I am not going nowhere. If you want to keep picking on this girl, you will have to go through me."

The bullies took a few steps closer prepared to attack Natsuki. They surrounded Natsuki on all ends, leaving her with no escape, not that she needed one. One of them cracked their knuckles and another cracked their neck. Growing impatient, Natsuki further provoked the group. "I do not have all day. If you are going to come at me..." She raised her left arm, used it to give them the beckoning sign, and continued, "...then come at me."

The oldest and strongest boy in the group grunted and lunged at Natsuki with his fist. Natsuki easily evaded the punch. With the boy wide open, she unleashed a flurry of punches and kicks in different parts of his body. True to her family's style of Ijōna-ken, or abnormal fist, Natsuki's body moved almost entirely on its own with very little thought or control on her end. Her strikes were random making it hard for the boy to guard or counter against. Yet, every attack hit their mark flawlessly.

The others halted their advance and looked on in terror as he dropped to his ground in front of Natsuki. For them, it was like being in a horror movie, watching their friend being murdered in front of them, and being powerless to save him. Perryton students in the area that witnessed what was happening decided it would be in their best interests to walk away. Even if the boy could muster the strength to get back to his feet, he knew he'd be foolish to do so.

The others stepped back in fear. The bruises and swellings on their friend's body served as a warning. Natsuki added to that warning. Channeling her mother's fury, she pointed at the 2nd year girl in the middle of the group and moved her index finger left and right to address them all. She growled, "This is your only warning! Nina Mossbury is under my protection! If any of you come around her again, no amount of money will be enough to fix what I break on you! Am I Understood?" Her voice roared loud enough to put everyone in the area on notice.

Recovering from the shock from what he just witnessed, the boy who initially threatened Natsuki answered on behalf of his

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group. “Y-y-yeah we g-get it.” They tucked tail and retreated leaving their battered friend behind. After much effort, he was able to get back up on his feet and ran away too.

The detour gave Natsuki only 7 minutes to get to the station. She resumed running, not taking any time to ask Nina if she was okay.

The train doors began to close. Natsuki flung her hand in the doorway forcing it back open. Natsuki entered the train, bent down, and grabbed her knees. She took a moment to catch her breath and took a seat next to a window. While staring out at the countryside, Natsuki had a quiet conversation with her biggest critic: herself. She muttered, “Sloppy. Amateurish. Predictable.” The elderly couple sitting across from her could see and hear her grumbling, but she didn’t notice them. She kept repeating those words to herself, growing angrier with herself with each repetition.

Sloppy. Amateurish. Predictable. Those were the words she used to critique her technique when dealing with Nina’s bullies. Those were also the exact words that echoed in her mind when she sparred with her mother two days ago. As she repeated the words to herself, she remembered that sparring session.

Saturday, January 1, 2000

At dawn, Natsuki and Mitsuyo faced each other in the backyard of the Taylor Mansion. Dressed in their gis, they stretched their muscles in preparation for their sparring session. Neither appeared tired despite both having an eventful New Years Eve. Natsuki stared at her mother, determined to beat her for the first time.

Natsuki and Mitsuyo bowed at each other. Afterward, they took different stances showing the unpredictability of Ijōna-ken style martial arts. Natsuki’s stance suggested that she was ready to throw her entire body at Mitsuyo. Mitsuyo stood motionless and patient, knowing Natsuki would attack first, and waited for her to do so.

Looking to gain the upper hand, Natsuki struck first with a flurry of punches target at random parts of Mitsuyo’s body and head. Following the basics of the style, she let her fists move

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without much control on her part. As a student of Ijōna-ken who was years away from mastering the style, Natsuki still needed some control to make sure the punches connected. Because she didn't have it, and because she was still somewhat uncertain she could beat Mitsuyo, Natsuki stumbled over when Mitsuyo dodged the punches. As she fell to the ground, Natsuki thought to herself, "*Sloppy.*"

Natsuki stood back up before Mitsuyo could take advantage. Her next string of attacks were a combination of punches and kicks. The fast pace at which she attacked forced Mitsuyo to take steps backward toward the pool. Mitsuyo evaded every attack except for Natsuki's last kick. With her left arm, she blocked the kick that was aimed at her face. She distanced herself from Mitsuyo. Seeing how easy it was for her mother to block and evade her strikes, Natsuki thought to herself, "*Amateurish.*"

The frustration began to show on Natsuki. She felt insulted by her mother not bothering to fight back. She felt that Mitsuyo didn't think her worth the effort which made her angrier. For her final assault, she didn't let spontaneity control her movements, but rather rage.

Natsuki ran at Mitsuyo and yelled enough for to wake up the Windsors, who lived a mile away. The birds in the trees flew took to the sky and the landscapers stopped working. The security guards patrolling the mansion kept working; they'd gotten used to Natsuki's howls during sparring sessions.

When Natsuki got closer, she jumped and attacked with a flying roundhouse kick. Mitsuyo grabbed Natsuki while she was still midair and tossed her into the pool. The water was cold, but not nearly as chilling as the feeling of another defeat. When Natsuki emerged, hair was loosened and she was covered up to her eyes in water. The look of failure in her eyes said what she thought in her head, "*Predictable.*"

Mitsuyo extended her hand to Natsuki. With a wide smile, she said to Natsuki, "You've improved, Natsuki." She wasn't as critical of Natsuki as Natsuki was of herself. Natsuki was hesitant to take her mother's hand. In that moment, she wanted the weight of her failure to drag her back down into the pool's depths. But

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doing that wouldn't bring her any closer to surpassing her mother. She took Mitsuyo's hand and got out of the pool.

20 minutes later, after drying off with the towel Dalton, the Taylor family butler, gave her, Natsuki sat on the bottom step of the patio deck. With both hands, she held the beige porcelain mug full of hot cocoa that Dalton made for her. Mitsuyo sat behind her on the step above. She tied Natsuki's ponytail with a new ribbon and gave her a lecture in Ijōna-ken. Her tone matched her dual role as sensei and mother, strict yet nurturing.

"All that should matter in the fight is the fight itself, Natsuki. Your only focus should be your defeating your opponent. I can tell by your movements that you are still weighed down by your thoughts, your emotions, and your doubts."

"Cast those things aside. Your fists and feet should do the thinking and the feeling. That is the basis of Ijōna-ken."

Mitsuyo didn't see Natsuki's face but she felt her frustration. Natsuki's entire body was tense. She smiled and spoke again to put Natsuki at ease.

"Do not be angry with yourself that you haven't grasped this lesson yet, Natsuki. When I was your age, I struggled with this lesson too." To further relate with her daughter, she added, "I thought a lot about the boy I loved."

"Now approaching: Northside Transfer Center."

The announcement brought an end to Natsuki's reminiscing. There was still a sour look on her face. Despite Mitsuyo's words of encouragement, including telling Natsuki that she'd improved, Natsuki wasn't convinced. In that moment, she didn't believe she'd never be good enough at Ijōna-ken. The doubt weighed heavier on her mind than it did during sparring.

Natsuki's doubts and look of frustration faded away when the train came to a complete stop and she saw Nathan on the platform waiting for her. When the doors opened, she jumped out of the train and into her boyfriend's arms. As she looked down and gazed into his eyes, and as she locked her fingers with his, she smiled. The only thing on her mind was the kiss that Nathan greeted her with.

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LESSON SIX:

PLOTTING

The act of carefully devising a course of action.

The Royals at Regent Plaza was already packed and had been that way since school let out.

The cashiers, waitstaff, and bussers moved around frantically trying their best to keep up with orders and keeping tables cleaned. Even the arcade machines in the back were crowded. To secure an open table, Will and Ashley went straight to The Royals from school while Nathan went to the station to pick up Natsuki. This left them by themselves for 42 minutes. They sat across from each other, unknowingly creating the same scene from the morning, complete with onlookers.

Ashley didn't let the music from the speakers distract her from studying her programming book and writing notes in her notebook. She also didn't let the whispers of her peers around her distract her either. They weren't saying anything she hadn't heard all day already.

"Aww, look they're on a date."

"Oh my God. Cutest couple ever."

All Ashley heard was her mumbling to herself things about variables, integers, conditions and statements. She wrote lines with the speed of a typewriter, stopping only to erase mistakes and then picking right back up at the same pace. She was like a woman possessed, but she was smiling, happy to be lost in her studies.

Meanwhile, Will heard everything and had no way to drown it out. The pop music from the speakers was too loud; listening to his CD player wasn't an option. Every arcade game in the back was occupied. He had no desire to bone up on his Geography or read any *Hamlet* for his English Lit Class. The Vision that compelled him to draw wasn't speaking to him either. Until Nathan and Natsuki

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arrived, all Will could do was sit across from Ashley and watch her write notes.

This left Will with no distractions; he couldn't ignore what his peers were saying around him. He clearly heard how upset they were that he wasn't making a move on Ashley.

“Why is he just staring at her?”

“Kiss her. Talk to her. Do something, you idiot!”

Will felt a bit of pressure being put on him by his peers that made him feel stiff. He glanced at Ashley and could tell she wasn't feeling that same pressure. Regardless, he didn't act on anything they were saying. That was until his heart gave him the orders, “Say something.” It wasn't April's voice that spoke to him, but Will knew that's exactly what she'd tell him to do. So he did.

He loosened up and asked Ashley, “What've you been working on?”

For the first time since she first sat down, Ashley looked up and stopped writing. She answered, “This? I'm putting together some code for computer club. We're working on that weight loss program for the coding competition.”

Will replied, “Oh yeah, I told mom about that. She went off about how smart you are for about 10-15 minutes. Then she told me to tell you that you can see her at the clinic any time you want for dieting guides.”

“We'll need that data. Tell her I'll drop by.”

“Bet.”

The two talked as casually as they always did, but Ashley did most of the talking. She went on about refining the code, debugging, and overall optimization. The more she talked about programming, the more excited she got, and the happier she became. Will was more than willing to let her keep talking for however long she wanted. Ashley was so thrilled to talking about coding, she even showed Will the pages of the book she was reading. All of it went over Will's head, but he did see how happy it made Ashley talking about it. It further solidified his desire to keep her at Washington so she can keep doing what she loved.

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Nathan and Natsuki walked in to the restaurant hand in hand. Nathan got props from some boys in his class for landing a girl as beautiful as Natsuki. He had to correct a few of them by telling them that Natsuki was Japanese, not Chinese. Natsuki was greeted by some girls she went to middle school with. They mentioned how nice it was to see her again. She also had to state that she was Japanese, not Chinese. The couple wanted to sit together, so Will had to get up and sit next to Ashley. A waitress came and set down the pizza Nathan asked Will and Ashley to order in advance.

It didn't take long for the group to devour the entire pizza slice by slice. When it was all gone, Nathan burped loudly. Right after, Natsuki let out a burp of her own that was slightly louder than Nathan's. The couple laughed at each other. Will and Ashley watched in amazement at how quickly Nathan and Natsuki clicked together since becoming a couple. It was like they'd been together for years and not just a few days.

Ashley started, "Everybody good? Good. Let's make sure we're all up to speed on what's going on."

"My parents want me at Perryton because they want what's best for me. What that really means is they want what's best for them. Having a child at the prestigious Perryton Prep would do wonders for their social standing."

"Since I already failed the P.E.A.K once, I technically should be rejected from Perryton forever. But mom and dad pulled some strings and now I'm allowed to try again."

Nathan asked, "Why not just fail the test again, dude?"

Ashley answered, "Because this time, it won't matter how I score on the test. Natsuki, explain."

Natsuki elaborated, "Two types of people are enrolled into Perryton: those who are smart enough, and those who are rich enough. For those rich enough, the P.E.A.K is simply a formality. Out of the 8 possible points you can score on the test, Leslie scored 1 and I didn't score any at all. Yet we were both admitted solely because of our direct connection to Donovan Taylor."

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Ashley expanded upon that, “The same connection my parents have now that they’re in Taylor’s inner circle. Now when I take the test, I don’t even have to put my name on it. I’m passing it no matter what.”

Will said, “So we need another plan.” He looked over at Ashley and noticed she had the same look in her eyes when she plotted Operation Napoleon. “And I can tell you already have one.”

Ashley said, “Part of one. My parents are using who they know to get me in to Perryton. So we’ll have to use what we know to get me out.”

Nathan asked, “And what do we know, dude?”

Ashley dropped her head down in disappointment and answered, “Not much.”

Displaying what he learned about the area’s history, Will chimed in, “We know this. Perryton Prep was named after Richard Perry, one of the Seven Founders. And it was built in the heart of Cheasequahan native land. We also know it’s where a bunch of rich people send their kids.”

Nathan asked, “So?”

Will answered, “So why would they name a school after the army captain who slaughtered hundreds of Cheasequahan, and then let only rich kids go there? One thing I’m learning from my time here is that rich people love their secrets. I’m thinking Perryton has to be packed with them.”

Ashley confirmed Will’s suspicions about the wealthy. “Rich people do love their secrets. For instance, there’s that section in Donovan Taylor’s library he never lets anybody near.”

Will added, “He was so protective of that particular section, he said he’d sue my family into oblivion if I went anywhere near it. I bet that section’s got some secrets that would destroy the Taylor family if they ever got out.”

Remembering her grudge with the Taylor Family, Ashley wrote “Get back into Taylor library” above coding notes she jotted down earlier.

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Nathan said, “So what you’re saying is there’s a secret inside Perryton so damning they’d do anything to keep it a secret.” In a rare moment of worry Nathan continued, “They’d expel Natsuki or even deport her! They’d send us to one of those prisons they do documentaries on TV!” He moved his index finger across his neck and finished with, “Or they’d just go, ‘screw it,’ and kill us all on the spot!”

Natsuki didn’t like seeing Nathan worried. That wasn’t the fearless Nathan Stone she admired. Flustered, she closed her eyes, clenched her fists and squealed “PLEASE DO NOT WORRY, NATHAN! I WILL PROTECT YOU!” Then, She raised one of her clenched fists in the air and committed to the group, “I WILL PROTECT ALL OF YOU!”

Natsuki’s resolve put Nathan back at ease. He put his arms around her shoulder and said, “Aww, thanks, babe!” He kissed her on the cheek causing her to blush. For almost a minute, her face was bright red.

With his courage restored, Nathan gave another point of view. “On the other hand, if Perryton does have a secret they’d kill us to keep, then they’d also be willing to deny Ashley admission if that was all she wanted.”

Ashley decided, “Then we’ll find that secret.”

After returning to normal, Natsuki calmly said, “I never thought about it until now, but there are places on campus that we students are strictly prohibited from going.” She offered, “I could snoop around, see what I can find.”

Ashley altered Natsuki’s idea. “That’s a good idea, Natsuki, but you can’t be the one to do it. You’re already on the prefects’ hit list for fighting the rich kids. You’ve got too many eyes on you. It’ll have to be Will and Nathan.”

Nathan questioned, “How are we supposed to pull that off, dude? We’re not even Perryton students. They’re not even letting us on to the parking lot.”

Ashley countered, “You’re not Perryton students yet. But you can be. All you need are some uniforms and some IDS.”

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Will requested, “Okay, but you gotta come up with better names for us than Brandon and Kevin this time.” He didn’t concern himself with any risks involved. For him, this was another opportunity for him to live his life and not hide away from it. Additionally, he didn’t want Ashley’s happiness being sapped away, which would surely happen at Perryton.

Ashley smirked and chuckled. She acknowledged, “I’ll see what I can come up with.” Then, she gave Natsuki her own assignment, “Think you can get some boys uniforms, Natsuki?”

Natsuki explained what she’d have to do to pull that off. “For that, I will need to get into the laundry facility. A small disciplinary infraction should be enough to get me on laundry duty.” Looking regretful, Natsuki said to herself, “I apologize in advance, mother.”

Before finalizing the plan, Ashley took a moment to contemplate. If there was a secret so dark it could bring down an legacy, one built on the blood of thousands, didn’t she have a moral obligation to expose it? If she simply used it to get something she wanted, wouldn’t that make her as bad as the people she claimed to hate? On the other hand, this secret - if it even existed - was the only thing that could keep Ashley out of Perryton and still in control of her own life.

Ashley came to a resolution. “Then that’s our plan. Sneak around Perryton and find some juicy blackmail. Everybody in agreement?”

With Natsuki’s affection and protection, whatever fear Nathan had of imprisonment and/or death faded away. He raised his soda cup and said, “Hell yeah, dude.”

Natsuki admired Nathan’s bravery against impossible odds. She wrapped her arm around his. Then, she raised her cup and joined it with Nathan’s. She happily shouted “YES!”

Ashley looked to Will whose cup was already joined with Nathan and Natsuki’s. Will smiled at Ashley and asked, “Do you even need to ask?”

Ashley didn’t doubt that Will would help, but it made her feel good to hear him say it. With his involvement, she felt she was

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making the right move. With a smile that matched Will's, she raised her cup and joined it with the others.

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FRICTION

Tension resulting from differing opinions

With the first part of a plan locked in, it was time for the group to head home.

The group walked to the Northside Transfer Center together. There, they waited on the top platform for the next train. Nathan and Natsuki stood beside each other near the tracks while holding hands. Natsuki looked directly down at Nathan's eyes and said, "I don't ever want to stand by and watch as friends suffer any more."

Nathan looked directly up at Natsuki's eyes and asked back, "That's why you wanna get better at Ijōna-ken, dude?"

Natsuki answered, "Yes, so I know for sure that when the time comes, I can protect all of you."

Nathan committed himself to helping Natsuki. "Well I'm no Ijōna-ken master, dude. Back when I was 8, I took 2 Tae-Kwon-Do classes over at Dave's Discount Dojo before picking up skateboarding." He clenched Natsuki's hands lovingly. His hands covered hers like a thick pair of gloves and she felt the loving warmth. He committed to her, "But if there's anything I can do to help you can get stronger I will."

Natsuki's face lit up; hearing Nathan make that pledge was one step closer to him proposing to her. She was fired up and couldn't get back to campus and spend the rest of the night training in her room.

While Nathan and Natsuki continued their conversation, Will and Ashley sat at a bench nearby with a sizable gap between them. Will had his earbuds on playing his mix CD on random. Ashley glanced over and watched Will bob his head to the song. He was in a state of tranquility similar to how she was when she was analyzing code.

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Both her mind and heart spoke to her. *"I wonder what he's listening to."*

Never before had her mind and her heart been in sync. Her mind wanted to know more about Will and she'd never asked him about his taste in music. Her heart, which she always kept closed, wanted her to connect more with Will.

Ashley inched herself closer to Will and tapped on his shoulder. Will took out his right earbud and looked to his right at Ashley.

Ashley asked, "What're you listening to?"

Will didn't know the name of the song, so he couldn't answer right away. He dug into his coat pocket for the jewel case the CD came in. He read the track list Jessica wrote until he found the answer to Ashley's question.

"It's called 'Optimistic' by a band called Radiohead. Ever heard anything by them?"

"No."

"Me neither. Jessica's been putting me on to all kinds of new stuff. Said this CD's got a bunch of songs a dork like me would." Will smirked and continued, "Joke's on her, I kinda do."

Ashley asked, "Can I listen?"

Without delay, Will wiped off the right earbud and handed it to Ashley. She moved in closer to Will to get the earbud to reach her right ear. Even with only one earbud, all Will heard was the music. The melody drowned out the announcements coming from the intercom, the chatter of people waiting for the next train, and the litter on the ground as the wind swept it around.

Ashley wasn't immersed by the music like Will was. Nothing about the song, from the lyrics or the vocals that delivered them, the guitars, or the drums moved Ashley like it looked to be moving Will. But it did serve its purpose; it taught Ashley more about Will. She took mental notes on how he was more open to new experiences, and the possible connection between his choice in music and his art. Learning something new about Will put Ashley

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in the same tranquil mood as Will was. She wanted to learn so much more about him; he was her most interesting case study.

Will didn't look over at Ashley. He was too absorbed by the song as the second verse ended and the longer the song played the more he liked it. But he didn't have to see her. He felt a familiar warmth, the same warmth he felt when April was close to him and smiled in the way he loved. Without looking, he knew Ashley was smiling.

There was still a bit of space between Will and Ashley. They were still apart enough from each other that no passerby would assume they were a couple. But, while their minds were elsewhere, their hearts were driving Will's right hand and Ashley's left hand closer together. At the time, neither were aware of what their hands were doing.

As the song faded out, the next train to Perryton Prep pulled up to the station. Natsuki separated hands with Nathan. She bent down slightly and the two said goodbye to each other with a passionate kiss on the lips. Wanting this kiss to be memorable, Natsuki employed everything Rachel taught her about kissing. Rachel had never kissed anyone in real life, but she drew from years of reading romance manga.

The kiss went on for so long, Natsuki had very little time to board before the train departed without her. She had just enough time to shriek, "GOODBYE NATHAN I CANNOT WAIT TO SEE YOU AGAIN!" before the doors closed on her.

With a grin that went from ear to ear, Nathan waved goodbye to Natsuki as the train left the station. When the train was out of sight, he turned toward Will and Ashley. He noticed that they were sitting closer together than they were earlier. He also saw that they were joined by Will's earbuds. He noticed that they were both smiling. And, most important of all, he noticed how close their hands were to each other.

He didn't know what was making them happy. What he did know was that they were getting closer, and the rumor he denied starting was getting closer to being true. He pointed at them and teased, "You should see yourselves right now, dudes. It's like I'm

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watching Macho Man and Miss Elizabeth at SummerSlam all over again.”

It was only then that Will and Ashley realized how close their hands were to each other. They didn’t touch but there were mere centimeters away from doing so. Will frantically put his earbud back in his pocket while looking away from Ashley. Ashley tossed her earbud back at Will and stood up in a hurry. She looked away from Will and created some distance between them. They didn’t have to say a word; the flustered look on their faces spoke volumes.

Not wanting to make them feel even more embarrassed, Nathan changed the subject, “C’mon, dudes. Let’s go get on our bus.”

Meanwhile, Jessica and Vincent sat at a foldout table inside Jefferson High’s music room. Jessica covered her face in aggravation with both hands. Vincent sat with his arms crossed and his feet on the table. His head was tilted back in his chair and he stared at the ceiling in defeat.

In a grim tone, Vincent said one word, “Review.”

Jessica groaned and slid her hands down her face. She gave her review of what happened. We put up these kick-ass flyers all over school.” Jessica held up a loose piece of notebook paper. Vincent wrote an open call for guitarist in various marker colors. To make it stand out against all the other fliers posted on Jefferson’s walls, he made it look like one of the many band posters that covered Jessica’s bedroom walls. She complimented her brother’s shoddy artwork. “Great job on these by the way.”

With his head still tilted, Vincent lifted a thumb in the air acknowledging his sister’s praise.

Jessica continued, “We had more people show up than we expected. Then again, who wouldn’t want to be a part of The Rock That Killed The Dinosaurs, the biggest up-and-coming band in all of Ingram Park?”

Vincent raised his other thumb in the air.

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“We gave them five minutes each to show us what they can do on guitar.”

Vincent asked, “And?”

Jessica gave her brutally honest review of the classmates that auditioned. “They all sucked. Every last one of them sucked. Even the ones who knew how to play a guitar didn’t sound like they’d fit our style.”

Vincent brought his thumbs down and said, “Agreed.”

Jessica cried, “Arrgh, this blows! We don’t have time to be farting around like this! We need another guitarist, a good one, or we’re going to eat so much crap at BotB!”

She looked at her brother and continued, “And we still need that new song.” Her tone suggested that she was getting impatient with Vincent not having any lyrics yet. She stressed the importance of having new material to perform. “Come on Vincent, you and I both know we’re not moving a college crowd with Love Zombie.”

Vincent replied, “True. Love Zombie sucks.”

Jessica revealed her true reason for wanting to do well in the competition. “I wanna rock the pants off of the whole crowd, give them a performance they’ll never forget. And I wanna stick it to those pretentious snobs Vivian and Alastair.”

She spoke bitterly of her biggest critics, but her mood went from ambitious to amorous when describing them. “Alastair, with his Chris Cornell body frame, and Vivian with her cute little bangs. Oh how I want to rub our victory in their smug, sexy...” She bit her bottom lip and stopped herself before going further. Though, she could’ve fantasized about them for the rest of the day.

She cleared her throat loudly and continued, “Anyway, like I said, we need a new song, and we need it now.”

Vincent took his feet off the table and sat upright. Then he pulled out a notebook from his backpack on the ground next to his chair. He opened it to a specific page toward the end and slid it over to Jessica. Jessica looked down at the notebook and read the lyrics Vincent scribbled in the middle of class. Unlike his other writings,

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these particular set of lyrics were neatly written, showing the pride Vincent put into them.

Our battlefield was one of love.

You liked to push. I had to shove.

Til that day when I went too far.

I won the war but left with scars.

Jessica slammed the notebook shut the instant she knew where Vincent was going with the lyrics. In four lines, he subliminally told the story of why Jessica transferred from Washington to Jefferson. She slid the notebook back to Vincent and demanded, "Write something else."

In a rare moment of pushback against his sister, Vincent asked, "Why?"

Jessica looked toward the door so she wouldn't Vincent any eye contact. She softly and quietly answered, "You know damn well why." Her voice cracked, suggesting a feeling of guilt she rarely - if ever - felt.

While Jessica and Vincent bickered back and forth over Vincent's lyrics, Noah Krinzinsky, a 16-year-old boy came into the music room and closed the door behind him. He was carrying a black, guitar-shaped case. Noah had a lean build and light brown hair peeking out his red and white trucker hat. He wore a navy blue, long-sleeved thermal shirt over a white undershirt, baggy denim jeans, and a pair of Vans sneakers.

Noah stood in front of the Nevilles, and asked them, "Is it too late to audition?" This caused the siblings to stop arguing and redirect their attention on to him.

Vincent asked, "Name?"

Noah introduced himself, "I'm Noah, Noah Krinzisky." He held up one of Vincent's crudely made flyers. He said, "Found your flyer in the trash can in the bathroom."

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Jessica wasn't in the mood to hear any more bad guitar playing. She gave Noah less time than the people who auditioned before him. "You got 5 minutes."

Noah replied, "Righteous."

After everyone else bombed their auditions, Jessica had no faith in Noah. That was until she saw the guitar he pulled out of his case. Her jaw dropped and she whispered to Vincent, "Is that a freaking Stratocaster?"

Vincent nodded.

As Noah plugged his guitar into the small amp next to him, Jessica commented, "Bro, you don't whip out that kind of guitar unless you're good at it."

Vincent nodded again.

Noah lifted his left leg and placed his foot on top of the amp. Then, he took a moment to tune his guitar. He went to work playing a series of guitar solos from big songs from Metallica, Nirvana, Pantera, and Megadeth. It showed off his rock knowledge and his experience on the guitar. In the five minutes Noah was given to play, he impressed Vincent, which wasn't hard to do. Noah was, without a doubt, the best person to audition.

Jessica was also blown away. Noah played his guitar with so much intensity, the amp looked like it was going to blow. To her, Noah played as if he were trained by the same person she was, her legendary father. Yet, she wasn't ready to let Noah into the band. With a skeptical look on her face and her arms crossed, Jessica gave her evaluation. "Well, Noah, you certainly know your way around 6 strings, no denying that. But you're going to need more than that if you want in the band."

Vincent wasn't pleased with Jessica's judgement. He thought Noah was a shoo-in and their long, exhausting quest for a new guitarist was at an end. He whispered to Jessica, "Desperate," reminding her of the strict timeline the band was on.

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Jessica whispered back, “Shut up, I know we’re desperate.” She looked back at Noah and said to him, “We’re going to need to see how you can perform on stage. I want to see if you’ve got the charisma”

As he put his guitar back into the case, Noah accepted Jessica’s challenge. “You guys want to see how I play on stage? In front of a crowd? Come by the auditorium Sunday Morning. You’ll see I’m Rock That Killed The Dinosaurs material.” With that, he exited the music room. He felt confident he’d win the Nevilles over then.

Vincent stood up and grabbed his backpack. He didn’t say anything, but Jessica knew he wasn’t happy with her decision to not bring Noah into the band right away. He also wasn’t happy with her rejecting the lyrics he wrote. They delved deep into a past she worked hard to bury. But Vincent wasn’t going to throw those lyrics away like he did so many others. Nor was he going to re-write them to soften the blow. If anything, the song Vincent imagined would tell the whole story. He was convinced that this was the song that was going to appeal to the more refined musical tastes of college students.

Vincent was going to have to do the one thing he hated doing: going against his sister.

CONCORDIA

Latin for “With one heart”

Ashley sat upright on the right side of her bed with her laptop nestled comfortably between her legs.

The volume on it was set to mute. Her TV was playing the news on max volume.

“Moss, who was indicted on several racketeering counts, had this to say.”

“These charges against me are ludicrous. See, see, see, this ain’t nothing but another plot by the man to keep a young entrepreneur down. They don’t want to see a brother out here shining in the new millennium.”

The TV did a good job masking the sound of her typing, and the muted laptop prevented any error alerts from blaring in her room. She feverously typed code referencing the notes she took all through the day. She smiled to herself, knowing what she was going to show the computer club tomorrow afternoon was going to amaze them. She could’ve gone all night; that is if she had a blueberry muffin to keep her energized, and if she weren’t interrupted by a knock on her door.

“Open the door, Ashley” The commanding voice on the other side came from Jazmine, her mother.

“Dammit,” Ashley said under her breath. She turned the TV down and closed the lid of her laptop. Before opening her door, she went over to the left side of her bed and tucked her laptop gently between her mattress and the bed frame. She didn’t hide it under her bed because that would’ve been too obvious.

Jazmine knocked again, this time with more aggression. “Open this door right now, Ashley!”

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“Okay! Okay! I’m coming.” Ashley unlocked the door and Jazmine barged in without invitation holding a garment bag.

Jazmine said, “I’d have the lock on your door removed if I didn’t think it would bring down the property value. She looked around and noticed something was amiss. She knew Ashley didn’t normally have her TV on. Between that and the locked door, she suspected Ashley was up to something. She asked, “What are you doing in here?”

Jazmine’s tone sounded familiar to Ashley. She sounded exactly as she did when she was interrogating employees to find out who was responsible for a massive failure. Ashley also knew Jazmine was capable of getting those poor subordinates to break eventually. Keeping her cool, she answered, “Watching TV.”

Jazmine didn’t buy it. She probed further, “Uh-huh, and what are you watching?”

Maintaining her composure, Ashley answered, “The news.”

Ashley’s answer made Jazmine even more skeptical. After all, teenagers weren’t known for watching the news, even ones as unusual as Ashley. “The news. Really? Well, tell me, what’s on the news?”

“Oh you know, another puff piece kissing the butt of your god Donovan Taylor.”

This struck a nerve with Jazmine and drove her to change the discussion. Ashley wasn’t concerned with Jazmine discovering her laptop any more, but she wasn’t free from Jazmine just yet. Jazmine opened the garment bag revealing a crisp, new Perryton blazer and matching skirt, both in Ashley’s size.

Jazmine waved the uniform in front of Ashley and commanded, “Try it on.”

Ashley objected, “A Perryton uniform? How’d you get this? I’m not supposed to have this until the official induction ceremony. You know after I’ve been accepted?”

Jazmine answered, “Your father and I pulled some strings.”

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Ashley sarcastically replied, “Of course you did.”

Jazmine moved the uniform closer to Ashley and commanded again, this time with more authority. “Try it on.”

Defying her mother, Ashley gently pushed the uniform back to her mother and said, “No.” It was getting easier and easier for her to stand up against her parents and she felt a small sense of satisfaction each time she did.

Jazmine didn’t try to make Ashley try on the uniform again. Instead, she attempted “I don’t get why you want to be so damn hard headed, Ashley Michelle. But it doesn’t matter. One way or the other, you’re going to see that being at Perryton is what’s best for you.”

Ashley countered, “You mean it’ll be what’s best for you and dad.”

Jazmine snapped back, “Yes, as a matter of fact it will be what’s best for your father and me. We’ll sleep so much better at night knowing you’re around people that will elevate you in life. Not drag you down to the gutter like that good-for-nothing boy William does.”

Ashley asked, “And what’s wrong with being down in the gutter?” With a rebellious smile, she continued, “Especially if I’m down there with the boy I love?”

That question struck another nerve. Jazmine angrily ordered, “Don’t play with me, little girl.”

Ashley said back, “I’m not playing. Will and I are dating. You haven’t heard? Everyone’s talking about it.”

Ashley might’ve overplayed her hand. Jazmine wasn’t as convinced of Ashley and Will’s relationship as all the 9th graders were. This was mostly because she didn’t want it to be true. “Nice try, Ashley,” she said smugly. “Instead of watching TV, you should be in here studying for those P.E.A.K exams. A 5 isn’t going to cut it this time.”

Before leaving the room, Jazmine set the Perryton uniform on Ashley’s bed. It was a reminder that Ashley’s future was already decided.

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Ashley closed the door behind Jazmine and locked it. Then, she pressed her ear against the door to listen to Jazmine walk across the upstairs hallway and into the master bedroom. When she heard Jazmine closing that door, Ashley returned to where she stashed her laptop and retrieved it.

She sat back on her bed and kicked the uniform off of it. The uniform flopped onto the floor where it would remain until one of Ashley's parents came knocking again. She turned back up the TV and changed the channel to UPN, a network that teenagers would watch over the news. An episode of *Moesha* was airing; the laugh track would provide ample background noise. The volume was loud enough to drown out keyboard strokes but not loud enough to get her parents' attention across the hallway.

Ashley opened the laptop's lid ready to resume her work. But before she typed a single character, she looked at her left hand. Out of nowhere, she remembered sitting next to Will at the TRAIL station. It was only now that she realized that her left hand moved closer to Will's right hand.

Her heart began beating, just like how it did in the library. She was no longer able to concentrate on programming. She saved her work, powered down the laptop, and tucked it neatly into her backpack. She continued to sit upright on her bed with her left eye focused directly on her left hand. Her hand started trembling and moving to the left on its own like it did on the bench. It was as if it were searching for Will's hand to connect to. Ashley forced it back to in front of her.

Her right eye was focused on the TV where Moesha and Hakeem, the friends since childhood are staring at other. The same way Ashley and Will looked at each other on Fate's Hill the day they decided to be just friends.

Ashley's heart kept beating so loudly, she couldn't hear the TV. That's when she said to herself, "We told each other that we're just friends. We are just friends right?"

Resolutions – Preview #1

Over at the Moon's, Will sat at the kitchen table and worked on his earth science homework. As it was a subject he had no interest in, he gave bare-minimum answers to the critical thinking questions of the section review. The answers he wrote were barely good enough to get him the checkmark for completing the assignment.

Will didn't have to do schoolwork at the table anymore. He wasn't grounded so he wasn't confined there. But it was the only place for him to get any actual work done. If he studied at the computer desk in the entertainment room upstairs, he would've too distracted by *Monday Night Raw*. Liz and Anthony made it clear to all the children that the living room was off limits for homework after Rosetta stained a small part of carpet with watercolor paint. Homework would've been the last thing he did in his bedroom, not when drawing or playing *Final Fantasy VIII* were options.

While washing the dishes, Liz, the nutritionist, said to Will. "Couldn't help noticing you didn't eat much tonight, young man. What's the matter? My honey soy chicken and noodles not good enough for you?"

Will looked up from his textbook and replied, "Oh, I wasn't really that hungry."

Liz fired back, "Guess you must've gotten full off of all that greasy pizza and sugary cereal you've been eating." Will didn't have a response. He felt guilty enough for passing up his mother's cooking. Liz gave Will a lecture. "You may not think that junk food is doing anything bad to you. But when you get older, all of it's going to catch up to you, especially in the gut. That's why I'm on you kids so hard about eating right while you're young."

Will said, "I'll eat better, mom." He put as much effort into making that commitment to his mother as he did his earth science homework.

Liz wasn't convinced that Will was going to give up unhealthy foods. For one he was a teenager; they consumed bad food and worse snacks like plants consumed the sun. And for two, he was eating those things with the friends he made; he wasn't going to give that up for honey soy chicken and noodles.

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She replied with a just as halfhearted, “Uh-huh.” With the dishes done, she dried her hands with a kitchen towel and sat across from Will. She asked Will, “So, how are things with you and Miss Ashley?”

Will knew where his mother was going with that question. The gleeful look on Liz’s face implied that she was just as eager to know about Will and Ashley’s relationship as his classmates were. He tried to redirect the conversation. “I have other friends you know. Nathan, Jess and Vincent, Rob, Raphael...”

Liz interrupted, “And I’m sure they’re all lovely. Now tell me how you and Ashley are doing.”

Will closed his textbook. Even if he wanted to do his homework, he wasn’t going to get any more of it done until Liz left. And she wasn’t leaving until he told her about him and Ashley. He said, “Things are good between us now. But there’s this whole this whole thing with her and that fancy private school up the way.”

Liz was impressed. She said, “Private school? Oh, that’s nice.”

Will countered, “Nice? You know Jenny Chatswell, that girl that’s always hassling Rose? Her family’s got a dorm hall named after them there.”

Liz was no longer impressed. “Oh, not nice. But I hear that school’s full of smart kids. I can see why she’d want to go there.”

Will clarified. “She doesn’t. Her parents want her to. They don’t care about her academic performance. They just want her to get in good with all the rich kids, and to get her away from me and Nathan.”

It was the last part that got Liz’s attention. But her brain omitted the part about Nathan. “Her parents hate you that much huh?”

Will answered, “Yes ma’am, they really hate me and Nathan.”

Liz ignored the part about Nathan again. “You know your grandparents hated Anthony too. Said they’d disown me if I married him.” She lifted up her hand showing her ring finger and bragged, “15 years later and I’m still not regretting it.”

Resolutions – Preview #1

Will knew what Liz was suggesting by her comparing her and Anthony's relationship to his and Ashley's. He told her what he wished he could say to the entire 9th grade. "Mom, Ash and I are just friends. Nothing more, nothing less. Just friends."

Liz's reaction was the same one Will's classmates would've given him. She didn't believe him. Like his peers, she knew there was more to Will and Ashley than he was letting on.

Will asked, "You don't believe me?"

Liz smiled deviously and answered, "I didn't say anything."

Will stood up from the table and picked up his textbook. With more seriousness in his tone, he insisted again, "Well that's all we are." With that, he went upstairs.

In his room, Will sat on the left side of his bed with his earbuds planted firmly in his ears. The last track of his new mix CD, Musiq Soulchild's "Just Friends," played. The smooth R&B gave Will the perfect ambiance to resume his drawing of Ashley's demonic parents. He incorporated Ashley's feedback from earlier, increasing the size of their horns and giving them long tails.

The time came for Will to draw Ashley. Using what Raphael taught him, he started by drawing an outline of Ashley's body. Then he drew her proportions to the best of his ability. He covered her hair with small circles, representing her curly hair, that he'd add detail to later.

What Will focused on mostly was Ashley's posture. He sketched Ashley standing in front of her parents. She didn't look away or slump over in submission or fear like she was in the car. Instead, Will drew her standing upright and looking up at her parents in defiance as they towered over her. To further show Ashley's rebellious stance, Will drew her right hand to be balled into a fist, indicating that she was ready to fight back against them and their wishes.

When he started drawing Ashley's left hand, he didn't make a fist. He drew her left arm reaching out to the side as if it were trying to grab on to something. When it came time to draw her left hand, the pencil started to shake. His right hand was drifting off to the side,

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causing him to make mistakes that he had to erase and correct. The closer he got to drawing Ashley's hand, the more the environment around Will started to change.

The Vision started taking hold of Will. The music he was listening to became distorted and then faded out. His bedroom shattered like broken windows and he was now surrounded by a black abyss. The smell of burning sulfur filled the thick air. It smelled like how Hell was described to Will in church. He found himself in the very demonic realm he was drawing.

There Ashley was staring up at the demons that were her parents with her right fist balled and her left hand extended. Will was drawn directly to Ashley's left hand and walked right to it. Then, he joined his right with her left. With their fingers interlocked, Will and Ashley stood together against her parents. They looked at each other with the same smile they had when they were alone and close. The same smile Will vowed to keep on Ashley.

Will returned to reality and the pencil he used was on the mattress next to his leg. He must've dropped it, but he didn't know when that happened. He looked to his right hand and noticed that it wasn't where it was before he was drawn in by the Vision. It had moved over several inches to the right.

It was only then that he realized that his hand was moving this way closer to Ashley's on the bench at the TRAIL station. His heart started to race loudly. So loudly that he still couldn't hear the music coming from his earbuds. He pulled his hand back and used it to slam his sketchbook shut. He said to himself, "We told each other that we're just friends. We are just friends right?"

To Be Continued...