

Williams

SUBURBAN HIGH BOOK FOUR

RESOLUTIONS

Unit 1 Preview
By Talen Williams

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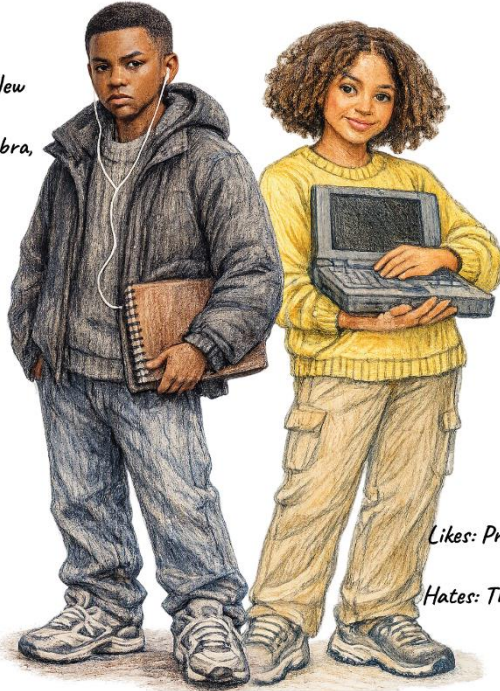
MEET YOUR NEW BEST FRIENDS.

Age: 14

Sign: Gemini

*Likes: His CD Player, New
Experiences, Tacos*

*Hates: Pep Rallies, Algebra,
His Old Neighborhood.*



Age: 14

Sign: Cancer

*Likes: Programming, Learning,
Blueberry Muffins*

*Hates: The Taylor Corporation,
Uncertainty.*

WILLIAM MOON

With his past life behind him for good, Will looks forward to the 21st Century.

Backed by his friends, motivated by his rivals, and guideby the Vision, Will begins his journey as an artist.

ASHLEY BAKER

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

Rumors of their relationship fill the halls of George Washington High School. It's not the rumors that bother them, but the possibility that they might be true.

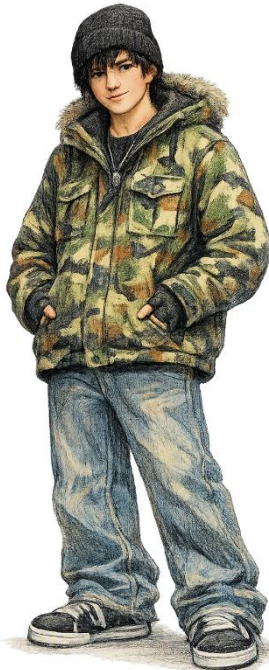
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Age: 14

Sign: Aries

Likes: Pro-Wrestling, Fighting Games,
Skateboarding

Hates: Hospitals, Losing Debates



NATHAN STONE

Ever the loyal friend, Nathan juggles between the band, his new girlfriend, and pushing Will & Ashley to becoming more than just friends. All while fighting against his temptations.

Age: 15

Sign: Libra

Likes: Training, Nathan Stone

Hates: Bullies, Her Weakness



NATSUKI YOKAZE

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. She finds an unlikely teacher in her boyfriend Nathan.

Age: 14

Sign: Taurus

Likes: Theater, Singing

Hates: Being Alone, The Monster
She Once Was.



LESLIE TAYLOR

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

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Age: 15

Sign: Virgo

Likes: Getting Involved, Fairness

Hates: Corruption, Failure

Age: 16

Sign: Capricorn

Likes: Cereal, Guitar, Heavy Metal

Hates: Ska, Anything That

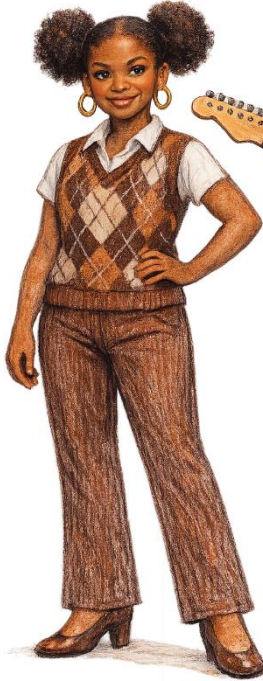
Interferes With The Band

Age: 14

Sign: Aquarius

Likes: Writing, Drums, Cereal

Hates: Arguing with Jessica



KRYSTAL HARPER

Krystal realizes the only way to change things at Washington High is to become student council president. But her opponent plays dirty, and she's being tempted to play dirtier.



JESSICA NEVILLE

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. For the first time, she might be way in over her head.



VINCENT NEVILLE

Vincent writes a song that he's knows can win Battle of the Bands. But the lyrics delve into a past his sister Jessica would rather stay buried. He's going to have to do doesn't want to: push back.

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If you are interested in being commissioned for art, please email: suburbanhighbook@gmail.com

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. One minute later, he accepted that was a lost cause and left the bathroom.

He walked past the bedroom where his two children were 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 planting 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 1:

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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They didn't want to cover up the matching silver band rings they wore.

The rings 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 waste time questioning who was responsible. They internally chalked it up as another back-to-school prank. 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've been 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.

The couple went all around campus posting flyers using thumbtacks and tape where appropriate. They chose very specific

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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 crept 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 mourning 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 together during the break. So he said nothing; he silently taped the

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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*. 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 thanks to a lifeline they were given 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 much longer if her opponent, Vanessa Neuendorff, won the presidency.

Krystal clearly remembered 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.

LESSON 2:

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 Lovah, 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 dreams or nightmares of his past clashing with his present. He hopped out of bed with an energy that was uncommon for kids returning 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 his wall where his painting *Breaking Through* was mounted proudly. 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. "Hmmpf. 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 because they were from two entirely different worlds. 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 breakfast. He simply complied to his parents' demands, "Yes ma'am. Yes sir"

Will crossed over the cul-de-sac to the Nevilles. 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.

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Will entered the house and followed Vincent into the living room where Jessica and Nathan were sitting on the green sectional 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'd be over 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 said, "Progressing."

Jessica rolled her eyes and continued her meeting. "Well while you're progressing, we're gonna be hosting auditions after school. You gonna be there, Stone?"

Nathan didn't answer; he was too occupied admiring the sexy ladies in the music video. Jessica shouted, "Hey, jackass!" before

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hurling a couch pillow at him to get his attention. His signature knit 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.”

Vincent bluntly said, “Ashley.”

Visibly annoyed, Will said, “Look out, 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 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 gloom on her face indicated their words were getting to her.

Suddenly, time stopped and the world around Will became silent and dim. Will's Vision, the supernatural force that inspired his drawings, kicked in. The car disappeared and Ashley stood in front of parents like how defendant stood in front of a judge as the judgement was being rendered.

Benjamin and Jazmine morphed into demonic entities. 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

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she fought with everything she had. But in the end, she couldn't change her fate.

The Vision ended as quickly as it started. Will was back in reality and time moved again. He looked 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 3:

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 asked, "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 greeted him, "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."

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.

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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 politely 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 hastily 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 show up. 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 sinister 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 startled 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 about it."

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. 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 disappointment, Will and Ashley wouldn't go any further than that. 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 one of the stools 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.”

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LESSON 4:

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. Abilene, 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, Abilene asked a classmate, “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 nor did they care.

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 group.

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 stance. 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 act.”

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, you are nothing but an example, an example of what will happen to anyone who breaks the rules here moving forward. You’re hereby 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 vice-principal. You won’t be expelled, but you will be spending three weeks in detention.” As a

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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. When those 15 minutes are up, anyone caught in the halls 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 far more positive 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 undeserved 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 time 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 look away 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 trembling 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 that Hell you had me sent to."

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 only able to stutter out, "I...I...I'm..." before Collette interrupted her. "Save it, princess."

She put her right index and middle finger up to Leslie's face and said, "Two things kept me alive. First, getting in good with the toughest clique there. I'll spare you the details of what I had to do to make that happen. I wouldn't want to corrupt your pure ears."

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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 really hurt 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 menacing grin grow larger. She took a few steps back, creating enough space for Leslie to escape, that was if she weren't petrified by fear 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?"

There were so many different ways Leslie could've answered Abilene, so many different words to describe who Collette was, none of which were nice. But Leslie remembered it

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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 knew that it wasn’t fear that made Leslie shake against the locker, but guilt.

LESSON 5:

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.

Dr. Hilcock's Physics lecture sounded like static to her, 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. Natsuki's focus, however, was squarely on the clock, waiting for it to strike 3:00.

When it did, and a chime rang, Natsuki 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 Finnegan, 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 holding each other in romantic embrace. On her desk was a small TV with a built in VCR. Next to

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it were a stack of anime movies on VHS. Her side was a disorderly shrine dedicated to all of her obsessions.

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 hurried 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.

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

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Another 2nd year boy demanded, “Walk away and act like you didn’t see anything.”

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 stopped coming close and looked on in terror as Natsuki swept the boy to the ground. 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.

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Recovering from the shock from what he just witnessed, the boy who initially threatened Natsuki answered on behalf of his 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.” She was so occupied with scolding herself, she didn’t notice the elderly couple sitting across from her that watched her and heard her grumbling. 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 a long and eventful New Years Eve. Natsuki stared at her mother, determined to beat her for the first time.

Natsuki and M 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.

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Looking to gain the upper hand, Natsuki struck first with a flurry of punches that targeted random parts of M's body and head. Following the basics of the style, she let her fists move 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 doubtful that she could beat Mitsuyo, Natsuki stumbled over when M dodged the punches. She fell to the her hands and knees and thought to herself, "Sloppy."

Natsuki stood back up before M could take advantage. Her next string of attacks were a combination of punches and kicks. The fast pace at which she attacked forced M 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 M. 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 M 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 M 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. M 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."

M extended her hand to Natsuki to pull her out of the pool. With a wide smile, she said to Natsuki, "You've improved, Natsuki." She wasn't as critical of Natsuki as Natsuki was of

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herself. Natsuki was hesitant to take her mother's hand. In that moment, she wanted the weight of her failure to drag her down into the pool's depths. But doing that wouldn't bring her any closer to surpassing her mother. She took M's hand and got out of the pool.

Shortly after, Natsuki sat on the bottom step of the patio deck. Dalton, the Taylor family's butler, gave her a towel to dry herself and a mug of hot cocoa to warm herself up. M 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 all of those things aside. Your fists and feet should do the thinking and the feeling. That is the way of Ijōna-ken."

M 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 because you haven't grasped this lesson yet, Natsuki. I too struggled with it at your age. So many thoughts and emotions ran through my mind that I did not know how to process or ignore."

M leaned in closer to Natsuki and said, "They were also about a boy I loved." That part she spoke only as a mother that knew exactly what her daughter was going through.

"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 of it. 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. She looked out of her window and saw Nathan on the platform waiting for her. Suddenly, the

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words that echoed in her mind weren't her saying, "Sloppy, Amateurish. Predictable." It was her mother saying, "They were also about a boy I loved."

When the doors opened, she jumped out of the train and into her boyfriend's arms. As she looked down and stared into his eyes, and as she locked her fingers with his, she was reignited with the both the energy to smother Nathan with kisses and the energy to keep trying to improve.

LESSON 6:

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 murmurs 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're working on?"

For the first time since she sat down, Ashley looked up and stopped writing. She answered, "Oh 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. 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 definitely get them a few rungs up the social ladder."

"Since I already failed the P.E.A.K once, I should technically 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 leaned back in her seat, covered her head, and replied, “Not much.” To her, there was nothing more devastating than not having the answer.

Showing 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 continued, “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 pledged, “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. "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 think about it. 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.

Williams
LESSON 7:

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 and staring lovingly at each other.

They talked the entire time. Nathan asked Natsuki, “That’s why you wanna get better at Ijōna-ken, dude?”

Natsuki answered, “Yes, so that if the time ever comes, I know can protect all of you.” She looked over at Ashley and said, “I will never stand by and watch my friends get hurt again.”

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 the Discount Dojo before picking up skateboarding.” He clenched Natsuki’s hands, covering them like a pair of thick, warm gloves. He committed to her, “Whatever I can do to help you get stronger, dude, 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 to 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.

Both her mind and heart spoke to her. “I wonder what he’s listening to.”

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Never before had her mind and her heart been in sync like that. 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.

Will told Ashley the artist's name, "MusiQ Soulchild." He didn't want to tell her the song's name. He said the words "Just Friends" more times that day than he cared to. Instead, he asked her, "Ever heard of him."

Ashley shook her head and answered, "Nuh-uh."

"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 like." Will smirked and continued, "Joke's on her, I do like them."

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 beat, the lyrics, or vocals moved Ashley like it did Will. But the song served its purpose: teaching Ashley more 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 in the same serene mood that Will was in. She wanted to

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learn so much more about him, but for reasons she wasn't ready to reveal yet.

Will didn't look over at Ashley. He was too wrapped up 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. While their minds were elsewhere, their hearts were driving Will's right hand and Ashley's left hand closer together. 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. Natsuki employed everything Rachel taught her about kissing. Of course, Rachel had never kissed anyone in real life, but she drew from years of reading romance manga. Natsuki missed Nathan's lips by a few centimeters. She readjusted and planted a kiss right in middle of them. The kiss went on for so long, Natsuki had very little time to board before the train departed without her. On the train, she had just enough time to shriek, "GOODBYE NATHAN I MISS YOU ALREADY!" before the doors closed on her.

With a grin that went from ear to ear, Nathan waved goodbye to Natsuki as the train pulled off. 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 watching Macho Man and Miss Liz at SummerSlam all over again."

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It was only then that Will and Ashley realized how close their hands were to each other. They didn't touch but there close to 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 herself and him. 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."

Jessica and Vincent sat at a foldout table inside Jefferson High's music room. Jessica covered her face with both hands and rubbed it in aggravation. 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 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 in The Rock That Killed The Dinosaurs, Ingram Park's biggest up-and-coming band?"

Vincent raised his other thumb in the air.

"We gave them 5 minutes each to show us what they can do on guitar."

Vincent asked, "And?"

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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 turned his thumbs up into thumbs down and said, “Agreed.”

Jessica moaned, “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 now.”

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 jerkasses 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, these particular set of lyrics were neatly written, showing the care and effort Vincent put into writing them.

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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 secretly 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, “Am I 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 on the floor in the bathroom.”

Jessica wasn’t in the mood for any more bad guitar playing. She gave Noah less time than the people who auditioned before him. “You got 3 minutes.”

Noah replied, “Righteous.”

Williams

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 three 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...”

Vincent knew Jessica was going to turn Noah down as she did everyone else. He also knew nobody else was coming in to audition, which would’ve left them empty handed. Above all, he knew that if he wanted to win the competition, he was going to push back on some of the impulsive decisions his sister made. He interrupted Jessica and spoke on behalf the band, “You’re in.”

Jessica looked at her brother and asserted her authority. “Hey, I’m the leader. I’ll make that call.” She turned back to Noah and tried to reject him again. “As I was saying, WE just don’t think that...”

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Vincent doubled down. “You’re in. We practice out of our garage on Penley Ave. North Presley Place. Start coming next Monday after school. We’re doing a new song.”

Noah responded, “I’ll be there.” before putting away his guitar and leaving.

Vincent stood up and grabbed his backpack. Neither spoke, but Vincent felt the hostility radiating off of Jessica. He hated going against Jessica. He looked his sister dead in the eyes and justified his reason for undermining her. “Out of time. Out of options.” He had to have faith that he was doing the right thing. He hoped he could get Jessica to understand that too.

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LESSON 8:

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 her laptop was set to mute to avoid any error alerts sounds from blaring in her room. To mask the sound of her typing, she had her TV playing at maximum 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."

Referencing the notes she took all through the day, Ashley feverously typed code. She smiled, 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 up, Ashley" The dominating voice on the other side of the door came from her mother Jazmine.

"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 wasn’t coming off as a mother who was curious about her daughter’s interests. But rather the vice-president grilling the entire department to see who was responsible for the latest screw up. Ashley knew that Jazmine’s tactic was to keep asking probing questions until one of her subordinates eventually cracked. Keeping her cool, she answered Jazmine, “Nothing. Just watching TV.”

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

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

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

“Another puff piece kissing the butt of your god Donovan Taylor.”

This struck a nerve with Jazmine and drove her to change the topic. 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?”

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

Ashley rolled her eyes and replied, “Of course you did.”

Jazmine moved the uniform closer to Ashley and commanded again with more authority. “Try. It. On.”

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

Jazmine didn’t order Ashley to try on the uniform again. Instead, she said, “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.”

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 came back with, “Oh, I’m not playing. Will and I are madly in love with each other. 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. That was because she didn’t want it to be true. “Nice try, Ashley,” she said smugly. “Instead of watching TV, you need to be in here studying for those P.E.A.K exams. 5 points isn’t going to cut it this time.”

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Before leaving the room, Jazmine set the Perryton uniform on Ashley's bed. It was meant to remind Ashley that her future was already decided for her.

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 her parents came knocking again. She turned back up the TV and changed the channel to UPN where An episode of *Moesha* was airing. The laugh track would provide plenty of background noise. She 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. She realized that her left hand had moved closer to Will's right hand. Her heart began beating, just like how it did in the library. She couldn't concentrate on programming any more. 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 trained 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 each other. The same way Ashley and Will looked at each other on Fate's Hill on the day they decided that they were just friends. Ashley's heart kept beating so loudly, she couldn't hear the TV.

She said to herself, "We told each other that we're just friends. We are just friends right?"

Over at the Moon's, Will sat at the kitchen table and worked on his earth science homework. It was a subject he had no interest in,

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so he gave bare-minimum answers to the critical thinking questions. The answers he wrote were barely good enough to get him credit 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 he could 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 he could've drawn or played *Final Fantasy VIII* instead.

While washing the dishes, Liz, always concerned about her family's nutrition, 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, "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. She lectured Will, "You might not think that junk food is doing anything bad. But when you get older, it's all 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."

Looking back down at his textbook, Will said, "I'll eat better, mom." He put as much heart into that commitment 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 junk food like plants consumed the sun. And for two, he was eating those things with the friends he made; he wasn't giving 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 going 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 too you know.” To derail the conversation, Will listed off his friends. “Nathan, Jess and Vincent, Rob, Raphael...”

Liz interrupted, “And I’m sure they’re all lovely people.” She leaned in closer in anticipation and continued, “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 with us now. But there’s 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 how smart she is. 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 mind 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

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him.” She lifted up her hand showing her ring finger and bragged, “15 years later and I think it’s safe to say I made the right call.”

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 felt like he told the entire 9th grade today. “Ash and I are just friends. Nothing more, nothing less. Just friends.”

Liz’s reacted the same way Will’s classmates did. She didn’t believe him. Like his peers, she knew there was more to Will and Ashley than he was letting on. Will saw the expression of doubt on Liz’ face and asked, “You don’t believe me?”

Liz smiled suspiciously 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. Friends.” 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, Radiohead’s “Optimistic,” played. The song put Will in the mood to pick up where he left off drawing 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. He closed his eyes for a moment to visualize Ashley. In his mind, he saw Ashley and only Ashley. 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 like she did in the car. 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 designs for her life.

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When he began 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, 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 took hold of Will. The music 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 closer to Ashley's on the bench back at the TRAIL station. His heart started beating loudly. So loudly that he still couldn't hear the music coming from his earbuds. He pulled his right hand back and used his left hand to slam his sketchbook shut.

He said to himself, "We told each other that we're just friends. We are just friends right?"

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LESSON 9:

TEMPTATIONS

The urge to do something you know you shouldn't.

Wednesday January 5, 2000

Nathan walked out of his bedroom with his skateboard in one hand, his cell phone in the other, and a cheesy grin on his face. He woke up to a text from Natsuki that read “Hiiiiii Nathan,” followed by enough <3 emoticons to hit the 150 character limit. He stared at the message as he walked through the house.

Despite being completely occupied by Natsuki’s text, Nathan couldn’t ignore the smell of perfume that flowed through the house. It wasn’t Miss Parker’s usual fragrance, suggesting some other woman spent the night with his father.

On his way out, he came across the garbage can in the kitchen. It was open and on top of the pile of trash was a torn up document. It was a JROTC parent consent form. Nathan had filled out the form entirely the night before. The only thing missing was Lucas’ signature. Nathan was a bit bummed by Lucas’ refusal to sign the form but not shocked by it. He also wasn’t ready to give up either. “We’re not done with this, old man.” If Lucas hadn’t left for work already, Nathan would’ve told him that to him in person.

At school, Nathan broke off from Will and Ashley and headed to some other part of campus. He wanted to give them some more alone time. On the walkway, he came across a trio of girls standing against the guardrail and talking among themselves. It was easy for him to ignore the girls until he came closer to them and got a whiff of the perfume the girl in the middle was wearing. The smell of orange blossom, and violet, smelled similar to the perfume Lucas’ lady friend covered the house in and hit Nathan like a 10-car pileup. He couldn’t help but turn his head to the right and stare at the girls.

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The girls looked up and saw the awestruck Nathan walking by. They smiled and waved at Nathan. The girl on the right said, “Hi Nathan,” in a tone he thought to be seductive. The girl in the middle whispered to the girl on the left about how cute Nathan was. Convinced that he was, the girl on the left motioned to Nathan to come closer and talk to them.

That’s when time stopped and the scene around Nathan became gray. Nathan’s devil, dressed like the bass guitarist in a black metal band, popped up on his left shoulder and urged him to give in to his temptations. “Dude! Look at those chicks eyeballing you! They totally want you! Don’t be a wuss. Get over there and make your move.”

Nathan took a single step toward the girls when his angel, dressed like the bass guitarist in an alternative rock band, appeared on his right shoulder. The angel pleaded with him to resist his urges. “What are you stupid, dude? You finally get a new girlfriend after all that trying, and you want to ruin it first chance you get? And for what? Some chicks who called you a loser a few months ago?

The devil argued, “That’s only because the Stone Family charm hadn’t kicked in yet, dude. Now that it’s in full gear, chicks are gonna be all over you, dude. This is exactly what you’ve been begging in your bedroom alone at night for! You’d be a dumbass to pass this up.”

The angel countered, “You’ve already got a chick all over you, dude. Her name’s Natsuki. And if she even thinks you’re cheating on her, she’s going to be all over you with those punches and kicks. Then her mom’s going to finish you Mortal Kombat style.”

The sound of a Mortal Kombat fatality rang in Nathan’s ears.

Nathan’s devil’s only reply was, “Ah hell, the pansy’s right. M would totally kill you, dude.” Both the devil and angel disappeared in puffs of smoke. Time resumed and color returned to the scene. A piece of paper was stuck on the left side of his face. The girls giggled at Nathan and walked away. One of them blew him a kiss as a goodbye. He blushed, and his face felt warm enough to melt snow. He waved back and quietly and reluctantly said to himself, “Bye, girls.” It

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showed that he wasn't entirely immune to their charms. He barely managed to avoid giving in, but he wasn't confident he'd be able to do so the next time. Something in his head told him there would be several next times.

Nathan peeled the flyer off his face and glanced at it for a few seconds. The slogan, "Vote for Vanessa today, or don't complain tomorrow," was printed in a font that was typical for a high school flyer. Everything else, however, appeared totalitarian in design. Vanessa stood arrogantly in the middle of the flyer. She pointed at the reader, imitating the historic Uncle Sam poster. Uncle Sam's facial expression and posture suggested he was making a request, whereas Vanessa's suggested she was making a demand.

Some students might've saw Vanessa's campaign ad and assumed she'd run the student government like something out of Orwell's *1984*. Nathan saw the flyer as garbage and chucked it into a nearby trash can. It landed on top of the other balled up and discarded flyers. The only politics he was ever interested in were the ones that happened backstage on wrestling shows.

In his homeroom class, Nathan approached his teacher, First Sargent Davis. Because Wednesdays were Uniform Day for the JROTC, Davis was in his service uniform. So were a handful of students in the class. 1SG Davis said to him, "I don't see a signed DD3203 in your hands, Stone. Going to take that as your dad saying no to you joining JROTC."

Nathan replied, "He tore up the form and threw it away." I'm not giving up, First Sergeant. I'll get the old man to come around!"

Davis encouraged him. "I know you will. Now get to your desk. School news is about to go live."

There was a change in the school news host line-up. Marissa had two co-anchors instead of one: Devin and Kimberly, her closest friends and cronies. They weren't anywhere as good as anchors as Marissa. Kimberly mispronounced a few words and Devin gave some wrong information regarding an upcoming event. But Marissa was

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more forgiving with them. Not only because they were friends, but because Marissa's rage ran off all the other co-anchors.

Devin announced, *"The JV Basketball team will take on Roosevelt High in the gym after school today. Come show your support for our Eagles!"*

There wasn't much excitement for that news. The team lost to Fillmore yesterday 63 to 48 and it was their third straight loss. With star player Shawn Franklin still benched, everyone believed they'd lose this game too.

Marissa, sitting in the center of the news desk and swelling with pride, announced, *"Student council elections are coming up. Recently, I sat down and talked to one of the candidates for president, Krystal Harper."*

The school was about to watch what Marissa believed to be her crowning achievement as an anchor. The broadcast faded out and transitioned to a pre-recorded interview. Marissa, wearing her signature news blazer and holding a microphone, sat next to Krystal in the empty bleachers inside the empty gym. Krystal wore her best argyle sweater vest and dress slacks combo.

With her professional demeanor as a journalist, Marissa opened with, "I'm here with Krystal Harper, student council treasurer and presidential hopeful. Krystal, why do you want to be president?" She put the microphone close to Krystal and waited for her answer.

Krystal clasped her fingers and placed them on her lap. Then, she clearly gave her reason for running. "Washington High is rotting from the inside out. Our classmates are losing out on opportunities, and I want to put a stop to that before they have nothing left."

Krystal's answer left Marissa intrigued. She scooted closer to Krystal, and as a journalist would, asked her a follow-up question. "How do you plan on doing that?"

Krystal laid out her platform. "By making sure all of our extracurriculars are funded evenly and fairly. And by working to reopen all of the clubs that had to shut down because of lack of funding."

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Marissa asked, “Even the macramé club?” There was a hint of sarcasm in her voice.

Krystal asserted, “Even the macramé club.” She elaborated, “Every club is important to me, Marissa. Each one gives students a chance to develop outside the classroom. A chance to discover themselves and make friends with people just like them. Those chances are being snatched away from them because of mismanaged funds. No more.”

Marissa was impressed so much, she briefly broke character. “You really out here trying to make a change. Okay, go ‘head girl. I see you.” Krystal smiled back; she was happy to know she had another supporter.

Marissa cleared her throat and went back into journalist mode. She said, “You’ve got a solid platform, but are the people behind it? The poll on the school website shows your opponent, Vanessa Neuendorff, in the lead with 32 votes to your 22. What’s your plan to close that gap?”

Krystal could’ve taken that moment to attack her opponent, to reveal some of the dirty secrets she knew about Vanessa. Secrets so scathing that it would’ve brought Vanessa’s campaign to a crushing end if they ever got out. During the filming the interview, the thought of letting one or two of those secrets slip crossed her mind. Her facial expression implied that she was fighting herself to keep those secrets inside. Ultimately, she chose restraint. To stick to her principles and run a campaign free of mudslinging.

Krystal answered, “No offense, Marissa, but you really can’t go off of what’s said on the internet. You can’t verify that everyone who voted in that poll was even a Washington student. I’m going to win our classmates’ approval the old fashioned way. I’m going to talk to them in person. Get a feel for their concerns and complaints and come up with solutions that make their time here much better. Solutions, that unlike the ones our current president promised, are actually doable.

Krystal clenched her left fist and proudly repeated her slogan, “I got...”

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Suddenly, the interview was cut off. The broadcast was interrupted by a commercial that looked highly produced enough to air during the Super Bowl. In it, a montage of photos and videos of Krystal in unflattering moments showed. Ominous music played in the background.

A narrator voiced over the commercial. *“Krystal Haper is not who she makes herself out to be. She says she wants to save your clubs. But she was the one that shut them down in the first place.”*

The commercial showed several photos of Krystal inside various rooms where clubs once were held. The photos were taken without anyone’s knowledge or permission. The photographer, whoever they were, took clear pictures of Krystal giving the leaders the paper that showed that their budgets were being slashed. This included a photo of Krystal delivering the news to the drama club last October. The photographer took extra care to focus on the upset looks on the club members’ faces as Krystal delivered the news.

The narrator continued, *“Krystal Harper is lying to you. She will not improve your life at Washington. She will only make it worse. Don’t let Krystal destroy our school with her lies. Vote Vanessa Neuendorff for student council president today. Or don’t complain tomorrow.”*

Vanessa appeared on screen to end the commercial with, *“I’m Vanessa Neuendorff, and I approve of this message.”* She stood on the right side of the screen with her arms folded and looking as arrogant as she did on her campaign flyer. A graphic saying, “Vote For Vanessa,” appeared on the right side.

The sudden interruption, and the commercial itself would’ve raised a few eyebrows. That is if any students or teachers were actually paying attention to the news. The broadcast resumed with Devin and Kimberly sitting at the news desk with shocked looks on their faces. Neither knew how the interview got hijacked by the commercial, or how to respond to it. The only thing that could be heard was Marissa yelling and cussing off screen, demanding to know who was responsible for the hijack. What she was saying was

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obscene, but fortunately for the school, nothing that would've gotten a fine from the FCC.

The director signaled for Devin and Kimberly to sign off while trying to get Marissa under control off screen. With a nervous smile, Kimberly spoke loud enough to barely overpower Marissa's shouting. *"That's all for today's news. For Marissa Thomas, I'm Kimberly Whitman."*

Matching Kimberly's volume, Devin said, *"And I'm Devin Brooks. Until next time..."*

The two co-anchors proudly shouted together, *"Soar, Eagles! Soar!"* The broadcast ended immediately without any credits rolling. That was done to cut off Marissa, who was still cussing up a storm in the background.

Krystal spent the rest of homeroom period dumbfounded. She stared at the TV in the corner in the classroom long after her teacher turned it off. Her classmates tried calling out to her and poking her. But no one could snap Krystal out of her daze.

Krystal knew about Vanessa's upbringing. How she was raised around a politician and learned how to play the game. She knew Vanessa would do whatever it took to win, including stealing her time in the spotlight. Yet, she was still surprised to see Vanessa go that far and wondered how much further she'd go.

After class, Krystal was still trying to recover from the attack ad. She walked a few steps through the hall prepared to address any and all questions her peers might've had. But there weren't any; similar to the reaction in her class, nobody seemed to care. Tyler Lowe, editor for the film club, ran up to Krystal and took a moment to catch his breath. In between breaths, he testified, "Nobody in... film club had anything... to do with... hijacking... your interview."

Krystal said, "I know you didn't. Marissa would've already killed you if you did."

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Back to normal, Tyler commented, “Vanessa must’ve thrown a lot of cash into it. Must’ve paid that fool on the news team more to air it in the middle of your interview.”

Krystal replied, “I hope it was enough to fix their face after Marissa gets done rearranging it.”

The two shared a laugh which lightened Krystal’s mood. That was until they heard a loud groaning coming from nearby. Krystal turned around and saw student council secretary Greg Louie sitting on the floor and against a locker. Neither knew Greg was there until he announced his presence.

Greg complained, “Welp, that’s it. It’s over. Vanessa’s going to be president. She’s going to make me do soooo much work.” He shuddered at the thought of all of the tasks Vanessa was going to give him.

In a determined tone, Krystal said to Greg and Tyler, “I’m going to win. I got this.”

Greg slid up against the locker and asked Krystal, “Does that mean you’re ready to get dirty? You ready to do what you have to do to win?” He showed her the notebook that he tempted her with when she first decided to run for president. The notebook he used to document all of Vanessa’s dirty deeds. This time, he opened to a random page to further lure her into taking a peek.

Krystal hesitantly reached out to the notebook with her left hand, slowly giving into the desire to fight fire with fire. Her fingers were about to touch the edge of the notebook when her right hand grabbed her left wrist and pulled her hand back. She slapped the notebook out of Greg’s hand and cried out, “No! I’m not going to stoop to her level. I’m going to run a clean campaign. I’m going to win the right way.”

Greg smiled and sarcastically responded, “Sure you will, Krystal. Sure you will.” He didn’t get her to break then, but he walked away knowing he put another dent in her armor.

To reassure herself she did the right thing in turning down Greg’s help, Krystal said to herself, “I got this.” This time her tone

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wasn't one of determination. It was one of bitterness and frustration. It suggested that she made the right call but was already regretting it.

LESSON 10:

DENIAL

Refusal to accept the truth

After school, Will had a stop to make before leaving campus: the computer lab.

Ghostface Killah’s “Apollo Kids” blasted through his earbuds as he walked through the crowded halls and walkways. He didn’t hear what his peers were saying but he spotted a lot of them staring at him. He didn’t have to listen to know they were still talking about him and Ashley. Three school days later, and they were still the hot topic among their fellow freshmen. They had been questioning and teasing him about Ashley all day. The more he swore Ashley and him were just friends, the more they believed otherwise. By 5th period, Will had given up and let everyone believe what they wanted.

Will met up with Ashley right outside the computer lab with only a few minutes to spare before the computer club meeting started. She handed him the programming book she wanted him to stash away for her and told him, “I’ll need *C++ Algorithms* tomorrow.”

Will said back, “I gotcha,” while putting the book away in his backpack.

He was set to leave school before Ashley called out to him, “Hey, call me tonight, okay?”

Will paused and gulped. His entire body tensed up and beads of sweat began forming on his forehead. He gripped the straps of his backpack tightly as though it was about to fall off of his back. His heart began thumping again, beating at the same rate per minute as one of the trance songs on his latest mix CD.

Up to that point, there had only been one girl that asked Will to call them on the phone before: April. He didn’t compare Ashley to April anymore, but he felt the same anxiousness when April asked him to call her the first time as he felt now. He slowly and

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nervously turned to face Ashley again. He asked, “Is everything cool?”

Ashley casually answered, “Everything’s cool.” She took a second to come up with a reason for wanting to talk to Will over the phone at night. “Just wanted to know how your Cyan Collective thing went, that’s all.” She played it as cool as possible, but her expression hinted that wasn’t the true reason.

Will had another concern. “Aren’t your parents gonna get pissed if you’re on the phone with me late at night?”

Ashley smiled and asked back, “Do I look like I care?”

Will didn’t know if Ashley really wanted to talk about Cyan Collective, make her parents mad, a bit of both, or something else entirely. What he did know was that the phone call was going to keep that smile on her face. So he agreed to do so. “I’ll call you as soon as I get home.”

Ashley didn’t go into the computer lab after Will left. She watched Will disappear into the crowd and a feeling of regret came over her. She leaned against the locker, crossed her arms, and looked off to the side. She asked herself, “Why couldn’t I be honest with him?” It was another question she didn’t have the answer to.

Will was caught off guard when he saw the cars parked near the curb of the condemned Clarke House. He watched as both teens and adults went into the house, more than he was used to seeing. The people were dressed like typical Cyan Collective members, so he didn’t hesitate to follow them inside rather than going around to the backyard. He shuffled himself past all the bodies and found the only open space in the living room. There, he got a better look at the members he was surrounded by and noticed he never saw any of them at any of the meetings he attended.

There were a few conversations being had. They were mostly about projects being worked on and life at various art schools across the country. The eerie ambiance that usually filled the house was still the loudest.

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Will felt April's spirit talking to him from within his heart. It was telling him to introduce himself to one of the teens in the living room. Will was all for it specifically because none of them went to Washington High. But before he could make a move, a familiar and annoying voice spoke to him.

"Must be agonizing for you, Will." He didn't have to look to know that Ezra Liebowitz was standing next to him. He felt Ezra's aura of pretentiousness radiating around him. Smiling arrogantly with his arms folded, Ezra continued, "Being around all this talent and knowing you'll never measure up. It has to be agonizing for you."

As it always did, Ezra's attempt to push Will's buttons failed. Rather than facing Ezra and firing back, Will asked, "Where's Raphael?"

Ezra said, "Hush. One of your betters is about to speak." He pointed to the decayed staircase where Suzi Newkirk, the undeclared leader of the Cyan Collective, carefully stepped on to the first stair. She held on to the banister for support, knowing the stair could collapse at any moment. Everyone stopped talking and turned to face Suzi.

Ezra said to Will, "I heard she called this meeting to kick out all the has-beens and never-weres. I'd say it was nice knowing you, but I'd just be lying." Will kept ignoring Ezra.

Standing over the entire Cyan Collective, Suzi addressed the group. "Listen up. I know you all have stuff to do, so I'm not going to take up a lot of your time. Just got a few things to say and then you can be on your way."

"We submitted the forms to get this house registered as a historic landmark. If we can get that, the city can't tear it down. But one of the requirements is we're going to have to restore this place back to how it looked when Clarke lived here, or as close to it as possible. I'm just going to assume nobody here has \$150,000 lying around to pay for renovations."

Suzi looked around and wasn't surprised to see nobody stepping up to pony up the money. She continued, "Didn't think so."

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Which brings me to my next topic, this year's Art in the Park. We're getting a huge vendor tent this year and it's located in a spot that usually gets a lot of foot traffic. We're going to sell pieces of art and all of the proceeds will go to pay for those renovations."

The reaction among the members were split evenly three ways. A third had no problem with selling their art for renovation money. A third wanted to keep any money their art made for themselves. The last third didn't like the idea of selling out for money regardless of the cause. Will wasn't in any of those groups because he didn't have any art to sell whatsoever.

Suzi continued, "I know deadlines go against the reason Cyan Collective was formed in the first place. But if you want your pieces put up for sale, you got until the end of February to get them to me." She concluded, "That's all I got. If you're sticking around, we're moving to the backyard. The rest of you I'll see next year if you're in town."

Suzi was twice as cautious with coming down from the stair as she was climbing it. Seconds after she did, it split in half. Only a handful of people, including Will and Ezra, followed her through the kitchen and into the backyard. The others left through the front door and, as Suzi predicted, wouldn't return until next year's meeting. That included all of the teens Will didn't get to introduce himself to.

It only took a few meetings for Will to fully adapt to the backyard's environment. The rock music coming from the boom box, the discussions around art, the heat and light coming from the fire barrel, it all became second nature to him. He sat on one of the couches surrounding the fire and went back to work on his latest drawing.

He focused on revising Ashley, specifically her stance. He remembered what she told him earlier, "Do I look like I care?" That statement, and the stubborn tone in which Ashley said it, echoed in Will's mind. He modified Ashley's posture to be more defiant and braver. In his drawing, she stood more ready and willing to face her parents. But there was still the matter of her missing left hand. Will moved his pencil over to start drawing it. But he froze up and he couldn't move the pencil any closer to the paper.

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Deep down, Will knew what he needed to draw. He knew what Ashley needed at her side to stand against her parents. The Vision made that clear and it pulled Will back in to his drawing to give him a reminder. The afternoon sky became a hellish void. The smell of beer and cigarette smoke became the smell of sulfur. The heat from the fire barrel became the heat from the fires of Hell. The sound of “Change (In The House of Flies)” became the sound of Benjamin and Jazmine’s growling as they moved in closer to sink their fangs into Ashley.

This time, Ashley stood as bravely as Will drew her. She turned to face Will and smiled at him. She put out her left hand, inviting him to take it. Will said he’d do anything to keep that smile on Ashley. His heart, which beat louder than the demons’ growling, told him what he had to do to make that happen. As he tried to reach out to Ashley, his arm shook and his fingers tingled uncontrollably. He didn’t reach out too far before pulling back his arm.

With nothing but doubt in his tone, he said, “We...we said that...we’re just fri...”

A bright flash of light brought Will back to reality. Topaz Song was sitting next to Will and fanning the Polaroid photo she took of him staring at his drawing. Raphael Pickney, Will’s art mentor, stood behind him. He was inspecting cans of spray paint one-by-one that he had in a duffle bag on the ground next to him. Velvet Tessay sat on the arm of the couch on the opposite of Will and tinkered with a small lump of clay. She was present physically but detached from the group mentally. Ezra lied on the couch next to Will’s and stared at the sky as it grew darker.

Raphael looked over Will’s drawing and commented, “I see you’re starting your edgy boy period.” Then he warned, “Might wanna be careful with how fast you enter that phase, Will. Some artists never leave it.”

Never missing a chance to mock Will, Ezra said, “For him to enter any phase, he’d have to be an artist first. Good thing that’ll never happen.”

Doing his job as mentor, Raphael gave Will feedback on his drawing. He gave Will both positive remarks and critique. “The devils

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look cool. You still need to work on your human anatomy, so their bodies looking as uneven as they do works. Try not erasing so much. Those smudges can stay on the page even long after you're done. The really good art critics can see them from a mile away."

"I recognize the girl as one of the ones from your other drawings, one of your muses right? Didn't she have curly hair? The lines you drew look stiff. Make them more varied; thicker lines for the bulk and thinner lines for the tips."

Raphael focused on what Will drew, whereas Topaz's attention was on what he didn't. She asked, "What are you going to do with her left hand?"

Will hesitated to answer Topaz. Topaz and Ezra were also 9th graders, but they weren't the ones to follow any gossip let alone the ongoing rumors about Will and Ashley. The only person Ezra cared to hear anything about was Ezra himself. Velvet was a sophomore and Raphael was a senior. So like the others in their classes, they didn't care for the affairs of freshmen. There was nothing at risk for Will to tell the truth, that he wanted to draw Ashley holding his hand. Yet, he hesitated. And then he lied. "I'm thinking about drawing her holding a sword or something cool like that."

Raphael was crouched behind the couch, putting spray paint cans into the duffle bag. He wasn't seeing the drawing, but he heard how unsure Will was with his idea. He asked, "Is that what your Vision is telling you to draw?" Will's silence was all the answer Raphael needed. "It isn't is it?"

Will closed his sketchbook and admitted, "No, it isn't." His tone was remorseful, as though he did something wrong and immediately felt terrible for doing it. The typically cheery Topaz was upset by Will's response. Velvet was still mentally absent; she didn't hear a word. She formed her lump of clay into a pair of earrings. A small oval was stacked on top of another oval twice its size. The larger oval had a hole in the middle.

Ezra scoffed and said, "You'd defy your Vision? The only reason why you're allowed to taint Cyan Collective with your

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presence? Disgraceful.” He threw up his hands and told Raphael, “Give up on him, Raph. He’ll never learn.”

Rapheal stood up, put his hand on Will’s right shoulder, and gave him the lesson for the day. “Remember what I taught you, Will. An artist creates with their eyes, their mind, and their heart.” Will looked up at Rapheal like an eager apprentice, ready to take in everything their master was going to teach. “The Vision is a blend of what you see, what you think, and what you feel. Deny your Vision and you’re denying yourself.”

Raphael deepened his voice; he really wanted Will to listen to – not hear – what he said next. “Draw what your Vision shows you, Will. Not what you think it does, and not what you want it to.” The way he spoke indicated that he didn’t want to have to teach Will that lesson again.

Raphael zipped up the duffle bag and carried it over to the unoccupied couch where he took his seat. There, he finished his lesson. “Problem is, up to now, I’ve only been telling you about the Vision. To really understand it, you’ll need to see it in action.”

He gave Will a list of assignments. “First, you’re coming with us to the opening of Ezra’s parents’ new exhibition at the Clarke Museum.”

Ezra groaned and complained. “Does he have to?”

Velvet spoke for the first time. “Will’s one of us. If we gotta go, he’s gotta go.”

Ezra bitterly replied, “Hmmp. Better keep that same attitude for your Clan Weaving.”

Velvet said back, “Of course he’s invited too. That’s if he’s still in our group by then.”

Curious, Will asked, “Clan Weaving? What’s that?”

Topaz enthusiastically answered on Velvet’s behalf, “Velvet’s 16th birthday! There’s going to be this big ceremony out in the woods!” She clapped and said, “I’m so excited for it! I love birthdays! So many photo ops!”

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Raphael continued, "Then you're coming with me when I go tag the Prescott Bridge."

Topaz was thrilled to hear that too. "You're finally going to do it? I can get so many pics! Can I come too?"

Raphael answered, "Can't stop you." He turned back to Will and finished with, "Finally, you're volunteering for Suzi at Art in the Park. It'll be a good chance for you to see work from other Cyan Collective members."

That assignment got Ezra's attention. He stood upright, put his hands together, smiled deceptively, and looked at Will. "I want to be there when you have to be surrounded by good art all day. I want to see the look on your face when it finally hits you that you'll never be anywhere near as good." He faced Topaz and commanded, "Topaz, bring your digital camera. I want the look of Will's ineptitude posted on the internet."

Topaz gave Ezra a thumbs up and energetically said, "Okay!"

For some, what Raphael ordered Will to do came off as a punishment for failing to learn his lesson. Will saw it as opportunities to both grow as an artist and experience new things in life. He told Raphael, "I'm down with all that."

Will made it home right as the sun set and the street lights turned on. He wanted to go straight to the phone in the kitchen and call Ashley. But Marcus was hogging it. Marcus put his hand up to Will to stop him from getting any closer to the phone or telling him to give it up.

He spoke, "Chantal, it comes a time in every man's life when they gotta make the tough choices. For your boy DeMarcus, that time is now. What I'm saying is, I gotta cut you from my dodgeball squad."

Chantal's shrieks and crying over the phone were loud enough for Will to hear. Marcus tried to console her, but he didn't try too hard. "Look, I know I promised you could be on the team if we made out behind the trailers. It's just that I'm trying to go out with a win streak and you're messing that up. You got hit too many times and I can't have that." Needless to say, that didn't cheer Chantal up, and Marcus

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was done trying to. He said, “Imma go ahead and let you get it all out of your system. Hit me up when you wanna go back behind the trailers a’ight?” With that, he hung up.

Marcus pushed the phone against Will’s chest and said, “Here, chump. Call your girlfriend.” He couldn’t simply leave without insulting Will. “Ol’ caking ass boy. Ol’ loverboy ass boy. Ol’ she’s my queeeeen to beeeee ass boy. Out here loving these broads. What’s wrong with you?”

As he headed up the stairs, Will called out to him, “She’s not my...”

Marcus shouted back, “Yes she is!”

Will dialed Ashley’s cell phone. He’d only called her a handful of times but he already knew her number by memory. After two rings, Will was worried he was too late. Fortunately for him, she picked up on the third.

Ashley spoke, “Sorry, I would’ve picked up sooner but I wanted to make sure my parents can hear me.”

Will didn’t expect for Ashley to keep her rebellious streak up. He didn’t question it though. He simply replied, “It’s all good.”

For the next hour and a half, Will and Ashley talked about almost everything. From their new classes and the new vice principal. What crazy things they thought Nathan had planned for his first real date with Natsuki. How computer club went, how intensely Ashley was looking for bugs to fix, and locking a date and time for her to meet with Liz. Ashley’s progress on the fake Perryton IDs. What Will learned about the Vision from Cyan Collective and everything Rapheal assigned him to do.

Will spoke and Ashley listened. Ashley talked and Will listened. Both gave each other their full attention; no parents, no TV in the background, and no pestering little brothers to distract them. The only thing they didn’t discuss was the direction their friendship was heading in. In fact, they both went out of their way to avoid that conversation. Neither was ready to hear the truth, and neither was ready to tell it.

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LESSON 11:

OPPOSITION

Resistance to ideas and the competing side in politics.

Thursday January 6, 2000

Jessica stood in front of the mirror in the bathroom and plucked her eyebrows. Incubus' "Pardon Me" played at low volume from the radio she had on top of the toilet bowl.

When the song was done, and the commercials came on, she muted the radio with her free hand. As she applied her lipstick, she looked in the mirror and saw Vincent standing in the doorway and holding his notebook. Vincent was wearing the same clothes he did yesterday which told Jessica that he was up all night writing. He read the new lyrics he wrote down the night before.

Another day breaks. Another battle to fight.

Who's in the wrong? Who was always right?

Right away, Jessica picked up what he was throwing down. She set down her lipstick and clenched the edges of the sink's counter. Then, she told Vincent what she thought about his lyrics by commanding, "Change it."

Vincent firmly said, "No."

Jessica refused to face Vincent. She looked at him through the mirror and shouted, "I'm not singing that damn song!"

She never raised her voice to her brother before, so it should've came as a shock to him. But Vincent remained stoic. He presented his argument as to why they should move forward with his new song. "Dad always says the best songs come from pain and suffering."

Jessica wanted nothing more in life than to become as famous as her father. Normally to her, his lessons on how the music industry worked sagelike. But she wasn't willing to follow this lesson. She

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pointed her thumb against her chest and argued, “Not my pain! Not what I went through! Not what I did! Nobody else needs to know that!” She looked off to the side and softly continued, “Nobody...nobody is going to know that.” Her voice cracked and her fingers tingled. The emotional wounds from that incident resurfaced, and so did the shame that came from it.

Jessica quickly reburied that shame and finally turned to face Vincent. She walked to him, poked his chest repeatedly, and demanded, “Write something else!”

Vincent didn’t agree to re-write the lyrics. In fact, he didn’t say anything at all. He looked up at Jessica and she stared back at him. They waited for the other to back down. After a brief, yet intense stare down, Jessica insisted, “We’re doing another song.”

Vincent countered, “We’ll lose.”

Jessica looked away from Vincent and said, “Whatever, I don’t need this bullshit.” She shoulder checked him as she walked out of the bathroom with enough force to push him out of the way.

After standing back upright, Vincent remained in the doorway and wrote in his notebook. Not new lyrics as Jessica demanded, but more lyrics to his song.

Hatred flowed through my voice and fingers

You cracked my psyche. The fractures linger.

Those new lines were about how Jessica was still hurting even after so much time had passed. He read them as he wrote them and spoke loud enough for Jessica to hear. Irrate, Jessica retreated her bedroom and slammed the door shut. She cranked her stereo loud to a high volume, but not high enough to blanket over her screaming. There was a very faint smile on Vincent’s face. He was happy to know his song invoking emotion from Jessica.

Krystal sat a few seats down from her usual spot in the student council room. She wanted to distance herself from her opponent Vanessa. With her left eye, she looked at her open budgeting binder

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and reviewed her recent adjustments. With her right, she glanced over at Vanessa, who was sitting in the president's seat. It wasn't odd for Vanessa to assume the president's position when he wasn't there. However she'd usually do so from her own seat. Now, she was fully taking over Kenneth's spot as though she'd already won the election.

Not waiting for Kenneth, Vanessa began the meeting by addressing Greg directly. "Where is your notebook, Gregory? Aren't you the secretary? Isn't it your job to take notes?" She spoke to him in the same bossy tone that made her disliked among her peers.

Greg rolled his eyes and bent into his backpack to get his notebook. Vanessa commanded, "From now on, I want to see that notebook open on the table and you fully prepared to take notes. And I will be reviewing the notes you take after each meeting." The last thing Greg wanted was Vanessa reading what he wrote down for previous student council meetings. He took out a new, empty notebook instead.

With that, Vanessa officially started the meeting. "Now then, today I'd like to address the state of student council." She paused and addressed Greg again. "Write this down, Gregory."

Under his breath, Greg said, "Yes, Your Royal Pain In My Ass," before grudgingly taking notes. He wasn't used to having to actually do anything during the meetings and he hated that he was being forced to.

Vanessa continued, "Hardly anyone's showing interest in the election. Alexis Villaneuva of the school newspaper asked students what issues they wanted the student council to tackle the most. Everyone walked past her. Confidence in my... I mean our student council is at an all-time low."

asked what issues affected them most as students, they all shrugged their shoulders and walked off."

Krystal muttered, "I wonder why."

Vanessa, having barely heard Krystal, looked directly at her answered, "Well Krystal, my guess is because of how mismanaged funds caused all the clubs to shut down."

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Vanessa struck a nerve with that statement. Krystal jumped out of her chair and raised her voice. “Excuse you? I know you’re not putting all the blame on me!” She rebutted, “If we’d taken just a bit of money from sports like I wanted, those clubs would still be up and running. If anything, people hate us because you and Kenneth haven’t done a single thing you promised to do.”

Krystal and Vanessa had a full-on shouting match. They screamed over each other, going down the list of reasons the other was to blame for the student council failing. Greg watched the girls arguing and pretended to take notes. He focused primarily on Krystal, hoping that she’d get angry enough to bring up the affair Vanessa and Kenneth were having. Vanessa was certainly pushing Krystal toward doing so, but Krystal still wouldn’t break.

As the arguing reached critical mass, Kenneth walked in to the room holding the biggest cup of coffee he could get his hands on. The bags under his eyes showed his exhaustion. The lipstick smeared across his lip and cheek showed why he was late for the meeting. Kenneth dragged his body in between Vanessa and Krystal and, with every ounce of energy he could muster, he shouted, “Okay! Okay! Break it up!”

The girls immediately stopped shouting, pointed the finger at each other, and claimed, “She started it!” like two bickering children. Their shrieks made Kenneth’s head throb even harder in pain.

He yelled, “I don’t care! Both of you sit down and shut up!” Vanessa retreated to her usual seat. She was taken aback; Kenneth never spoke to her that harshly before. When she sat down, her focus shifted back to Krystal. She stared at Krystal with a grin, proud in knowing she’d gotten under Krystal’s skin. Across the table, Krystal noticed Kenneth’s girlfriend Clover Peony’s lipstick on him. She also noticed Vanessa’s non-reaction to it. She correctly assumed their affair was still ongoing and neither Kenneth nor Vanessa felt any shame from it. It was more ammo for Krystal to use against Vanessa, and the temptation to do so was growing.

Greg whispered, “Psst, Vanessa. Vanessa. Vaaaanessssssaaaaa,” until Vanessa finally acknowledged him. Then he asked, “That part of the meeting where Kenny told you to sit down and shut up. Should I

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write that down?" Vanessa huffed and went right back to staring at Krystal.

Kenneth groaned, rubbed his eyes, and wiped his hands down his face. After chugging his coffee he started the student council meeting properly. "Project Graduation..." He yawned and started over. "Project Graduation wants to organize a fundraiser for their post-graduation trip. They're thinking a bake sale. Krystal, I want you to help organize it. Get with them, figure out what they need..." He yawned again and finished with, "...and how much it's going to cost."

His next order of business was for Vanessa. He said, "Vanessa, stay after, we need to go over a few things."

Krystal rolled her eyes and said under her breath, "Yeah I bet you do."

For the first time, Krystal wasn't the last to leave the student council room. Greg had snuck out undetected earlier. She couldn't wait to get out of there as soon as the meeting ended. She had an pretty good idea what Kenneth and Vanessa would get up to alone in the room, and the very thought of it disgusted her. She kept herself composed, holding in her anger until she got to Eddie's care where she'd erupt.

As she walked the A Building's empty hallway, she spotted several of both her and Vanessa's campaign flyers scattered on the floor. They were all crinkled, torn up and drawn over with markers. It proved Vanessa right when she said the students had lost faith in the student council. That her peers believed that no matter who won, nothing would change.

Krystal picked up one of her flyers from the ground and opened it up. She looked at it and told herself, "I got this." The look on her face was the opposite of her look on the flyer. She was becoming less confident that she would win, and even less sure she even wanted to.

In the theater at the performance arts center, Leslie and Matt were on stage rehearsing their lines. There were still a few weeks

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before *Everything's Fine and Dandy's* opening night, far too early for a dress rehearsal. But Leslie was wearing her character Norma's costume, a pink cardigan over a light blue gingham dress with a checkered pattern, and a pink headband. Her costume was designed by Abilene, and it followed 50s' fashion styles with Abilene's new millennium flair sprinkled in. Leslie wore the costume during auditions to make sure everything fit on her in case Abilene needed to make alterations.

To maintain the chemistry he shared with Leslie on stage, Matt also wore his costume. His was a leather jacket with a white t-shirt underneath, denim jeans, and a silver chain bracelet. There was a prop carton of cigarettes in his jacket's pocket.

Leslie sat in a prop chair next to a round prop table which represented the booth at the diner the scene took place in. In this scene, Norma confronted her secret boyfriend Johnny for her life being turned upside down. Leslie recited her line with the same distraught emotion the script called for. "Everything was going swell for me until I met you, Johnny."

Matthew pretended to comb his hair. Then he put his right foot on the table and read his line with the swagger of a 1950s teen rebel. "Sweetheart, if me crossing those tracks ruined your life then... then..." He forgot the last part of the line. Fortunately, Leslie knew the entire script. She spent every free moment this week reading it both at home and over at Abilene's.

Leslie whispered Matt's line in his ear, "Then maybe it wasn't as swell as you thought it was."

Matt recited the line, "Then maybe it wasn't as swell as you thought it was." Then, he quickly whispered, "Thanks." The script called for Leslie to pout and turn her head away from Johnny. Matt couldn't see Leslie blushing. That part wasn't in the script.

Joseph watched Matt and Leslie rehearse from his seat in the center section. He didn't stop them to berate Matt for forgetting his line or Leslie breaking character to remind him what it was. He was calmer than he was last semester. Sure, the performance arts building was still on life support. The curtains barely hung on, and

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the theater's old smell made everyone think it was well past its expiration date. And the drama club itself didn't fare any better. Ticket sales from *Cordelia's Last Winter* bought the club a few more months of life. But Joseph was confident Leslie and Matt's performance would bring more butts to the seats and much needed revenue. Word of mouth about Leslie's acting and singing during the last play had made a good number of people anticipate her next performance.

Rehearsals continued without any hitches. Leslie and Matt continued the scene up to the doo-wop song where Norma and Johnny argued over who was at fault for Norma's life going wrong. With her heavenly voice, Leslie sang

This is my life and you don't belong.

I did everything right, I did nothing...

Leslie paused suddenly when she saw who was sitting in the front row all of a sudden. Collette sat right next to Joseph with her arms rested behind her head and chewing bubble gum.

Joseph asked, "Leslie? Everything okay? You need to take five?" He didn't speak like an overbearing director, but one who wanted his lead actors to be comfortable. He noticed Leslie looking over to the right of him. Collette popped her bubble gum; that was when Joseph realized she was sitting next to him. Caught off guard, he jumped out of his chair and turned around to face Collette. He said to her, "Hey! This is a closed rehearsal! Drama club members only!"

Keeping her nonchalant posture and attitude, Collette blew her bubble gum and popped it again. Then, she pointed at Leslie and said to Joseph, "Leslie invited me. Said I'd be a good fit for you drama geeks because she says I can sing good."

With an intentionally loud and annoying voice, Collette sung, "LA LA LA LA LAAAAAAAAAAAAA!" She sung until she could see Joseph's patience wearing thin. In her regular voice, she continued, "She said I should drop in and check it out for myself. Would've been here sooner, but that new vice-principal's got me

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seeing the counselor every day after school for my ‘behavioral issues.’ Whatever that means.”

That last thing Collette said is what got to Leslie. Collette having to see the guidance counselor every day was another consequence she had to suffer because of Leslie. Leslie didn’t hear anything Collette and Joseph said before that, and she didn’t hear the back-and-forth they had afterward. She stood on stage, stunned and unable to move or speak. The air around her felt thicker, making it hard for her to breathe. It took a few days, but Collette had officially begun her campaign to ruin Leslie’s life. Her opening salvo was an invasion on Leslie’s sanctuary on campus: the theater.

Matt walked over to check on Leslie. He put his hand on her shoulder and whispered, “Are you okay, Leslie?” Leslie didn’t hear him, nor did she feel his hand on her shoulder.

“Leslie,” Joseph called out to her. “Did you say she could come?”

Joseph’s question snapped Leslie out of her trance. She could’ve told him no, and he would’ve booted Collette out. But she also knew Collette would’ve come back again and again until the vice-principal had to get involved. And getting Collette into any more trouble was the last thing Leslie wanted to do.

Leslie breathed a sigh of despair and told Joseph, “Collette can stay and watch... if she wants.”

Joseph had Leslie and Matt re-rehearse the scene from the beginning. Leslie was clearly off of her game. She mispronounced some words here and there. And, for the first time, Matt had to remind her of part of a line she suddenly forgot by whispering, “Everything was going swell for me.” During the song, she went off-key a few times, though she was able to recover.

Leslie couldn’t shake off the anxiety she felt from Collette staring at her in the front row. Collette wasn’t just a nuisance hellbent on making Leslie miserable. She was that theatre critic, the one who could make or break a play with a just a few words in a

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newspaper or magazine. The pressure was weighing Leslie down. It was a miracle that she made it through rehearsals.

Backstage, Leslie stood perfectly still as Abilene made slight adjustments to her costume. She thought she'd be free from Collette backstage; Joseph was really strict about that area being for cast and crew only. Abilene said, "Turn to the left for me, hun." Leslie turned to let Abilene adjust another part of the skirt. That's when she saw Collette sitting in the dressing table chair closest to the door. Her feet were planted on the table, and she was rocking back and forth while chewing her gum. There was no telling how long she was there.

Collette gave her feedback on Leslie's acting. "That's the best you could do, Princess? Come on, I've seen you act so much better." She mocked Leslie and said, "Oh please, Principal Caine. Please save me from the big, bad Collette." She put on the fakest puppy eyes and continued, "Pwetty pwetty Pwease save me."

Leslie barely tolerated Collette's presence in the theater. She wasn't going to stand by and let Collette take over the dressing room too. She demanded, "Get out of here Collette, the backstage is only for theater club."

Collette didn't budge. Without even looking at Leslie she continued rocking in her chair and said, "What are you going to do, Princess? Tell on me?" Collette figured out that Leslie didn't want to get her into any more trouble. Sure enough, Leslie's demands ended there.

Abilene, on the other hand, wasn't as tolerant. Everything she knew about Collette Neal she learned from Leslie in the past few days. And though it was what Leslie did in the past that transformed Collette into the obnoxious girl sitting in front of her, Abilene wasn't going to stand by and let Collette hassle her friend. She walked toward Collette and put her hand on her hips. She scolded Collette like she did whenever her younger siblings misbehaved.

"Now look here, you little gremlin. I know that Leslie having you sent to that school messed you all up in the head. But

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the girl you want your revenge on? She ain't around anymore. So why don't you go find someone else to annoy?"

Collette turned her head and saw Abilene standing over her. But she wasn't intimidated; she dealt with much tougher girls at Harding. She asked, "Oh she's a good girl now? Why didn't you say so?" She jumped out of her chair, causing it to fall onto the floor. She looked past Abilene and directly at Leslie, and said, "Tell you what? Why don't you and me go on down to the superintendent's office. You tell him you're longer that bitch who ruined my spotless disciplinary record. And he'll just wipe way that 4-month black mark. I mean, that's how it works. Right, Princess?"

Leslie was speechless. Deep down she knew Collette was right. No change in persona was going to erase what she did to Collette. And right now, neither was an apology, even if she could speak to offer one. Collette put up 4 fingers to remind Leslie, "4 years, Princess. I got you for the next 4 years, and can't nobody save you from me." She pointed at Abilene and finished with, "Not even this hick."

She blew a bubble and popped it close to Abilene. Then she turned around, placed her hands in her pockets, and made her exit.

An enraged Abilene shouted, "Hick?" She chased after Collette and said, "I'll show you a hick! Come back here you no-good piece of..." Leslie grabbed Abilene's arm, stopping her from going after Collette.

Collette wasn't done menacing Leslie just yet. Down the hallway she called out, "Now where's that boy you were eye-humping on stage? I want his phone number!" She was purposely loud enough for Leslie to hear.

Back in the dressing room, Abilene redirected her anger to Leslie. She said, "You need to do somethin' about her hun, and you need to be quick about it."

Leslie knew Abilene was right. This was Collette's first attack on Leslie and she'd already dealt a lot of damage. Leslie knew it was only going to get worse from now on. She had options for dealing with

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Collette. She could've gone to Vice Principal Grissom, whose zero tolerance policy would've sent Collette back to Harding. This time for good. She could've called Natsuki and requested – not forced – her to deal with Collette. But both of those options were what the old Leslie, the girl who would be queen, would've exercised. And the old Leslie was the last thing she wanted to be.

LESSON 12:

IMPROVISATION

Making something up as you go.

Saturday January 8, 2000

Around noon, Will and Nathan took the bus to the Northside Transit Center. Both of the boys had trains to catch.

Nathan, who was carrying an army duffel bag his father lent him, was meeting up with Natsuki at the Perryton station. Will was going to the arts district downtown. Today, he was taking on Raphael's first assignment: the Liebowitz exhibit. They sat toward the back of the bus and discussed many things. Will updated Nathan on his progress with "Final Fantasy VIII," and how he was saving up for the PlayStation 2.

"Folks said they're not buying me another system after they just got me one for Christmas."

"Yeah, but dude that was the PS1. Did you tell them this was the 2?"

"Told them and even showed them the feature *PSM* did on it. But my dad was all..." Imitating his father he said, "I don't give a damn if they put you in the game. You want that new Nintendo, you get out there and make you some Nintendo money. Go mow some lawns or something, you tracking?"

Nathan laughed and asked, "Dude, he called it a Nintendo?"

Will bitterly answered, "He called it a Nintendo." Will knew that because his parents didn't bother calling the console by its correct name, they wasn't going to buy it for him. He leaned in his seat and said, "So it looks like I'm either mowing lawns all summer or seeing if Rob's got work for me once he's back at school."

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The conversation shifted to Nathan's plans with Natsuki. He said, "I'm taking Natsuki to the old industrial district out in Westlawn. You know about that place, dude?"

Will showcased what he learned about the region's history. "It's where Taylor Arms manufactured weapons. After World War 2, the factories were switched up to make household appliances. Up until the late 80s when Donovan Taylor took over the company and outsourced production to China."

Nathan responded, "A simple yes would've done just fine, dude." He continued, "Since then, we've been skateboarding in those abandoned factories and warehouses. Today, I'm using it as an Ijōnaken training facility."

The bus pulled up to its designated parking spot at the transfer station. As Will and Nathan exited, Will commented, "An old, abandoned factory. You and Natsuki going on a date? Or solving a Scooby-Doo mystery? I'd be worried about Natsuki if I didn't know she could whoop your ass if you tried anything out there."

Nathan grinned and said, "Speaking of date..."

Will knew where this conversation was going. He sucked his teeth, and moaned, "Man, here we go."

This particular conversation went on all the way up to the TRAIL platform. Nathan said, "Come on, dude. You and Ashley..."

Will cut Nathan off, demanding, "Drop it, Nathan."

Nathan wouldn't drop it, and with 7 minutes before either of their trains arrived, he had plenty of time to keep it going. "Everybody knows it, dude. It's been a week and they're still talking about it."

Will looked dead at Nathan and sarcastically said back, "Yeah thanks for that. Really appreciate being hassled about that all week."

Feeling Will's hostility, Nathan finally admitted what his entire friend group already knew. "Okay look, dude. When I started that whole rumor about you and Ashley dating, I only told like one person. I didn't think it was going to spread to the entire freshman class and I damn sure didn't think it would go on this long."

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He asked, “But why has it gone on this long?” Then he answered himself, “Usually, when a rumor goes on for more than a day, it’s probably because there’s some truth for it.” He casually put slapped his hand on Will’s shoulders, pointed at him, and said, “You two really got something going there, dude. Something real.”

Will’s mind told him to scream at Nathan to drive it in his head that he and Ashley were just friends. His mind told him to break Nathan’s jaw for getting that rumor started in the first place. His mind told him to threaten to kick Nathan’s ass even worse if he didn’t publicly dispel the rumor ASAP. But his heart was tired of his mind rejecting the truth. It took over momentarily, and the truth as to why Will hadn’t confessed his feelings to Ashley yet came out.

He took Nathan’s hand off his shoulder. He looked down in doubt and asked, “What if I screw things up with Ashley? What if I do or say something messed up and we break up? I wouldn’t just lose her as a girlfriend, Nathan. I’d lose her as a friend.” He closed his eyes and clenched his fists tightly and continued, “She’s already had her broken once,” referring to when Leslie betrayed her. “I don’t wanna risk putting her through that again. I don’t want to be the one to take that smile away from her.”

In a serious tone, Nathan asked a question that cut through Will’s insecurity. “What if being with you makes her smile, dude? I mean you’ve only known her for 5 months. In that time, she’s confided in you more than she’s ever done with me, and we grew up together. Every time you two have your little heart-to-hearts on the hill or on your porch, she’s always in a better mood.”

Will thought about what Nathan said and knew he was right. Ashley did always seem to be in a much better mood after talking to him, learning about him, or just being around him.

The train to Perryton was approaching the station. Nathan told Will, “Look dude, if all this is getting to you, I can go around and tell everyone you two aren’t dating. I don’t think anyone’ll buy it. They’ve already seen how you two walk down the halls together. But I’ll still tell ‘em if you want.”

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The train pulled up to the station and passengers exited. Before boarding, Nathan gave Will some advice. “But if you wanna make Ashley smile, you know what you gotta do to make that happen.” He got on the train and stuck his head out of the door. He shouted back at Will, “Stop being a dumbass and do it already! You dumbass!”

As Nathan’s train pulled off from the station, Will stood in front of the platform. He put his hand over his heart and responded to what Nathan told him by asking himself, “Yeah, but can I?” Will’s train pulled up and he boarded. That question weighed on his mind the entire trip.

At Chatswell Hall, Natsuki stood on her mat on her side of the room. She warmed herself up for her date with Nathan by practicing her punches and kicks on her side of her dorm room. Rachel stared at her computer monitor. With her hand on her mouse, she was preparing to make a life or death choice.

She was playing a visual novel whose title translated to “Tales of Friends & Lovers.” She bought from the same site she’d already spent hundreds on buying anime, manga, wall scrolls, and figurines. The game’s text was originally in Japanese. Natsuki went into the files and translated the text to English. In exchange, Rachel offered to do Natsuki’s Physics homework for the rest of the year. Natsuki was still her own for exams, but both she and her mother were satisfied with the barely passable grades she got on those.

After numerous hours invested into the game, starting over many times to get the good ending, Rachel reached the story’s conclusion. She excitedly read, “Ryosuke looked deeply into Hinata’s eyes and...” There were 3 choices on screen. Rachel had the mouse arrow hovered over the option for Ryosuke to confess his feelings to Hinata and was ready to click it.

Natsuki increased the intensity of her warmup. As the time to meet up with Nathan drew nearer, her punches and kicks were faster and more furious and more focused. She was so zoned in, she thought she was in an actual fight, and she let out a furious yell. The shockwave of the yell echoed all through the room and caused

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Rachel's body to vibrate in her chair. It forced her to move her mouse and click the middle option on screen: Grab Hinata's butt.

When Rachel regained her stability, she was devastated to see Ryosuke as a hopeless adult. Ryosuke was driven to despair because he lost the girl he was madly in love with in high school and lived out the rest of his life alone and unloved.

She grabbed her monitor and shouted, "Ryosuke, you fool! You screwed up big time!" She blamed the character for the choices she made. She reloaded her save file to get the good ending when things went from bad to worse. She cried, "Ack! My last save was an hour ago! I'm going to have to do the school festival all over again!" She scrambled through the papers on her desk looking for the notes she took down of all the correct dialogue choices.

Natsuki's cell phone beeped and Rachel was more excited by that than Natsuki was. She spun around in her chair and said, "It's him! He's texting you, Natsu-chan!" Natsuki broke her concentration and jumped on her bed to grab her phone.

She looked at the screen and lit up with glee when she saw Nathan texted her. Matching Rachel's energy, she said, "He's on the train! He's on his way!" The girls squealed in joy together.

Natsuki put on her track jacket while Rachel gave her last-minute dating tips. "Okay remember what I taught you. Make lots of eye contact. Don't look away for any reason. Giggle - not laugh - at all his jokes. And flirt, woman, flirt! Be as flirty as humanly possible."

Fully prepared, Natsuki headed out. Rachel requested, "I want details, Natsu-chan! All the details!" She held up a notebook and elaborated, "I need more material for my Nathan x Natsuki fanfic!"

Natsuki looked back and replied, "I'll tell you everything."

Natsuki sprinted across campus without slowing down or running out of stamina. Her warmup and anticipation of seeing Nathan again gave her infinite energy. There were many obstacles and distractions between her and the TRAIL station. Staff and students worked together across campus to prepare for Prospect Day, the day

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where a handpicked selection of gifted and wealthy students would be invited to tour Perryton.

Natsuki looked straight ahead during her run. She didn't pay attention to the decorations, banners, and signs being put up. She avoided the people carrying the streamers in the school's colors: royal blue and white. And she ignored the elite students that barked orders and the regular students did all the grunt work. She'd gotten used to that being how things worked at Perryton Prep. She was unaware that someone was watching her leave campus.

Natsuki reached the station just as the train came to complete stop. She kept running to the train door, where she saw Nathan coming out. She pounced at him with enough force to push him back into the train and spin him around. She wrapped her arms around him tight and shrieked, "HI NATHAN!" before planting kisses all over his face. Nathan's only response was to lean his head back and smile goofily. He could barely breathe but he loved the feeling of Natsuki's arms around him. Even if he had the strength to break from Natsuki, he didn't want to. She wouldn't let go of him until the TaySEC officer patrolling the car told them to take a seat.

Natsuki took Nathan the hand and led him to the first empty seat. Nathan was still recovering from Natsuki's hug, and the feeling of being loved. He surrendered all control of his body to her. Nathan and Natsuki sat together, and Natsuki wrapped her arm around him.

She followed Rachel's first dating tip. Perhaps making too much eye contact, she stared affectionately at Nathan and wouldn't look away for any reason. A very small part of Nathan was beginning to become uncomfortable with how intensely Natsuki was staring at him. It was unusual for Natsuki to act that girly, even when she was around him. The rest of him was still loving the fact that a girl was this close to him without being repulsed. His only regret at the time was that there were no girls from Washington High on the train to witness it. If there were, they'd see just how committed he was to Natsuki and how possessive she was of him. Maybe they'd stop trying to get him to leave Natsuki for one of them.

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There was some time left before arriving at Westlawn station. Enough for Nathan to explain why they were going to the industrial district.

“I read up on Ijōna-Ken on the internet, dude. Did you know that theirs was the only school that didn’t have a formal dojo?”

Natsuki nodded and answered, “Yes, it was one of the first things mother and father taught me.”

Nathan continued, “So you know that students would travel all over Osaka with their sensei to train. In the woods, on the mountains, in towns, wherever they could that wouldn’t get them busted by the shogunate.”

Natsuki told Nathan why that was the case. “We disciples of Ijōna-ken know that a fight could happen anywhere, at any time, and for any reason. We must learn to adapt to our surroundings quickly so we can focus on our opponent.”

Nathan said, “That’s why I’m taking you to the old Taylor factories. Plenty of new surroundings there for you to adapt to. No more playtime in Leslie’s backyard for you, dude. It’s time to up your game if you wanna beat your mom.”

The thought of getting one step closer to surpassing M thrilled Natsuki; she beamed with joy. Then, she shook Nathan like a rattle and screamed, “THANK YOU FOR DOING THIS FOR ME NATHAN!” She was loud enough to draw the attention of the other passengers and the TAYSEC officer again. She was still laser focused on Nathan, but she felt everyone’s disapproval of her for disturbing the quiet. Not wanting to get kicked off the train before it reached Westlawn, she returned to her regular tone. “Thank you for doing this for me, Nathan.”

As he recovered both his body and his vision, Nathan stuttered, “A-a-a-anything f-f-for y-you, d-d-dude.”

After departing at the Westlawn station, the couple trekked through tall, unkempt grass to the abandoned manufacturing buildings. The facilities were fenced off, but there was a small opening they were able to crouch under to get in. Nathan led Natsuki through the maze of

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rusted storage containers and to the building in the center of the area. The plant life was growing through the cracks of the pavement.

The door to the factory was rusted shut, but a bit of teamwork would force it open. Nathan said, “On three.” Natsuki nodded. On the count of three, the two combined their strength and rammed against the door, flinging it open.

The factory was a relic of a bygone era. Taking up the most real estate on the ground floor were broken machines that once produced rifles and then washing machines. Boxes, crates, pallets, and rusted tools were scattered all over. The boards that covered up the broken windows were covered in graffiti. Light came from the broken windows on the roof. Some of light fixtures hung on to the ceiling by a single exposed wire. The other fixtures lie broken on the ground. A decommissioned forklift was tilted on its side in the corner. The strong smell of the factory was a mixture of years of rust from the dead machines and the puddles of unknown liquid on parts of the floor.

When he found an open spot, Nathan dropped his duffle bag on the floor causing a cloud of dust to kick up. Nathan opened the bag and pulled out his paintball gun and a container of paintballs. While assembling the paintball gun and loading the pod with paintballs, he told Natsuki more about what he learned about her family’s style.

“You never know when or where a fight’s gonna happen, dude. And you also don’t know what your opponent’s going to fight you with. Your great-great-great-great-great grandparents had that in mind when developing Ijōna-Ken. Their belief was that you had to adapt quickly to get the upper hand on your opponent. All while remaining spontaneous so they don’t get the upper hand on you.”

Nathan held his paintball gun up to Natsuki and said, “For this exercise - slash - date, I’m going to run around this old factory and try to hit you with paintballs. Your job is to avoid getting hit and to hit me back. I won’t make it easy for you, dude. But I’ll try not to hit that pretty face of yours. I know from experience how bad these paintball thingies hurt.”

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Natsuki assumed Nathan's last sentence was a joke. Following more of Rachel's advice, she let out a forced giggle, and blurted, "OH NATHAN YOU'RE SO FUNNY!"

Nathan was baffled by Natsuki's reaction. He scratched the back of his head and plainly said, "Okay. Well, I'm off dude, dude." Then, he ran off. Within seconds, Nathan was out of Natsuki's sight.

In those seconds, Natsuki shifted from giddy romantic to focused warrior. She knew standing out in the open and looking for Nathan would get her pelted with paintballs. She ran through the factory in another direction to get accustomed to her surroundings before she went on the offensive. Four paintballs hit the floor a few centimeters from her left foot which caught her off guard. Natsuki looked up and to her left and saw Nathan's silhouette running across the unstable catwalk. Natsuki didn't have the time to figure out how he got up there so quickly. She didn't chase after Nathan, instead she committed where he attacked from to memory.

Heightening her senses, Natsuki continued her pursuit of Nathan. It wasn't long before another volley of paintballs came at her. This time, they came from two directions: from her left and her front, seemingly at the same time. She avoided every shot by doing backflips and cartwheels, paying no heed to the puddles of strange fluids her bare hands touched.

Nathan maneuvered through the area of crates with the same ease he did the obstacles on the paintball course. Natsuki couldn't get a beat on his location, but she could map out his movement patterns. As the teachings of Ijōna-Ken dictated, she adapted to her environment and to her opponent. She predicted where Nathan would attack next, and she'd be correct. Nathan swooped down on Natsuki from behind. But before he could pull the trigger, she turned around, jumped, and kicked him in the chest mid-air.

Nathan dropped to the ground, covered his chest, and gasped for air. Worried that her kick might've broken one of his ribs, Natsuki ran over to Nathan while screaming, "NATHAN! ARE YOU OKAY?" When she got close, Nathan sprung up; he was faking his injury. He pecked Natsuki on the lip and then created some distance

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from her. Natsuki was thrown off by Nathan's deceptive tactic, but she had him in her sights now.

She dashed at him and attacked relentlessly with random punches and kicks both on the ground and in the air. Nathan weaved to avoid some of the strikes and used his paintball gun as a shield to deflect some others. From uppercuts to roundhouse kicks and sweeps, Natsuki unloaded her entire arsenal of techniques on Nathan. When Natsuki did connect, she hit his face, his arm, and his abdomen. He knew he stood no chance against Natsuki in close quarters combat. He turned and retreated toward the factory entrance.

With a good amount of distance from Natsuki, he took a deep breath, aimed his paintball gun. He took a single shot at the charging Natsuki and it hit. A fairly noticeable yellow stain was now on Natsuki's jacket. Natsuki stopped when she felt the paintball's sting. She believed she failed the training exercise. She wanted to give up right and then and there, but Nathan wouldn't let her. From the shadows, he called out, "Fight's not over yet, babe!"

Natsuki blushed and said to herself, "He called me babe." Babe was a term of endearment Rachel taught her about and she was extremely happy by Nathan calling her that. She screamed it again, "HE CALLED ME BABE!" This gave her a second wind and the training resumed.

They went at it for another hour without losing any steam. Nathan was able to hit Natsuki a few more times on both her jacket and trackpants. Natsuki was able to catch Nathan twice more. Using what she learned about how Nathan moved, she made him think she was going to hit him from the front when actually, she kicked him from the back. Then, when he was prepared to block her attack from the left, she jumped over him and struck him with punches to his right. She didn't fall for Nathan's trick the next time she got him on the ground. Instead, she followed up with another attack that he had to roll out of the way of. Her strikes were more chaotic and more rapidly fired. At the same time, she had more control over them than she ever did before. She had to control herself if she didn't want to hurt Nathan badly.

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When that hour was over, Nathan laid on the floor using the duffle as a cushion. Natsuki laid on top of him, using his chest as her own cushion. They were both drenched in sweat and their every muscle burned. Natsuki's tracksuit was covered in paint. Nathan's body was covered in dirt and bruises. They were exhausted and happy. They locked fingers and breathed loud enough to echo all through the factory.

In between breaths, Natsuki said, "Thank...you...for this...Nathan. This was...a...great...date."

Breathing just as heavily, Nathan responded, "My...pleasure...babe."

Natsuki felt Nathan squirming and struggling to get up. She got off of him and pulled him up with both hands. It took all of his remaining stamina to get his paintball gear back into the duffle bag.

Natsuki put her hand around Nathan's shoulder and helped him walk back to the train station. During their walk back, Natsuki told Nathan the benefits of his method of training. "This will help me with sparring against mother. I will study her. Observe how she moves or doesn't. Use the environment to my advantage. And, when the time is right, strike when, where, and how she couldn't possibly expect." With her free hand, she raised her free fist and proudly declared, "JUST YOU WAIT, MOTHER! I WILL DEFEAT YOU NEXT TIME!"

Nathan weakly replied, "That's awesome... babe. You...show her..."

On the train back to Perryton, Natsuki sat close to Nathan with her arm wrapped around him again. It didn't heal any of his bruises, but Nathan felt comforted with her at his side. This gave Natsuki the chance to use Rachel's third piece of dating advice. She twirled her finger across Nathan's chest. In her most flirtatious voice, she whispered, "The way you held your own against me back there was soooooo hot."

Nathan knew what Natsuki was trying to do. Her awkward voice cracks, fake girly-girl accent, and unusual use of compliments like "hot" gave her away. He gently grabbed Natsuki's finger and said,

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“You don’t have to try so hard, babe. I’m already yours.” Then he assured her, “I’m not going anywhere.” That statement was more for himself, to remind him that he was committed to Natsuki. He released his grasp on her finger, gently put his hand on her cheek, leaned in closer to her, and kissed her lovingly. He didn’t mind the pain from his cheek. For Natsuki Yokaze, he’d endure much more and far worse.

With a bright red face, Natsuki matched Nathan’s passion. The two’s lips remained locked until the train reached Perryton. They didn’t care who was watching, nor did they care about how they felt about it. When the train stopped at Perryton Station, and Natsuki departed, Nathan waved her goodbye. Natsuki stayed on the platform and waved back until the train departed. She couldn’t wait to get back to her dorm room and tell Rachel everything. However, there were people standing in her way.

Waiting for her was Jace Bartlet, one of the third-year elites that she confronted earlier in the week. Standing next to Scott was a prefect that was holding a clipboard.

Jace told the prefect, “Told you she snuck off of campus. I saw her do it.” He sounded proud of ratting on Natsuki.

The prefect read from the clipboard, “Natsuki Yokaze. According to this, you were assigned to help set up for Prospect Day.” He inspected her tracksuit, taking note of the yellow paint stains.

Natsuki protested, “No I was not.” She was correct. What she didn’t know was that group of elite students bribed the Prospect Day staff to put her name on the roster of workers without her knowledge.

The prefect slapped the clipboard and insisted, “This clipboard does not lie, Ms. Yokaze, and I was led to believe neither do you. You left campus without prior permission and you defiled your uniform. These infractions cannot go unpunished.”

Jace gave the prefect some recommendations on how to punish Natsuki. “Make her dig ditches. Or clean the entire science wing. I know! Make her clean the headmaster’s bathroom until she graduates.”

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The prefect looked down at Scott and ordered, “Decorum, Mr. Bartlet.” He pulled out a pink slip from his jacket’s pocket and filled it out on the clipboard. He gave it to Natsuki and rendered his verdict to her. “Ms. Yokaze, you are hereby ordered to change into a clean uniform. Then, you will report directly to the laundry room where you will wash your tracksuit by hand. You will report to the laundry room for the next seven days and clean the uniforms of the first-year students. Failure to report will result restrictions for your entire dormitory.”

Jace smirked pompously. Though he wanted Natsuki’s consequences to be more severe, he was able to show her that there was a price to pay for interfering with her betters.

Natsuki planted her hands below her waist, bowed and formally apologized. “I am sorry for breaking the rules. I humbly accept my punishment.” Neither Jace nor the prefect saw Natsuki smiling underneath her bow. It wasn’t really a punishment, but the perfect opportunity to do her part of Ashley’s plan.

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LESSON 13:

PERSPECTIVE

Seeing things through someone else's point of view.

In Livingston's medical center, Ashley sat in the lobby of Essex Fitness.

She was distracted by a particular page in her notebook. On the page's header the words, "Will. What is it about him?" were written huge letters and highlighted in yellow. She'd taken a new set of notes on Will after throwing away her old ones back in December. The many notes on Will plastered all over the page in an unorganized fashion which was unusual for Ashley. She scratched her head and tapped her pen against the page. She scanned it multiple times, looking for that one detail about Will that stood out for her, but couldn't find it.

Ashley didn't know it at the time, but she wasn't where she was supposed to be. The rock music blasting from the speakers. A woman boasting about her weight loss on the TV on the corner wall. The weights clanging and the heavy grunts coming from both men and women. These things should've been dead giveaways. But she didn't realize she was in a gym until she heard footsteps approaching her. A man with a deep voice introduced himself to Ashley. "Hey there, Miss. Name's Bravo."

Ashley looked up away from her notebook and saw Bravo, a six foot tall man with 14 inch biceps, towering over her. His name was written in marker on the nametag pinned on his tight Essex Fitness work shirt. Bravo went right into his sales pitch by asking, "Want to shed some pounds?"

Ashley was intimidated by Bravo, and for a very brief moment, ashamedly attracted to his muscular build. She looked away from him but discreetly kept an eye on his chest. She shyly answered, "Um no thank you." She looked around confused and asked, "Is this the right place? I'm looking..."

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Bravo cut Ashley off and continued his pitch, “You looking to build some muscle? Strengthen your core? Shave a few seconds of your mile? Yoga? Pilates? Krav Maga? We’ve got personal trainers for whatever you’re looking to get into. How about supplements? You good on those? We’re running a special for our teen fitness program. Only \$19.99 a month for the first six...”

Someone turned down Bravo’s offers on Ashley’s behalf. “She’s not interested, Bravo.” Ashley looked to her left and was relieved to see Liz, dressed in tan scrubs, coming out of the office next door. “This young lady’s here for me.” She invited Ashley to join her. “Come on, Ashley. I’m ready for you.”

Ashley stood up and followed Liz into the Refreshing Wellness Weight Management Clinic next door. Bravo, not ready to give up on a sale, called out to her with more aggressive advertising. “There’s always room for improvement! And it’s never too early to get started on it! Our Get Swole For The Spring classes are booking up really fast! Think it over okay?”

Because she wasn’t a fully registered dietitian yet, Liz didn’t have an office. Her bachelor’s degree earned her a desk inside an open, small yet spacious cubicle with medium-sized glass walls in the reception area. Her cubicle was between two others that were occupied by other junior nutritionists that also gave dietary consultations. She kept her cubicle as tidy as she did the home.

The clinic was quiet for a Saturday. The music in the reception area was low and the monitor mounted on the wall behind the receptionist was muted. Normally, even with this quiet, Liz and Ashley wouldn’t hear anything from the gym next door. But Tank was working out at the time, and he made his presence known by shouting, “PLEDGE ALLEGIENCE TO THE TANK!” That was followed with chants of, “YEAH TANK! GET SOME, TANK!” from the trainers.

Sitting at her desk, Liz commented, “That boy better be eating his greens like I told him to.” She faced Ashley, who was sitting in the left chair across the desk and said, “Okay, Miss Ashley, show me what you got.”

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Ashley energetically pulled out her laptop from her backpack and put it on Liz's desk. She opened an alpha build of the computer club's diet program. She turned the laptop around so Liz could see the screen. Then, emulating Steve Jobs, whose latest presentation she recently caught on TV, she explained the program. And she did so with a giant smile.

"Our program creates a profile for the user based on age, gender, height, and weight. Factoring in those things, it uses the data we compiled from decades of health and fitness books, magazines, and online articles from credible sources to create the optimal diet and exercise plan."

Liz studied the screen and nodded along. She was impressed by the work that was put into the program so far. She read the monitor and said, "It's saying you test subject should jog a quarter mile every day. How's he doing with that?"

Ashley answered, "Issac's been skipping days. But as you can see from the weight log, he's managed to lose a pound. His nutrition is another story. Our diet algorithm isn't complete yet. We need more data, which is why I'm here."

Liz ejected a floppy disk the computer on her desk and slid it over to Ashley. She told Ashley what was on it. "This has spreadsheets containing the nutrition plans I've recommended my clients. They don't show their names or medical details. But they're broken down by gender, age and weight range. Hope it'll help."

Ashley gleefully showed her appreciation. "It will!" She stood up and said, "Thank you so much, Mrs. Moon!" She closed her laptop and prepared to stow it into her backpack when she observed the photo frames on Liz's desk. The photos took up all of the right side of the desk and were all of the Moon family. There was one photo that stood out to Ashley. It was of 11-year-old Will and April sitting on their bikes beside each other.

Unable to look away from the photo, Ashley asked, "Mrs. Moon, can I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

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“Was Will... was Will in love with April?”

Liz answered in return, “Why do you ask?” Then she became upset, but not with Ashley. “Is he still thinking you’re her? I done told that boy...”

Ashley waved her hands and frantically answered, “N-no! He’s not mixing me up with her anymore!”

She clenched the photo frame on both ends and sat back down. She looked at it while Liz answered her earlier question. “Truth be told? Yes, I think Will was in love with April. But he didn’t know that he was until it was too late. That’s why I think her passing tore him up as long as it did.”

Ashley leaned in closer to the photo and stared at it harder. She said, “I see.”

Liz took a more laid back posture in her chair. Then she flipped the topic onto Ashley herself. “Ashley? Do you like Will?”

“M-m-missus Moon?” Feeling flustered, Ashley lost her grip on the photo. She desperately tried to regain control, barely able to prevent it from dropping to the ground and breaking. She put it back where she found it on the desk and sat back down. She closed her fists and hesitantly moved them up and down her thighs. She sighed and finally confessed, “I do.”

There was more for Ashley to reveal, things she hadn’t before. “The thing is, Mrs. Moon, I don’t know why I like him. And until I find out, I can’t be sure if what I feel for him is real.” She became frustrated with herself for not having the answer already. “I’ve listened to Will so much, and I’ve gotten all these notes. I’ve read them, studied them, analyzed them. But I’m not anywhere near close to figuring that out.”

Liz stood up and walked around the desk. She sat on the desk in front of Ashley and placed her hand on Ashley’s. That seemed to have calmed Ashley’s nerves. Then, she gave Ashley some long overdue woman talk. “Ashley, it’s perfectly normal for a girl your age to be confused by your feelings.”

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“It...it is?”

“Yes, baby girl, it is. The thing is you don’t need a bunch of notes or any computer program to sort your feelings out.”

“I... I don’t?”

Liz took her hand off of Ashley’s, tapped on her heart, and said, “All you have to do is to listen to this.”

It wasn’t the first time Ashley was told to listen to her heart. She recalled when Vincent told her to. She wanted to let Will into her heart, but her heart was filled with hatred for Leslie Taylor and resentment for her parents. She wasn’t sure if there wasn’t any space in there for Will. She wasn’t sure if he wanted to be there.

“Mrs. Moon, do you know? Does Will like me? You know...like he did April?”

Liz confidently answered, “If he does, you’ll be the first to know.”

Ashley eyes opened wide open. “I will? He’ll tell me? Because he didn’t tell April and...”

Liz put Ashley’s mind at ease. “Ashley, I’ve had to get on Will on a lot of things, but he’s never been hard-headed. He’s never been one to make the same mistake twice.”

Ashley took a breath of relief and smiled. In a way, Liz helped her get closer to the answers she was looking for. “Thank you, Mrs. Moon.” Her mood went to back to miserable again. “There was a time I wished I could have these talks with my own mother. But you know how she is.”

Liz responded, “I heard your parents can be difficult. Actually, Ashley I should be thanking you. This was good practice for giving Rosetta the talk when she gets to be your age.” She went to retrieve her purse and said, “I’m pretty much done here today. Why don’t I give you a ride back into town?”

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After giving it some thought, Liz changed her invitation. “You know what, Ashley? Why don’t you join us for dinner tonight? You look like you could use an real homecooked meal.”

Ashley stood up and accepted, “Okay.”

“Good. On the way, we can discuss your blueberry muffin habit.”

The Edmund Clarke Museum of Art was the centerpiece of the Arts District. After leaving the downtown TRAIL station, Will took the Random University Shuttle to get there. He wasn’t worried about being allowed to board. If he was enough of a college student to get into a frat party, he was more than enough of one to ride their shuttle.

When he arrived at the museum, Will met up with Raphael and Topaz, who were waiting for him near the entrance. Raphael greeted Will, “Will, my padawan. About time you showed up.” Topaz - being Topaz - snapped a quick photo of Will. He still couldn’t predict when she’d sneak a pic of him.

From the moment Will stepped foot inside the museum, he was blown away by what he observed. Hundreds of black butterflies made of paper were plastered on the leftmost wall of the lobby and they went up to the ceiling. Will went over to get a closer look but from a safe distance. He didn’t want to touch any of the butterflies and risk making one of them fall off of the wall. What he quickly noticed was that every butterfly was shaped in a different way.

Raphael gave Will the tour. There were wings dedicated for European, African, Asian, and North & South American art. Topaz snuck photos of Will’s reactions to the works he observed. She was constantly on the lookout for guides and security officers who had warned her several times in the past that photography was prohibited.

Will’s reactions to the exhibits were varied. He was impressed by the paintings and sculptures, especially with the effort that went into them. He was confused by the installations. He read the descriptions on the plaques but he still didn’t get the meaning behind

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any of them. He didn't have it in him to say any piece was bad. He didn't think they would've made it into a museum if they were.

There were pieces of art that were the obvious highlights. They were the ones each guide made sure to show the patrons. First, there was a triptych named *Dynasty*. On the left panel, representing the past, was Eustace Taylor, the Taylor Corporation's founder. In the middle panel was Donovan Taylor, the current CEO. On the right panel was Leslie Taylor, the one being prepped to lead the company in the future. They sat in elegant chairs, posed as royalty, in front of large window.

Outside of the window was a view of Livingston when each Taylor ran the company. For Eustace, it was a black and white town that was still being developed. For Donovan, it was snapshot of the city as it was in current day. For Leslie, it was a futuristic metropolis with flying cars, a future that only TaylorCorp could provide.

Next was the Chamber of the Seven. The oval-shaped room featured portraits of the city's seven founders painted by Edmund Clarke himself. Will spent a significant amount of time in this room. He leaned in closer to each painting and read the plaques under each of them. From them, he learned more about Grant Livingsworth from Pennsylvania, who was tasked with charting the new frontier. Captain Richard Perry of the Continental Army, who accompanied and protected Livingsworth. Tobias Random, the scholar from Maine, who sought and documented knowledge of the new frontier. Saint Juliet, the missionary from Virginia who was ordained by God to spread Christianity outside of the colonies. Addison Taylor, the exiled son from Delaware, who was forced to find his own way westward. Clara Ingram from Massachusetts, who was falsely accused of witchcraft and fled the colony to escape burning at the stake. And finally, Edmund Clarke himself, a painter from Maryland, who had grown tired of making religious art and searched for inspiration to paint something new.

In the middle of the room was an isolated rectangular wall. A single painting, gigantic and framed in gold, was the only piece mounted on this wall. The painting was of Fate's Hill and the oak tree on top of it. Despite being almost 200 years old, the painting was in pristine condition. Having sat atop Fate's hill numerous

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times, Will felt drawn to this painting and wanted to fully study it. Will walked up to the rope barrier to get close to the painting. Before looking at it further, he took a moment to read the plaque underneath the painting to himself. There was no elaborate description of the work. Instead, there was only a quote from Grant Livingsworth.

“Rejoice! From upon this hill, Fate smiles down upon us and has decreed this land to be our new home. Let us forget the life we left behind, for we are born anew.”

Will felt connected to Livingsworth’s words. Similar to how the seven founders started a new life atop Fate’s Hill, so did he. Topaz took a photo of Will looking at the painting. His expression, his posture as he leaned in closer, and the way he covered his face with his right hand in deep thought. These things told Topaz that the photo she took was a keeper.

Finally, there was the Cheasequahan art wing. Clay pieces, paintings, and jewelry were displayed in highly secure glass cases. They were painted in the tribe’s colors of yellow and blue and with the tribe’s traditional patterns. Velvet was in this area and would take over giving Will the tour. “Hundreds of years of Cheasequahan history and all that’s left of it is in this room. With venom in her words, she continued, “Most of it stolen. Or, as they like to say, looted through righteous conquest.”

Velvet took Will over to a tapestry called *Clan Weaving*. She told Will that it was estimated to have been painted in the early 1200s. Weaved into the tapestry was a young Cheasequahan boy and girl standing beside each other near a fire. Their wrists were bound together with a braided cord made of jute rope and plants. Their fellow tribesmen danced around them in celebration.

Next, Velvet showed Will the standout piece. A gigantic mural that took up the entire western wall. It was titled *Omen* and was dated 1799. Cheasequahan warriors, shamans, and farmers gathered on the left of the mural. Colonial settlers, soldiers, and missionaries stood on the right. In the middle, the Cheasequahan chief shook hands with the Colonial leader. Below them was text that Will couldn’t decipher as it wasn’t in English. Velvet translated the text for him. “As the Vision foretells.”

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Curious, Will faced Velvet and asked, “This was someone’s Vision?”

Velvet answered, “All Cheasequahan art is.”

This raised another question. “The Cheasequah knew the colonials were coming. And they knew what they were going to do with the tribe and the land. Why didn’t they fight harder to stop it?”

Velvet crossed her arms and answered, “Grandpa told me when I was a kid. The Vision and fate are intertwined. They’re both wild, unpredictable, and often cruel. Above everything else, they’re both unchangeable. My ancestors got that. That’s why they didn’t put up much of a fight.”

Will asked, “Do you think fate can be changed, Velvet? That maybe the Vision can be wrong sometimes?”

Velvet firmly answered, “No. Fate is why you’re here. Fate is why you have the Vision to begin with. And Fate is why Suzi dumped you on our laps.” She bluntly repeated the lesson Raphael taught Will. “Stop trying to deny it and stop thinking you can change it.”

An announcement came from the intercom. “Attention guests. The Liebowitz exhibit will be starting shortly. All ticket holders please proceed to Liebowitz Hall.”

Velvet said, “Let’s go and get this over with.”

Art connoisseurs, critics, and journalists gathered in the hall and awaited the unveiling of Gideon and Dahlia Leibowitz’s newest piece. There were also members of high society that were easy to point out because of their elegant clothing. They discussed art, business, and politics over wine served to them by museum volunteers. Luigi Boccherini’s “Minuetto” played from the speakers, adding further prestige to the event.

Will was immediately separated from the others. A peculiar section of the hall called out to him. There, red paint bled into the otherwise white walls. When he got closer, he read a sign, “Ezra Liebowitz: The Red Sessions.” Ezra’s paintings, all in red and only red, were proudly on display. The centerpiece was *Ezra Leibowitz No.*

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8, the painting he showed off in art class. The painting that was ridiculed in art class was being adored here. Will was starting to think that maybe not all art belongs in a museum.

Ezra, wearing a new turtleneck sweater and fedora for the occasion, walked up next to Will. He bragged, “I’m hearing rumblings that my latest piece is valued at one million dollars at the least. Didn’t I tell you my works would hang above the mantles of the world’s elite?”

As he often did, Will ignored Ezra. That was until Ezra further provoked Will. “And where is your painting, little Willy? That travesty you called *Breaking Through*? Tell me, did mommy and daddy at least pat you on the head and say you did good job before burying it in the crawlspace?”

Without looking at Ezra, Will defended his art. “I framed it and put it on the wall in my room. It may not be worth jack to you, but it’s priceless to me.”

Ezra scoffed, “Hmph, whatever helps you sleep at night.”

The museum’s director dinged his wine glass causing everyone to turn their attention to him. The music stopped and he announced, “Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the region’s premier artistes: Gideon and Dahlia Liebowitz.”

The hall erupted in dignified applause as Gideon and Dahlia made their grand entrance. Dahlia wore a bustier and hoop skirt made entirely of recycled denim jeans. Gideon wore a suit in the same pattern as his painting, *Soul of Picasso*. They walked hand in hand to their covered exhibit in the middle of the hall. Then, they each raised one of their hands in the air, and the audience stopped their applause.

Gideon spoke with a smarmy voice. “Imagine a world, one where you are given all that you could ever need, and more than you could ever want.”

With an equally exaggerated voice, Dahlia took over. “And yet, not matter how much you given, or how much you take, it will never be enough.”

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With these two sentences alone, Will knew where Ezra got his attitude from.

In theatrical fashion, the duo introduced their latest and greatest work. “We give you *America!*”

Gideon swiped away the white cover revealing a sculpture of giant bacon cheeseburger with the works. Some of the toppings and condiments dripped out of the bun. Surrounding the burger on all sides were men and women of various races. Their clothing represented their status as either penniless, blue-collar workers, office drones, or the extremely wealthy. Regardless of their standing, their clothing was tattered and ripped, exposing their malnourished bodies. They could be seen eating the burger, chewing it, devouring it. But there weren’t any bite marks on it, no visual evidence that they even began eating the burger. At the same time, their expressions made them look like they were craving more of it.

Neither Gideon, Dahlia, nor Ezra were surprised by the audience reception. The elite, the very people whose overconsumption the piece criticized, clapped in ignorant bliss.

A wealthy man commented, “It speaks to my soul.”

A wealthy woman commented, “I am absolutely moved.”

Because the elite clapped, the press clapped. Because the press clapped, the commoners in the crowd clapped. Will looked around and quickly realized that he was the only person in the hall not clapping. Not wanting to stick out, he clapped half-heartedly. He had no idea what the piece was supposed to mean. He just knew everybody else liked it, so he was supposed to like it too.

The Liebowitz couple held wine glasses in a manner similar to the very upper-class they criticized with their sculpture. They toasted in celebration for another well-received piece of art. A line of patrons that wanted to praise them formed and it went all the way out to the main hall. Elites, journalists, critics, and everyone in-between took turns worshipping the artist duo. Each person was allowed 90 seconds to kiss up to them, and they spent every second of it doing so. The

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couple soaked in every ounce of praise. That was their metaphorical bacon cheeseburger, and they could never get enough of it.

When it was time for the Cyan Collective to meet with Gideon and Dahlia, Ezra spoke on their behalf. He air kissed his mother on both sides of her face and greeted, “Mother. Father. Once again, you’ve outdone yourselves.”

Dahlia arrogantly replied, “Ezra, darling, of course we did. You should know by now that it doesn’t take much to have these rubes eating out of our hands.”

Gideon said, “I see you’ve brought your fan club with you.”

Will asked himself, “Fan club?” Raphael shook his head and signaled to Will to not bother refuting that.

Gideon looked at Will and then praised his son. “Why you’ve even added one.” He clasped his hands and addressed Will, “Hello there, young man. Have you learned a lot about art after our Ezra’s taken you under his wing?”

Before Will could tell Gideon that Ezra hasn’t taught him anything, Ezra answered for him. “Will isn’t an artist, father. He’s a poseur. Merely a spectator, no different from any of the other rabble here.”

Will stepped in to speak, “I’ve only started learning to draw....”

Ezra interrupted, “They say he has the Vision, but he ignores it. And it shows in his little scribbles.”

What Ezra said shook Dahlia to her core. She gasped, and in an overly dramatic tone, she asked, “He doesn’t follow his Vision?” Overcome with anguish, she put her hand over her head and said, “Oh my, I feel so faint.” She told Gideon, “Hold me,” and then fainted into his arms.

With only a few words, Will managed to offend the biggest names in art in the region. The director wanted to step in to tell the group that their 90 seconds were up. But Gideon raised his free hand to halt him. Enraged, Gideon lectured Will, “The Vision is the

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building block of art. The very foundation of which all creativity stands upon. Denying or defying it is an insult to every person who's ever picked up a brush."

Will responded, "I get that now..."

Gideon cut him off. "I don't think that you do." He waved his hand in a dismissive manner and ordered, "Leave. Now."

Will tried pleading his case again. "But I..."

Dahlia, still nestled in Gideon's arm, screeched, "Leave us!" She impersonated an actress in a tragic stage play. To drive home that Will was no longer welcome, she splashed her wine in Will's face.

Will, not wanting to be where he clearly didn't belong, took his leave. Ezra watched him leave with the biggest, smuggest smile. Outside, Will paced around in a small circle with his fists clenched and shaking in anger. He didn't care that passers-by looked on with concern for him. He was blinded by anger. He had never suffered such humiliation, not even as a victim of Freshman Friday.

Raphael caught up to Will. Topaz and Velvet followed shortly after. Raphael said to Will, "Look, man..."

It was Will's turn to cut someone off. With rage he said, "You proved your point, alright? The Vision is important and I shouldn't be going against it." He spoke barely quiet enough to not draw the attention of security.

Raphael apologized, "What happened in there, we didn't plan that. The Liebowitzes have always been up their own asses and..."

Will interrupted again. "Those stuck up assholes don't get to tell me I'm not allowed to be an artist. Nobody does. I still may not fully understand the Vision, but I know I have it. I see it when I'm sleep, and a lot of times when I'm up. They can't take that from me. Can't nobody take that from me."

Unknown to Will, Topaz had snuck another photo of him. At that point, she'd collected a photo of him expressing nearly every emotion.

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Will spoke up about Ezra and being annoyed with him for months. He put all the bass he could in his voice and exploded. “And you better check your boy Ezra. If we were back where I was brought up, I would’ve been stole off of on his punk ass for talking down on me the way he does. The streets would’ve demanded that.”

Will knew he was never the tough street kid he just portrayed himself to be. And he was a notoriously bad actor. But his frustration brought the Salem out of him and it struck fear into the older, bigger Raphael. Raphael told Will. “You’re not the only one in Cyan Collective he pisses off.” Velvet and Topaz nodded in agreement. “Suzi would’ve booted him a long time ago if his last name wasn’t Liebowitz. Don’t worry, I’ll rein him in.”

Raphael said, “Look, you don’t have to do the other two assignments I gave you if you don’t want to. I’ll still teach you whatever I can.”

Will took some time to calm himself down. Then, he responded, “Nah, it’s good. I’m still down. I definitely want to go see that clan weaving. Velvet told me her people are all about the Vision. So I’m thinking they can teach me some more about it.”

Raphael was satisfied that his protégé wasn’t giving up. He said, “We’re not sticking around to watch Ezra get his ass patted for another two hours. Let me give you ride back into town. Least I can do.” Will took Raphael up on the offer and followed the group to his car.

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LESSON 14:

CULMINATION

The final point of a long process.

At around 5:25, Raphael pulled up beside the curb of Will's house.

As Will was about to get out, Raphael said, "Hey, I didn't know you lived next to Jess." Will sat back down and looked out of his window. He saw Jessica in the garage alone, something Will had only seen when she was angry. This time was no different.

Jessica was sitting on a stool with playing her guitar with a huge scowl on her face. She was grudgingly flipping back-and-forth through two specific pages of Vincent's notebook, trying to find the ideal chord for his new song. As she strummed her guitar, she sang the lyrics, trying to find the right pitch to match the chord. She grew more enraged with each second. Then, she stopped abruptly and got up. She kicked the stool and threw the notebook to the wall. She screamed and then she stormed over to the door where she slammed the garage door switch with her fist.

Will asked, "You were there at Washington when Jessica went right? Why'd she switch schools?"

Raphael explained, "Dunno. She was there one day and gone the next. All I know was that there was a lot of shouting and fighting in the halls leading up to it."

Will asked, "You know what about?"

Raphael shrugged his shoulders and answered, "Didn't know."

Will turned to Velvet who answered, "Didn't care."

The mystery remained unsolved. Will got out of the car and waved goodbye as it drove off. Inside the house, Will heard his mother talking in the kitchen, "Now you want to be careful to not make too big of cuts. Keep your eye on where the blade is going. There you go, you're doing good." Will assumed Liz was teaching Rosetta how to cut vegetables. That was until he went into the living room and saw

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Rosetta sitting on the floor watching cartoons. Will went closer to the kitchen, he was alarmed to see Ashley.

Ashley was wearing a cooking apron and Liz was guiding her hand cutting cucumbers on a cutting board. Keeping her eyes on Ashley's hands, Liz said, "That you, Will? Dinner's in 20. Go get ready."

Will tried to ask, "Ashley? When did... I mean why didn't you..."

Still guiding Ashley's hand, Liz commanded, "Go upstairs and get yourself ready for dinner, William. I'm not going to tell you again."

"Yes ma'am." As Will went upstairs, he heard Liz tell Ashley, "Told you he's just like his father." She gave her some advice on how to handle Will. "You have to keep him on schedule, otherwise he'll throw your whole day off." Will was too far up the staircase to hear Ashley chuckle or say, "I'll keep that in mind."

Will came into the entertainment room and saw Markus leaned over the arm of the couch holding a PlayStation controller. He looked down and saw his console carelessly placed on the floor just far enough away from the television to remain connected to it. If he wasn't careful, he could've stepped on it on the way to his room. He confronted Marcus, "What are you doing with my PlayStation out here?"

Marcus continued pressing buttons as he answered, "What it look like I'm doing? I'm playing it like pop said I could. He said you had to share it remember?"

"But you don't even like RPGs. Do you even know what you're doing?"

"No, it's stupid. First they make you watch this long movie with two sissies swinging swords at each other." He imitated two men weakly sword fighting and then continued, "Then they make you run around this school and play people in this dumb card game. Ain't these games supposed to have dragons and junk in them?"

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Will answered, “Dragons come later. You gotta work your way up to dragons.”

Marcus sucked his teeth and said, “Man, I’m done with this. You need to get you some better games.” He tossed the controller. Will dove toward the controller and caught it before it could hit the hard floor. He turned off the PlayStation, disconnected it from the TV, and cradled it along with the controller in his arms like a newborn child.

He told Marcus, “Don’t be touching my stuff without asking me first.” He changed the subject and asked, “How long has Ashley been here?”

Marcus answered, “What I look like? Her babysitter? Shoot I don’t know. She came in here with mom. They’ve been down in the kitchen cooking the whole time. So you ain’t gotta worry. She ain’t been in your room, and she ain’t seen any of those magazines you got hidden under your bed.”

Will knew the area under his bed was as clean as it was the day the family moved in. Marcus – as he often did – was getting on his nerves. He told Marcus, “Shut your stupid ass up.” He was extra quiet in case Anthony could hear him from his bedroom. He continued toward his room and commanded, “And stay your butt out of my room.” That part he said loudly enough for Marcus to get the picture.

Will changed clothes; He didn’t wanted to have to explain to his parents how wine got on some of his new clothes. There was still 10 minutes before dinner and Will took full advantage of it. He walked over to the painting. There, he put his hand over his heart and spoke to April. He boldly declared, “Tonight’s the night.” He held his pinky up to the painting as if he were making a pinky promise to April and said, “I promise.”

Will came downstairs as everyone was gathering around the table. Everyone intentionally left the seat next to Ashley open for Will to take. Liz led the family in prayer, a tradition Ashley wasn’t familiar with. Will joined his left hand with Rosetta and offered his right to Ashley. Ashley slowly joined hands with Will.

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As soon as her hand touched Will's, Will was pulled in by the Vision. There, he stood beside Ashley with their hands interlocked. Together they stood against her parents. With their mouths wide open, the demons descended on the pair ready to devour them whole. As they came close, they were repelled as if an invisible barrier protected Will and Ashley. Not even the acid-coated saliva dripping from the demons' crooked teeth could touch them. The demons tried to strike them with their claws, but those attacks were also deflected. In a way, the Vision was telling Will that as long he and Ashley had each other, nothing could defeat them.

"Amen."

Will returned to reality as Liz finished saying grace. He said, "Amen," seconds after everyone else did. He felt Ashley's hand still on his. It seemed like she wasn't in a rush to let go. Will said to her, "Prayer's over, Ash. You can let go now." Ashley slowly broke away from Will, one finger at a time.

Dinner was grilled chicken salad with a homemade sun-dried tomato dressing, a huge switch up from what Ashley was used to eating. The Moons ate slowly, taking many bites before swallowing. Ashley wasn't also used to the table manners the Moons exhibited. Anthony started the dinnertime discussion by speaking to Ashley. "Will tells us you're really bright. Got all As on your report card and everything." He turned to Will and his tone went from positive to authoritative. "Which is why I don't get how you can come in here with a C minus when you've got your girlfriend to help you out."

Will didn't correct Anthony that Ashley wasn't his girlfriend. Instead, he defended his grade. "Sorry dad, but you can't get me to care about algebra. I passed. It's done. I'm never graphing another equation again."

Ashley didn't correct Anthony either. Her response to his praise was, "Thank you, Mr. Moon. It wasn't easy. I struggled in some subjects too, like history. Luckily, I had Will here to help me out with that. And he really stepped up and picked up my slack on that group project we had." Ashley didn't take any history classes last semester, and the so-called group project never really happened. But she took

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the opportunity to cover for him. Will picked up on that right away and smiled slyly at her.

Anthony changed the subject with some thrilling news. “Mr. Taylor wants to thank me for all the work our team did during the whole Y2K thing. He invited us out to his mansion for the annual company picnic.”

The family was excited to hear that, each for their own reasons. Liz asked, “A fancy mansion? With rich people? And expensive food? That I don’t have to cook? Oh, we’re going!”

Rosetta looked up at Liz and asked, “Mama, can we get nice dresses? And get our hair and nails done?”

Liz answered, “You know it, girl!”

Marcus asked, “Leslie going to be there? Everybody in my grade talks about how fine she was in 8th grade. And from what I heard, she’s even finer now.” He rubbed his hands and said, “Oh man, I’m running all the game on her.”

Anthony slapped Marcus on the back of the head and said, “You’ll do no such thing. Matter of fact, if I even catch you around his daughter, I’ll whoop you right then and there.” Shifting into drill sergeant mode, he looked around the table, pointed at everyone, and ordered, “All of y’all are going to be on your best behavior. This is my chance to move further on up, and ain’t none of y’all gonna mess this up for me. Trying to get us a pool in the backyard, you tracking?”

Marcus, Rosetta, and even Liz saluted Anthony and said, “Yes sir.”

When he got to Will, he noticed he wasn’t as enthusiastic about visiting the Taylor mansion as the rest of the family. He questioned, “What’s wrong with you boy? You’re not happy to be going to a mansion? It’s going to be like those rap videos you watch. This is big for us, and you’re sitting over there like you couldn’t care less.”

It really wasn’t that big of a deal for Will since he’d already been to the Taylor mansion twice before. But he didn’t want to reveal that to his family. He hastily and nervously came up with a lie. “I... I

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was... just thinking about... that uh... giant lake they've got out there."

Will's lie got Anthony even more excited. "You think Mr. Taylor will let me on his boat?" He put his hands together, looked up to the heavens, and prayed, "Lord, please please please let him let me on that boat."

Ashley wasn't big on the Moon's going to the mansion either. Perks and privileges like these were how Donovan Taylor sank his fangs into his most loyal subordinates. Hearing how Anthony saw the picnic as an opportunity to advance his position reminded Ashley of how her parents became the social climbers they were. The thought that The Moons – and Will in particular – could be corrupted by Taylor's influence just like her parents put her in a bad mood.

Showing concern, Liz asked, "Ashley, sweetie? What's wrong? Did you want to come with us?"

Marcus suggested, "Yeah you can roll with us if you want. If they press us, we'll just tell them you're a distant cousin or something. They already think we all look alike."

Liz snapped, "Marcus!"

Marcus doubled down, "What, mama? They do. On my first day of school they took one look at me and thought I was related to some chump named Shawn Franklin and just assumed I could ball like him too."

Ashley answered Liz, "I'm already going, Mrs. Moon. My parents are really close to Mr. Taylor. They're invited every year. There was clear anguish in her voice.

Anthony leaned in closer to Ashley and whispered, "Hey Ashley, think you can put in a good word with your parents for me?"

Will couldn't help but notice how uncomfortable the conversation was making Ashley. The conversation included all of her least favorite subjects: TaylorCorp, her parents, and Shawn Franklin. It was his turn to rescue her. He stood up and said, "How about a board game?" The family looked at him like he said the strangest thing ever.

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He gave a valid reason for suggesting a board game. "I mean we haven't played one since we moved here."

After rigorous debate and argument, the everyone agreed on playing Monopoly. The game went well for the first 45 minutes. After that, Rosetta had control of most of the board with houses and hotels on every property she owned. Each family member had to negotiate their way out of bankruptcy.

Liz offered, "You can have ice cream every night for a week." This bought her a few more turns until she pulled the chance card forcing her onto Rosetta's water works.

Anthony offered, "I'll let you sit on my recliner for a week." Rosetta gave him the \$75 to pay the luxury tax. She wasn't as generous when he landed on one of her railroads.

Marcus bargained, "Let me get past Boardwalk and I'll get some of my female friends to slide on Jenny Chatswell for you." Rosetta wanted to take Marcus up on that offer, but Liz turned it down for her by shaking her head in disapproval. Marcus revised his deal, "Fine, I'll do your chores for a week." Rosetta let him pass, only for him to land on Boardwalk again.

Will declared bankruptcy without putting up a fight. He knew that being spared this turn would only doom him the next.

Ashley, who had the best chance of beating Rosetta, wanted to negotiate by trading property. But Rosetta had no interest in that. Will leaned in and whispered an idea to Ashley. Ashley smiled and offered, "I'll come over and help you with your spelling bee words."

Rosetta slammed the table and exclaimed, "Deal!" Ashley was done in by being forced to pay school tax from the community chest card. In the end, Rosetta didn't just win the game, she was going to live the next week in luxury.

Liz sent Ashley home with a container of leftovers inside a plastic bag and Will offered to walk her. The street lights lit up the sidewalk and guided them down the street. The two unintentionally walked closer to each other than ever before. Ashley updated Will on

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her progress with the Perryton plan. “I’m almost done with the IDs. Just need to come up with your name. Any suggestions?”

Will took a moment to think about it. He didn’t have a name yet, but he had some criteria to what he wanted it to be. “Somewhere between ‘unthreatening black man’ and ‘obvious minority quota.’”

During the walk, they took turns coming up with a good fake name for Will. “Brandon?” “Curtis?” “Tony?” “Malcolm?”

After many rejections, Ashley suggested an odd name. “How about Talen?”

Will scratched his head and asked, “Talon? Like eagle’s claws?”

Ashley answered, “Yeah, but it’s spelled with an E instead of an O? Makes it more unique.”

Will bluntly teased, “That’s the dumbest idea I’ve ever heard.”

Ashley jokingly punched Will in the arm and said, “Well genius, I’m giving you a week to come up with a good name. After that, I’m coding a random name generator and going with whatever it spits out.”

After laughing for a moment, Will changed the subject and his tone to a more serious one. “Sorry about all that TaylorCorp talk at dinner. I know how much that bugs you.”

Ashley said, “It’s fine, Will. I know your parents can’t help but to get all amped up about Taylor’s picnic. Thousands of employees and only about 50 of them get invited every year. I know that your dad worked really hard to receive that honor.”

Will asked, “But aren’t you afraid that the Taylor money will change my dad? Like it changed your folks?”

Ashley asked back, “Are you?”

Will thought about it for a moment. Then, he revealed some of the thoughts he had when Ashley showed him the TaylorCorp headquarters downtown. “Do you know what every person who lives in Salem wants to do?”

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“No. What?”

“Get out of Salem, point blank, period. Whether if they want to admit it or not. You know that that rapper Grippa Grip? Born and raised in Salem? He said it best on that one song.”

Will recited some of the song’s lyrics. “Streets gave me air but wouldn’t let me breathe. Label put me in gold chains, set me free.”

He continued, “There were sometimes when even April’s family wanted to give up on Salem. Pack up and leave it all behind. Most people never get that way out. They’re born there and they die there. Mr. Taylor gave my family that out when he didn’t have to.”

“To be honest with you, Ash, I don’t care if it was for political reasons or to make his company look good. Thanks to him, we got out. My dad got the job he worked his butt off for. My mom got on the path realizing her dream.”

He smiled coyly at Ashley and finished with, “And I got to meet you.”

Will’s explanation helped Ashley understand why Will didn’t hate the company as much as she did. For all its faults, it was responsible for bringing Will into her life. But she couldn’t ignore how it transformed her parents. She couldn’t forget how happy Benjamin and Jazmine were to be invited to the company picnic the first time. She couldn’t erase the memory of her parents swearing their devotion to TaylorCorp during that picnic.

She watched Anthony and Liz have that very same reaction her parents had. She witnessed history repeat itself, and she was just as powerless to change it.

Ashley stopped walking and tugged on Will’s sleeve causing him to stop a few inches in front of her. “Will?”

Will turned his head back toward Ashley and said, “Yeah?”

“Look, I know we can’t stop TaylorCorp from changing your parents. But promise me you won’t let it change you okay?” With her free hand, she raised her pinky to Will and pleaded, “Promise me you won’t change, Will.”

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Will couldn't promise Ashley that he wasn't going to change. The more he kept his promise to April to live his life, the more he experienced, and the more he came out of his shell, the more he evolved. But what he could promise Ashley was that no matter how he changed, or how often he changed, the Taylor Corporation would never have anything to do with it. He turned around completely, locked his pinky with Ashley's and committed to her, "I won't let TaylorCorp change me."

With a smile on her face and sincerity in her voice, Ashley said, "Thank you, Will."

The two reached the house next to Ashley's. Before Will could step foot onto Baker property, Ashley ran in front of him and put her hands on his chest stopping him in his tracks. "This is as far as you go. Another step you'll trip the laser grid my parents set up."

"Man, stop playing."

Ashley insisted, "I'm not playing. They've got it tuned to your DNA. Nathan's too." The Bakers' car wasn't in the driveway meaning Ashley's parents were out. But Will wasn't about to take any risks. After all, they were in Donovan Taylor's inner circle. There was no telling what kind of TaySEC home security technology they had access to.

Ashley said, "I'll see you at school okay?" She turned toward her house and began walking to the driveway. For Will, this was the moment couldn't delay any further. He was about to do what he promised April's spirit he was going to.

"Ashley, hold up!"

"Yeah?" Ashley turned around and walked back toward Will.

"I was thinking about checking out that movie theater Friday. You know, the one behind Regent Plaza? I still haven't been yet." Will's heart raced and he choked on his next words. "And I...um...was thinking...that if...you weren't doing anything..."

Ashley instinctively knew what Will was trying to ask her. Liz was correct. She didn't need any of the notes on Will to piece it

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together. Her heart told her everything as it raced in anticipation. She waited for Will to get the words out. But she didn't wait long before approaching him and helping him out. "William Moon, are you asking me out on a date?"

Hearing that out loud made Will's heart beat faster and his body shake in nervousness. It wasn't the thought of being rejected that shook him up. It was the fear of not being honest that got to him. "Y-y-eah? I guess...I'm um...axe...a-asking you on a d-d-date?"

Ashley smiled in the very way Will vowed to protect. She leaned in closer to Will and whispered, "Then it's a date," before kissing him on the cheek. In that moment, he felt Ashley's heart beat in sync with his own. The warmth of her lips on his cheek was completely different than the warmth he felt from April. But it was just as comforting.

As Ashley ran across her yard, she shouted, "Make sure you pick a good movie!" She would've been embarrassed if Will got a look of the wide smile going across her blushing face.

Will remained on the sidewalk to regain his composure and pick his jaw up off of the ground. When his mind and body returned to normal, he dashed back home as fast as his legs would move him. Back home, he ran up the stairs and then came back down to talk to his family. They were in the kitchen playing Gin Rummy.

With heavy breath, he told them, "Since I know you were all wondering, I asked Ashley on a date." He went up three stairs and came back down when he realized he didn't tell them the most important part. "She said yes." As he climbed the stairs, his ears rang with the sounds of congratulations and encouragement from his family.

Even Marcus praised Will in his own way. He called up, "It's about dam..." He paused as soon as he remembered their parents were within earshot and rephrased his statement, "It's about darn time!"

Will went to his room. There, he got comfortable on his bed and pulled out his sketchbook and some freshly sharpened pencils. He turned to the incomplete drawing. He didn't waste any time refining what he already begun sketching. The Vision told him vividly what he

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needed to draw and he wasn't going to deny it any more. He went right to work drawing Ashley's missing hand, and his holding it.

*** TO BE CONTINUED ***

