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Paranormal Orgy

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PARANORMAL ORGY

By

Cameron Michael Contois

THESIS

Submitted to
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Paranormal Orgy

This thesis by Cameron Michael Contois is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research.

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ABSTRACT

PARANORMAL ORGY

By

Cameron Michael Contois

Paranormal Orgy is a novel length work that explores a world full of the paranormal— demons and vampires and aliens— and how some very real, very flawed characters get by in the face of these monsters. Many different points of view are utilized in this work, beginning with the point of view of a 15-year-old girl who may or may not be possessed. Haunted by the prospect of growing up, this girl attempts to live and love in the world of the strange. Other point of views explored include that of an addict, an estranged daughter, a strict grandmother, and an uncle haunted by unrequited love. Throughout this work, the idea of what it means to be human in the face of ghosts and monsters is illuminated.

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DEDICATION PAGE

I dedicate this thesis to my parents, Lucille and Roger Contois, who have loved and supported me unconditionally through this whole project.

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INTRODUCTION

When I was a child, I would obsessively watch a show called *Unsolved Mysteries*. Just the scary theme music would send shivers down my spine. Often there were episodes that reviewed unsolved criminal cases of missing people. But the best segments were always the ones that featured paranormal elements: A hotel haunted by Civil War soldiers, Grey aliens abducting victims out of their bed, shadow people with glowing red eyes, sneaking up on people in the middle of the night. Whether these paranormal segments were real or made up, the show made them feel real. What if there really were boogeymen hiding in underneath my bed or coming from the sky? I remember one night, my family was visiting Kingsford, where my mom's brother's family lived. It was always a treat to see my cousin Erick. I was still very young and looked up to Erick, who was a year older than me.

One night, while lying in bed, we could hear my uncle watching TV. We heard the *Unsolved Mysteries* theme come on from the next room, and we both shouted "Unsolved Mysteries!" at the same time. We stayed up all night, scaring ourselves, talking and imagining what it would be like to see a ghost in the closet, or a UFO slowly moving across the sky. What a crazy things could exist in the world out there—there had to be more to this galaxy than what had been discovered. That's when I became obsessed with the paranormal.

My close friends know what one of my greatest fears is: alien abduction. In alleged true abduction stories, people claim that they are taken out of stalled cars on lonely highways in the middle of the night. Some people report having lost time, where they are unable to remember what had happened to them during these missing hours. Only after hypnotism do they recall these alleged encounters with aliens call the Greys, named for their gray, skinny bodies with big black eyes. Other people claim that they are taken right out their beds at night, levitating right through solid walls. As a child, this idea terrified me: No matter how safe you thought you were, even in your own bed, aliens could come and get you and do horrible tests on you. This childhood fear still resonates with me, if just in the back of my mind, to this day.

When I was three years old, I started skating. My sister and I played hockey, but soon I began to favor figure skating (later in life, I was much too tiny to play hockey against much stronger and taller people). In the Marquette Figure Skating Club, I spent a lot of time with my sister and two female cousins, all who also figure skated. Growing up, I began to notice something. There were few, if any, great female characters in popular culture for my sister and cousins to look up to. In cartoons, the Chipettes were always second to the Chipmunks, there were virtually no female Transformers, and only a few female GI Joes. Sure, there were My Little Ponies, but where were the female superheroes? Why was Super Girl so “blah” compared to Superman and Bat girl abused while Batman revered for his broodiness? Even today, the upcoming DC movie *Suicide Squad* features a sexualized, ditzzy version of the Harley Quinn character (when she first

appeared in *The Batman Animated Series*, she was a villain with a PhD, not an oversexualized character).

Growing up in Marquette, MI, there were very few Asian people besides me. The population was very white. When it was time for Halloween, where were cool Asian characters that I could dress up as for Halloween? Even today, American television is embarrassingly bare of Asian characters, especially Asian characters who aren't portrayed stereotypically as cold, lacking of personality and/or know karate. There's Glenn from *The Walking Dead*, and that is the only example I can think of off the top of my head.

In this work, I strived to create both relevant female and Asian characters that I find lacking in American popular culture. That is where my two characters, Morgan Sweetser and Kyra Chan originated from.

Kyra Chan is a character that really intrigued me. At first, she was written only to be the love interest to the main character Morgan. But as her character developed, I realized she is a fragile girl, feeling abandoned by her absent mother, and doing anything (drinking, sex) to fit in with her peers. She is a girl not quite sure of her new found sexuality, and secretly wanting to be more than a sex symbol.

The paranormal has always fascinated me, but that's not the only reason I looked into the idea of demonic possession. The novel *The Exorcist* by William Peter Blatty was based on an alleged true story of a possessed girl. However, in the "real life" story, the victim was a boy. What I find interesting is the fact that the gender of the

victim was changed from a boy to girl. Perhaps demonic possession is representative of the demonizing of female sexuality.

In Blattys' novel, the possessed girl is 12 years old. Puberty, in the novel, seems to be represented by a "demon" taking over an "innocent" girl. She masturbates with a crucifix represents how her coming womanhood is somehow impure, against God even. In *Paranormal Orgy*, I wanted to explore how the idea that possession could be a metaphor for growing sexuality, that the possessed live in a society that demonized young women and work to repress sexual urges.

I also challenge heteronormativity by making my main character, Morgan's, love interest Kyra Chan, her classmate in high school. Again, I attempt to create a world and space where the feminine are dominant.

During the three years of my life working on this project, I was diagnosed as being Bipolar II. I feel that this diagnosis also drew me to the idea of possession. Bipolar people go through manic episodes where they may overspend a lot of money, go on no sleep, participate in risky sex. I became obsessed with the idea that I could go manic, that I could have thoughts in my own brain that were not my own, that I could act in ways I wouldn't normally act. Perhaps, in some ways, this is not that different from having a demon inside of oneself.

As someone who suffers from this mental illness, I wonder at what point to the thoughts of the "real me" end and the thoughts of mania or depression sink in. Is this illness perpetuating what is already inside me, or does the illness create new thoughts all together? Would someone who was possessed by a demon just indulge more in their

own lustful and sinful thoughts or does the demon create them altogether? These questions and ideas fascinate me.

I also feel that I wrote the character of Morgan as a person who suffers from depression. Her “possession” begins in the fall and ends in the spring, mirroring seasonal affective disorder.

The summer I was seventeen, I barely slept at all. I would stay out until midnight or later with my friends and be at the ice rink to skate at 6 in the morning. I now know that this was me being manic, but at the time it was a wonderful feeling. Only when the winter came did I crash, and crash hard, succumbing to bipolar depression.

The cloud room that Morgan goes to when the demon takes over her body may be representative of her own manic, happy place, void of responsibility and full of sugar and candy bars and fluffy furniture.

Another paranormal element I incorporate into this work are the stories of Black-Eyed Children. I first heard about these alleged true stories about Black-Eyed children on a TV show called *Monsters and Mysteries in America*. People told of strange looking kids in hoodies knocking on their door in the middle of the night or trying to get into their car while parked in a deserted parking lot. The children always wear their hoods up and, while seemingly children, talk in a grown up, sophisticated manner. In one story, a person recalls that the children knocking on her door in the middle of the night and wanted to come in to use her phone. When the woman wouldn't let them in (they said they had to be invited in, in the tradition of vampire lore) the children became angry, and when she looked at the kids' eyes, they were pure black.

These mysteries and monsters always intrigue me, and to throw them all into one narrative, a “Paranormal Orgy” of sorts, was an experience to write about. Just as when I was a child, I am fascinated with unsolved mysteries, with the unknown. Aliens could be floating above us in technologically advanced spacecrafts. There could be vampires lurking in the shadows after dark, more to vampire lore than just stories. Wayward souls may become stuck on this plane of existence, destined to haunt a place for eternity. However bizarre, these ideas capture my imagination and percolate into virtually all my fiction writing.

Another inspiration for *Paranormal Orgy* is the show *American Horror Story*, and specifically Season 2. I was enamored with that season because the writers had included so many paranormal elements into a single season of the FX television show. There were haunted insane asylums, alien creatures, mad Nazi doctors, a serial killer, an angel of death, and corrupted Nuns, just to name a few of the bizarre things that showed up. What a creepy, spectacular world to create.

While writing this novel, I tried to be funny, witty, and some of it is written tongue in cheek. I started as a spoof of *The Exorcist*. The characters seemed to be in the joke, the prose littered with meta elements. But as I wrote on, I realized soon that I really do care for the characters I’ve created. I began rooting for my main character, Morgan, and delving deep into the soul of the character of Kyra Chan. I looked at my own thirty something angst and added it to the character of Serena Sweetser.

No longer could Morgan be just a generic teenager saying witty things and pop culture references. Her possession was no longer just a joke, it started becoming

something deeply sad and unnerving that this very real person I'd created had to deal with, at one of the hardest times in a person's life: early high school. I was no longer creating a whacky story about witches and aliens. Sure, I want to keep the humor there, but there was more going on here. I realized you can't have paranormal without the normal. They world might be fantastic, but characters were three dimensional— very flawed but very loving people.

This work started as a 3-Day Novel, a contest where people attempt to write a novel in three days over Labor Day weekend. The first draft was a mess of storylines and characters and no real direction. But, throughout revisions, I did try to keep a frantic attitude of the first draft and pace that first showed itself during that weekend I spent three days straight writing, barely sleeping, barely eating. It's amazing what strange ideas came from just sitting and staring at my keyboard typing for such long periods of time. It was a trying and exhausting weekend, for sure, but I would do it again for the wonderful experience it was.

We were encouraged to participate in the 3 Day Novel in a fiction workshop taught by Jon Billman. It was a great experience. I went to my parents' house (who were out of town) I took the basement, and my friend and classmate, Sofie, took the second floor and we wrote. We could see how other writers across the world who participated in the contest by posting over Twitter, creating a sense of community for the writing contest. When we needed a break, My classmates and I would message each other over Facebook. This encouragement from classmates was instrumental in the writing the first draft of much of this thesis.

I remember vividly, that first night, at 12:01 am, when I was staring at the blank computer screen. I had an idea that I wanted to start a novel with a girl possessed by a demon. So I started with the most vulgar, sacrilegious line I could think of and went from there.

Demons are supposed to be sacrilegious, right?

Sofie and I would meet up for a break to make a taco dinner, or to check in, but we mostly just wrote. Looking back (although I didn't feel this way at the time, perhaps hindsight glosses over the bad), it really was one of the best weekends of my life. I used sticky notes I stuck on the wall as I came up with more and more ideas. What if Morgan was really a witch? What if she accidentally murdered her dad? What if Morgan's mom, Serena, was a drug addict, but her drug would not just be heroin, but magically enhanced heroin? These jumbled ideas came out as fast as I could type, always watching the time tick away. That first night, I didn't stop typing until 5 in the morning. The first draft was, at times, I must admit, incoherent. But the groundwork was laid for this project.

When discussing this piece in workshop, the number one question I was always asked was: Do Kyra and Morgan hook up? My answer at the time, the same answer that I give now: "I don't know." Kyra's attraction to Morgan is ambiguous and Kyra's not in a place in her life to deal with that. But, I think, deep down, she has many feelings for Morgan. But I suspect that Kyra won't be ready to date someone exclusively for a long time. So, I don't know if they will ever be together. I like to think so. I wrote this secretly

thinking that Kyra and Morgan would be very good together. As usual, though, life always gets in the way.

Another frequently asked question about this piece that I had in workshop was how I came up with the idea of the demon looking like Matthew McConaughey, the way he looked when he starred in the show *True Detective*. The answer to this question is that I have no idea, except that I thought it would be hilarious if Matthew McConaughey as a demon.

During revision, I worked on was making the character of Morgan less passive. In the first drafts of this novel, things just happened to Morgan. She would get possessed and end up in her cloud room and watch the possession from up above. She hears that her dad didn't commit suicide, but was murdered, but didn't care much about that either. Life was just passing her by. I realized halfway through, that Morgan is a much stronger character than that. She is not just someone that let's things happen to her. At some point, she become strong enough to fight back, to take charge of her life.

The one strong male character, Jason Hoffman, came much later in the crafting of this novel. Originally, he was meant to be a 2 dimensional extra in this work, but I soon realized there was more to his character as well. In this female dominated narrative, he stood out to have his own story to tell, having been abducted and ultimately having to stand up to "Grey" aliens.

I am always happy when I look at this thesis, because not only am I proud of this work because not only is it the longest thing that I've ever written, but because of all the good times that are connected with the writing of this. I've made friends in workshops,

like Michael Giddings, who have been instrumental in shaping this work. For the last three years of my life, the good times, the bad, the relationships and heartbreaks, are all connected by these prose. There were sleepless nights struggling to make deadlines, and hours of writer's block staring at blank TV screens. There were nights when I was ready to give up and throw in the towel, thinking that a novel length work was too epic a goal to get through. But I did make it through. Now I have a novel under my belt, and am excited to see where writing takes me and how it manifests in the next part of my life.

PART ONE

MORGAN AND KYRA

Chapter One
Wet

“Lick my cunt, priest,” I hear myself say. I sound weird, like a tourist.

The walls of the bedroom I’m restrained in are painted lime green, and the air smells like a chicken pox. My pale skin glows a cloudy-day shade of blue.

“The power of Christ compels you,” says Father Harris, tossing holy water from a vile in an exaggerated fashion, like he’s an actor on a soap opera.

The radiator, flaking white paint, growls in the corner, although the room is freezing. Since this whole thing started, the room never warms. Tonight, the temperature’s sunk so low there’s a film of frost on the rails of the bed. The metal buckles of the leather straps that hold my body down freeze and tear at my skin. Harris, sitting in a metal folding chair at the bedside, shivers. I can see his breath as he read Latin.

“Be gone with you, spawn of Satan,” shouts Harris.

“Oh my gawd, shut up,” I say. This time it’s really me speaking. Harris is so goddamn annoying. I turn my head toward the window, glass clouded by time. Outside, it is spring.

The gaudy silver crucifix Grandma Sophie has nailed to the wall (I mean, come on, something that awful is just calling out to the rogue demons of the world, saying, ‘please, come haunt my house’—a holy challenge crying out for sacrilege) rips from its display and flies across the room, ricochets off Harris’s male pattern bald head, and thwaps into my raised hand, landing perfect in my palm just like Mjölfnir returning to her Thor.

I feel like I'm gaining some foothold to return to my body, but the demon fights back, taking complete control, and I'm somewhere else. Here, it's white and misty and I can float if I want to. Bags of M&Ms and Skittles and all sorts of candy bars float about, there for the taking. This room smells like a Q-tips, fresh laundry washed in Downy, and a little bit like nail polish, but in a good way, not overwhelming.

I reach my hand, palm up, into the air and the mist circles around into my grip. I can mold this mist corporeal into clumps like snowballs, or mold it into rudimentary shaped animals. I smooth out this mass into a long, rounded shape, trying to make a dolphin. It looks more like a sperm and I throw it down into the puffy floor.

I like it here. This place is warm and sunlight streams through the clouds until I'm tired, and then, on cue, the room dulls to a soothing midnight blue, like there's a moon just out of sight, and I can sleep on the cloud queen size bed.

When I show up here, I'm always wearing what I was wearing before I was whisked away, although there is a cloud closet in the corner that seems to have no end when opened, full of Abercrombie and Fitch, and Armani, and Express and any other latest styles of clothes I could ever want, all tailored to my size. I've opted for sweats today. Sure, all the name brand exclusive styles of clothing are fun, but there's no one here to see me in them, and there's no taking them back down to earth, so it's kind of like what's the point?

I sit down and sink into the cloud Laz-E-Boy in front of the 90" flat screen television. Let the demon and the priest battle it out down below, I have no reason to leave this place. I don't have to worry about the going to school or about trying to fit in

with the dicks who go there. I don't miss the homework, although I do kind of miss AP Calc class. I'm the only Freshman in it!

Here, I don't have to worry about why my drugged out mother is never around.

Here, I don't have to wonder why Kyra is such a twat...

I feel myself wet down there, and begin gasping for air. I squirm, but I can't stop it. I close my eyes and try to re-enter my body again, to put an end to this. I open my eyes and I'm back in grandma's room, a glimpse of the lime green drywall, before my eyes roll back into my head and I let out a moan. My hipbones thrust into the air and my pink sweats tear off, ripped down the seams, by some unknown force, a crucifix between my legs.

"Fuck me, Harris," I shout, "Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me, fuck me." Harris doesn't look away and I'm disgusted with that fat piece of shit. Look away, dammit. His face is red, but his sweaty brow has his eyes fixated on me. He hurls more holy water, but it only stings my skin, no, 'stings' isn't even the right word, it's a mild discomfort, like your hand feels after holding a green pepper.

"Let Morgan's soul go. In the name of Jesus Christ, leave this child's body forevermore," Harris shouts. That's me, the Morgan he's talking about, and I'm the soul he's fighting so hard to save. Also, I'm fifteen, hardly a child!

And, for the record, it's not fun sharing your body with a demon from hell. He makes upside down crosses protrude out from under my skin. That shit hurts. He carves words with his claws into my flesh: HELL and SATAN, and one time, oddly enough, TITTIES. He's constantly trying to get Harris to fuck me, which is so disgusting it makes

me nauseous. If I wasn't so sure Harris was into little boys, I'd think that Harris was horny for me. The demon must think so, too. He must want Harris to want me the way he constantly parades my body in front of the priest's beady, pedo-eyes.

The first time I woke up from demon guy's clutches naked and masturbating was on Christmas Eve, three months earlier. I was yanked back from my cloud world into consciousness on top of Grandma's beady blanket, almost there— almost toward something I'd never felt before, my slender body naked, legs spread, fingers wet, blond bangs over my face. In that instant, thinking about Kyra, something was about to happen, until I realized I had had an audience listening to my moaning: Harris, my Grandmother in the next room, maybe Uncle Jason, if he was home from work. I felt so ashamed... terrified they could hear the demon in me.

* * *

Of course, mom wasn't there for any of the possession. She's not here, now. Mom's gone, and dad's dead, blew his brains out in his pickup truck one random summer night... but that's a different story, I suppose. The bottom line is, they're both gone.

Dad's fucking dead, but Mom. Where. Is. Mom?

I want all of this, all of it, to stop but I can't hold onto what is mine, and just when I think I'm reentering my consciousness, I'm expelled back to the cloud comforter, wriggling and screaming. So if I can't go back, why can't I just live in this heavenly sanctuary forever? Be done with all of that below.

But even here, I can't completely escape; I can't be a complete hermit to the outside world. I'm flung back into my body now and then, often against my wishes, although I've been able to resist this going back more and more. I'm building up resistance to returning my body; I'm better able to stay here in my heaven. Maybe this is dying.

There's another way I can see what is going on with the "me" below; I can watch what's happening to my body by staring into the random metallic liquid puddles. I look down at the fluffy floor and I can see the exorcism being played out in the liquid metal pooled up in small depressions and ravines of the clouds, scenes played out in images of high def.

I decide to watch TV and pick up the remote to scroll through the channels, but can't find anything on (I'm so sick of *American Pickers*. Who made a show about two dudes going around just sifting through other peoples' crap. But I digress...) so I crawl over to the metallic liquid, and spy on my own body restrained to the bed in second floor bedroom. I see my body, still naked from the waist down, laying on the bed, eyes shut. Grandma Sophie runs into the room and covers me up with her blanket. She falls to her knees and cries.

I used to look down on myself a lot in the beginning. The clouds around me would clear and sunlight would surround me as I looked into a puddle, and I'd watch my body lying there, leather strapped on the old bed on top of a rough beady white blanket—the kind of blanket grandmas always have that even, Gollum who sleeps on rocks, would find uncomfortable. My body thrashed and contorted in all sorts of

unnatural states, and I would giggle as I watched myself shout things like “Priest, lick my clit” and “Stick your tiny dick in my tight asshole.” Harris’s white cheeks would turn rosy. However, after a long winter of embarrassing Harris, the drama has all gotten old. These same scenarios play out again and again, night after night.

Father Harris and Belial have been locked in epic battle for months now (Spoiler alert: The demon’s name is Belial. Harris won’t figure this out for another two weeks). I look down at that ugly girl strapped to the bed, the red zits on her face and down her white arms. Leaving her behind, let’s do it. Free from these ties that bind. I don’t want to ever tell Harris about this place, this white space of Laffy Taffy and cushions. This is my personal space, such a deep part of me that describing it would leave me exposed and changed, like quantum mechanics, how the mere act of observation of a sub-atomic particle changes its properties.

I’m tired of watching that ugly girl sleep. I return to the chair and pass the evening binge watching shows on Netflix. This week, I’m plowing through season three of *Pretty Little Liars*.

Chapter Two Baptism

I swear if I stare at the top layer of the cake, it's actually moving, like a chocolate glacier slipping down a mountain slope. It's Molly's birthday, we sit around the wood varnished kitchen table, rough and scratched. Uncle Jason pokes three candles into the cake, two for each decade and the third for a half, he says (she's turning 25), and lights them and proceeds to sing "Happy Birthday to You..." although nobody else sings along. He drifts off "day... to.. Molly....."

"Nice cake," I say, and me and Molly start laughing. It's rare we share these kind of moments, her being 10 years older than me. We don't always have much in common. I haven't had a demonic attack in two days, and the respite is exhilarating, enlightening even. One often forgets how much normalcy equals clarity.

"Hey," Uncle Jason says, "I spent all day on that cake."

This makes me and Molly laugh louder. My sister, Molly's, (or "half-sister" she often refers us as when she thinks I can't hear) black hair is short, a boys cut, really, and she has big, imposing eyes. She's come down from Washington DC with her husband "for her birthday party" but really to check on how I'm doing. I see through their little plans; I'm fifteen, not a fucking moron. I hate how they try to hide stuff from me and suddenly I'm not laughing.

Jason begins to cut the cake and then holds the knife in the air in dramatic fashion, "Wait wait wait." and he walks to the downstairs bedroom and emerges with two wrapped gifts. Molly tears the paper off of the bigger one, a child again. It's a globe

but instead of the earth, it's got all the constellations. Jason plugs it into the kitchen counter and it lights up brilliantly, it's the best and brightest from the NASA gift shop.

Jason hands her the smaller present, and opening it reveals a shell locket.

"Uncle Jason," Molly says, "you shouldn't have..."

I didn't, Jason explains, it's from your mother and Molly stands and throws it down to the floor, and stomps on it, although (and it looks like it's made of glass) it doesn't shatter.

"If mom wants me to give me a present," she says, "she should have come here and given it to me herself." Uncle Jason picks it up and holds it up by its chain and asks what he should do with it, and she rips it out of his hand and tosses it to me. I snatch it from the air with a start.

"Let Morgan have it," Molly says. Molly's face is red and her eyes bug out a bit more, her pretty eyes, but beady all the same. Uncle Jason tries to calm her, as is his nature. Molly's arms flaying through the air, Jason trying to reach out to touch Molly's shoulders, but she backs away, so he pushes his hands, palms face down, at the ground, as if that will bring my sister down a notch. This never works.

Molly Sweetser is full of anger and rage.

As Molly and Jason argue, I run the chain through my fingers and hold the seashell in my palm. It's sea green, but translucent. There's a little clip on it that implies it is a locket that opens, but it's stuck. You can see through the shell and there's nothing inside anyways. I feel like I shouldn't take it, but it's so small, beautiful, like Virginia Beach at the end of the Spring Break season, but not completely over. Some lingering kids

remain, calmer, not as much pressure to have fun. More authentic. Spring break almost over, but the summer is on its way. That was this shell, this thing from our mother who we haven't seen in over a year.

Mom. Where are you?

While Molly and Jason are still fight, I place the locket around my neck. It feels warm; It feels like home.

Then my vision blurs, and a mist comes over my eyes. I blink, and am laying in a cloud. I sit up and run over to one of the metal puddles. The liquid ripples, as if an unseen stone has been dropped in the center, and the view of the kitchen, from the top down, becomes visible.

My right arm is bent in an unnatural way. I can't see my eyes, but the top of my blonde head, but I imagine them pupil-less and white or glowing a strange green. My head twists all the way around, 360 degrees, and I hear myself say (sound comes from the Bose speakers set up in the cloud room):

"Morgan's soul is mine! You will never have her," "I" say. Molly and her husband, Bo, and Uncle Jason cower in the corner. This goes on for fifteen minutes, the demon shouting, well, demon-y things, and puking up green shit, spraying it all over the room.

Then, for no apparent reason, my body lifts off the chair. I'm levitating. I'm fucking floating! Wow!

Father Harris rushes in the door, like Spider-man web-slinging into a burning building to save a child. He has a cross in hand, a man purse around his waist. What a perfectly timed entrance.

“The power of Christ Compels you,” Harris shouts.

“Your mother sucks cocks in hell,” Belial, in my body, says.

“No she doesn’t,” Harris says.

“Yes, she does.”

“No, she doesn’t.”

“I’m pretty sure she does.”

“I know she doesn’t. My mom’s still alive. She’s on a cruise in the Bahamas.”

“Oh,” Belial says, “I knew that. I was just testing you.”

“That doesn’t even make sense,” Harris says. Then Belial opens my mouth and spews out a bunch of pea soup vomit, covering his face. Ew, he got some in his mouth!

Uncle Jason, Molly, and Bo, have awkwardly left the kitchen.

“Demon,” Harris has the holy water out now, he’s brought a big jug of it, a two liter pop bottle full of it and says, “tell me your name.” Apparently, if the Exorcist knows the demon’s name, he can get some kind of power over the spawn of Satan. The back and forth has happened over and over again. I’m about to tune out and start binge watching *Jessica Jones* on Netflix when Harris does something he’s never done before. He grabs me by my hair and pulls my body out of the air, back onto chair. Still gripping my hair, he grabs a towel and throws it over my mouth, and dumps the holy water over my face.

In the cloud room, I gasp, suddenly unable to breath. I claw at an invisible towel that isn’t there. I feel like I’m drowning. And then, still in my cloud room, I feel excruciating pain of my hair being pulled.

Harris pulls the cloth off of my face and Belial shouts, “Jesus H. Christ, you Holy Waterboarded, me. You. Dick!”

* * *

I wonder if this waterboarding is how Catholic’s baptize, with yelling priests and wild splashings of holy water. My baptism was Lutheran (I think?), my Baptist a woman. She was a pastor with a big nose, sweaty brow, and abnormally long eyelashes—I think her name was Martha. Maybe? She looked like a Martha, a Martha with a saggy white robe hung over saggy boobs and pudgy butt. I remember Martha stepped down from the marble alter hunched over, and, later asked my mom if she lived in the church’s bell tower.

Martha dunked my head in the big wooden bowl of water in front of the congregation, her clammy hands shoved my head deep into the water. When Martha’s grip loosened I whipped my head out, long blond hair slapping backwards, and laughed. The congregation chuckled and my smile exposed a missing front tooth. Martha didn’t break her perma-frown, and my mother pulled me toward her. Even under the stern grip of mom’s hands, I giggled uncontrollably, although I felt none of this was funny.

* * *

“Tell me your name,” Harris shouts, his pudgy face so red it might spontaneously combust. He throws the cloth over my mouth and dumps more water onto my face.

“Ok, ok.” Belial pushes Harris away with unnatural strength of a fifteen year old girl’s body and floats back into the air, “We are legion! We are the bringer of death and the night. We are loyal ser, cough, uh excuse me. I can’t believe you fucking

waterboarded me. Um, like I was saying, We are loyal servants to the dark Lord. We are Belial!”

“Belial, be gone with you,” Harris shouts.

Belial laughs and laughs and laughs, and I can’t help but laugh, too, although I feel that none of this is funny.

Chapter Three Sacilege

The weird thing is, beneath all the pain of pulled hair and the burning lungs, I feel an overwhelming feeling of Déjà vu. Or, is that even the right word? I've foreseen this all before. The water boarding, the levitating, Molly's birthday cake covered in pea soup.

The one thing they never tell you about possession is repetition. The same things happen over and over again. Maybe that explains the Déjà vu. Maybe I'm psychic?

* * *

It's Good Friday morning, the day they killed my Lord and Savior or something something. I dozed off in my cloud chair and when I awoke, I was in my bed, strapped down, naked except for a torn shirt, one shoulder bare like the 80s.

I'm, of course, telling Harris to (you guessed it) fuck me, and I'm horrified all over again— it's so disgusting. The thought of this old dude seeing me naked... when no other person has seen me down there except for Kyra... it just... Harris throws more holy water on me, repulsed by my body, my ugly naked body covered in zits and eczema.

Kyra's seen me naked. I always tried to hide behind my locker, after diving class, but she would always slam the metal door, closing the barrier between us, and look me up and down as I reluctantly stripped out of my suit, her brown eyes frowning. The Tuesday before Thanksgiving break, Kyra told me, "will you please wax your hairy bush, gross" and so, that night, I took a razor and carefully shaved until there wasn't a visible hair left I could see. I imagined sliding out of my suit in front of Kyra, watching her little eyes size up my smooth vaj, but the next day, Kyra wasn't in diving class. Kyra'd left

town early with her mother, heading to their DC house for an early start on some shopping.

“I know your name, Belial, and I command you to leave this girl’s body,” Harris says.

“I know your name. It’s Patrick Harris. And I’d command you to stop being a douche, but that ain’t gonna happen,” Belial says. “Now fuck me, priest.”

“My name’s Charles Harris. I think you’re thinking of Neil Patrick Harris.”

“Oh,” says Belial, “my bad. Still, though, fuck me, priest!”

I know my story sounds *Fifty Shades of Gray* about now, but I’m, like, always naked. Like I said earlier, repetition. Possession is so goddamn repetitive. I recline in my chair, wondering why Belial is so obsessed with sex. I turn up the TV with my remote but can still sense the drama below. This has all getting so old. I wish I could run away to, oh, I don’t know, Paris.

The puddle in front of me, to the left of the flat screen, my left, begins to wave and rippled. I slide out of the Laz-E Boy and crawl to the edge – the puddle has gotten bigger than before. I’m looking down at a large courtyard brick courtyard. There’s a strange pyramid—a glass pyramid.

The Louvre. We learned about this in Social Studies last year. The puddle’s showing me Paris.

“Bagdad,” I say and a sandy city appears in the ripples. “Guam,” and I see a city surrounded by a blue ocean, like a summer snow globe with sparkles instead of snowflakes. Las Vegas. Montreal. Morocco. Bangkok. Cleveland.

I pause, not really watching the freeway through the concrete city below. I take a deep breath:

“Show me Mom,” I say.

The puddle goes blank, metallic.

“Show me Serena Sweetser,” I say. “Show me Serena,” I shout. “Show me, Dammit.” I grab a Twix out of the air and throw it into the puddle. The metal slowly engulfs the candy bar.

“Show me Uncle Jason. Show me Molly. Bo. Anybody?”

Nothing.

“Show me Serena. Please. Show me mom.” The liquid swirls again, but nothing happens.

The puddle won't show me, and I imagine mom and dad, while worlds away from each other, each on Irish landscapes, old Druid ruins beneath their feet. There's Charlotte Church singing Celtic in the distance. It is cold, and I can never see dad's face.

On a separate cliff, mom wears a summer dress blowing in the wind above the waves crashing against rock below. She reaches her arm out toward the ocean, as if trying to grasp someone's hand. She's trying to take hold of me.

But Mom's not in Ireland. Mom won't be here for Easter. Serena could be anywhere.

* * *

Uncle Jason is a good guy, really he is. Skinny and nervous, he reminds me of a small nosed Ichabod Crane, perhaps a bit more handsome. He's busy dropping dye pills

into mugs of water. Little copper egg holders are laid out all over the newspaper covered table.

There's a hiss from the oven; water is boiling over from a metal pot.

"Oh no, the eggs," Jason says. He tries. He really tries.

Grandma Sophie had to leave last week for corporate retreat and will be back before Easter, so it's just me and Jason. I drop a purple pill into the water and watch it slowly dissolve in swirls like a galaxy in a cup. The kitchen is white tiled and modern, and it's actually warm for once.

"You know, kid," he said, "we're going to have a good Easter. I can feel it."

"I don't know," I say, "Nothing's good anymore. Things are shit."

"Why don't you invite that friend of yours, Kyra, over for Easter dinner? I have a feeling the Easter bunny will be bringing you Mortal Kombat game. You can kick her ass with Katana."

I haven't seen Kyra in months, since December, when the possession started. I want to see her, see that stupid lil bitch, so bad. The last time I saw her in person was the night of the Ouiji board.

I drop a hot, overcooked egg, half mindedly into a cup of yellow dye. The possessions all started small enough, at the end of November, after Thanksgiving. I was standing in the landing, the front door behind me. I carried three large bags; I had just gotten back from shopping with Jason in the batshit crazy malls. Sophie had told Jason that better not buy me anything but I can make Jason bend over backwards and I got

three new Abercrombie and Fitch outfits, and a Washington football hat, the Redskins, but I don't call them that because it's fucking racist.

I ran up the stairs to my room before Grandma Sophie could see all the bags of merchandise I held in my hands, barging into my lime green bedroom. I thought Jason was running up the stairs behind me but when I glanced over my shoulder, no one stood in the doorway. How was I to know someone—something—was there, invisible.

Predatory. Hungry.

I had lived in this room for years now, at since I was eleven, but I never thought of this place as my own. That apartment, the one with the shag carpet and the creaky old catwalk out back, that still felt like home, even after all these years. Yeah, it was a shithole and had roaches, but when the Virginia summer breeze blew through the backdoor into the kitchen, it tasted fresh and the small apartment felt open to the world, as if there was promises that would be kept at far corners of the earth, down here in the dirt and sticky gum sidewalks and the needles, even here there was hope; there was no need for cloud rooms.

The lime green bedroom never felt like home. I always compared it to the old apartment in summer, this place feels winter. It closed in on you, and sometimes the air smelled a bit like rot. Maybe? Maybe it was all in my head. Maybe it was longing that smells so bad.

I stripped down, hating the red splotches over my skin and the zits on my back, which I can see in the skinny, tall black rimmed mirror, quickly covering the embarrassment with ripped jeans and a maroon hoodie, beaming AF to the world. The

mirror rapped, well not the mirror I realized, but something in the wall behind the mirror. Rap rap rap.

Rats? I thought. It must be rats. The pounding started again. Rapping in threes. Can rats count?

Not thinking much more about it, I took off my new outfit and hid it in the dresser, and slipped into my pink sweats and ran down the stairs. When Sophie saw me, she scrunched her forehead into a frown. She knew that Jason had spoiled me, had bought me tons of new clothes at the mall, and she wasn't happy about it.

Uncle Jason does anything I want, I thought. That night, while sitting at the kitchen table for dinner, I felt a sharp fingernail brush against the back of my neck. No, only in my head.

Then, two nights later, when I arrived home from school, it was December first I remember because I had had a Calculus test third period that day, and I was pretty sure I got an A. I threw my backpack down on the landing and ran to the phone, and dialed Kyra's number on my cell, flopping down on the big white couch on the white rug over the hardwood floor, layers of cloths to hide the old wood frame below. Aged, just like Sophie, worn by time.

Kyra was telling me how Ty had asked her to go to a party, but how she was over him and wanted to fuck his best friend, Cooper. Kyra was in love with Ty, she had to be, the way she talked about him constantly – talk about how much she hated him, let her tell you.

“He’s having that party, but I’m not going to go there because he’ll just want to sleep with me. I’m going to sleep with his best friend Cooper to...” Kyra’s a virgin, she knows I know it, so I didn’t know why she always implied that she wasn’t, or that she was into casual sex; she wanted to promote false promiscuity.

I remember Kyra Chan sitting on her white and pink comforter, rubbing lotion into her tan arms as she talked to me. “You think Cooper’s gross. Why would you ever do that?” I asked.

Then the invisible fingernail run down my neck and this time lingered as it went down my back, although nothing was there when I batted at it. I told Kyra, and she said that it must be a ghost. Some phantom fingernail from the other side running down my back, scratches from the beyond. There was only one things to do, Kyra said. Later that night, she brought over her Ouija board.

We set up the Ouija board in the green room. I lit two of the tall, white candles in a brass reindeer holder, the ones Grandma Sophie used for Thanksgiving on dresser next to us. The board was a small Hasbro glow-in-the-dark set, a mesh of glowing green and unilluminated purple, edges covered in dotted illustrations. We sat across from each other, Kyra facing me; I was on my knees. The candle light our only illumination. Kyra looked like a ghost, her brown skin shined a ghostly aura around her. A white sweater hung off her shoulder, red lipstick on her lips.

“If you’re being haunted,” she said, “we need to figure who it is. What does she want?”

“I think it’s a guy,” I replied.

“Oh,” Kyra said with a shiver, “Maybe he thinks you’re his long lost love.” When Kyra smiled, her braces sparkled from the candle light. She reached over and grabbed my pale hands in her brown ones and places them on the planchette.

We try a few times, asking if anybody is there, and calling upon the spirits and to please give us a sign. Any sign. Only the shaking of candle light broke the stillness. Kyra’s hands are sweaty on top of mine.

“Please, show us yourself. Unless you’re too scared—”

There was a rap rap rap on the door. But when Kyra shouted “Show us yourself,” Uncle Jason cracked open the door, asking us if we wanted some popcorn. Before I could answer, Kyra shouted yes! and Jason shut the door and we listened to his footsteps walk away down the carpeted hallway. My legs were falling asleep, and so I adjust to the side, half laying on the floor. Kyra reached out and grabbed my hands again, and placed them again above the plastic planchette. Then it moved rapidly.

The planchette spelled out I-M-C-A-P-T-A-I-N-H-O-W-D-Y and Kyra’s brown eyes lit up, glowing in the dim light.

“Captain Howdy,” I said. “Really, Kyra. Could you pick a gayer name?”

Kyra swore she wasn’t moving the planchette (of course she would say that) and we kept asking more questions, but the ghost remained quiet.

“What do you want?” Kyra asked for the final time, and we sat in silence until Jason knocked on the door, bringing in a microwave bag of popcorn, a little bit burnt. Kyra munched on it, getting corn caught in her braces.

“We need to up the anty,” she said, “get in touch with the dark side.” She stood, brushing smooth her skinny jeans and let her eyes wander around the room, as if surveying dinosaur bones in a museum. She grabbed the big, god awful crucifix on the wall, and yanked it free. She hung it on the bottom nail, upside down.

“We need something more.” Kyra said, “I know. I’ve seen this in your Grandma’s room.” Before I can stop her, Kyra snuck down a hall and returned with a statue of the Virgin Mary, the glass painted one where she reaches down, palm open, to a little lamb below. Kyra grabbed my backpack off my bed, pulled out a permanent marker, and scribbled big, black nipples on the Virgin’s breasts and scribbled a big smudge of supposed-to-be-pubic-hair between the legs.

“Kyra,” I shouted, “that’s Sophie’s. That’s an antique.”

“It’ll wash off.”

“No it won’t. It’s permanent!”

“Whatevs.” Kyra drew horns on the lamb. “There we go. Sacrilege!”

I didn’t even know what that meant.

“That should bring out the demons.” Kyra and I sat back down, around the glowing board.

Now then, Kyra said, let’s try this again, “Is Cap’n Howdy still here?”

Y-E-S

What do you want, she asked. Kyra did all the talking; I sat in silence.

T-H-E-S-O-W-T-H-E-D-I-R-T-Y-G-I-R-L

What?

The planchette began moving really fast and I couldn't make out all the words, except I think I made out the spelling of my own name. Kyra couldn't keep up with all the words, either, so she pulled the planchette over the word Goodbye, and went back to munching on popcorn. I figured Kyra had been moving the planchette the whole time, and figured she had become bored with the whole thing.

That night was the last time I saw Kyra is person. It's hard to believe that that night was only a few months ago, it feels like years. I hold a yellow egg in the hand and, not realizing I have purple dye on my pointer finger, and leave a big purple smudge on the shell. I try to cover it with a butterfly sticker, but the smudge it too big to be concealed.

I miss moments like this—moments of peace.

* * *

Kyra shouts, "Morgan, watch this." and bounces of the diving board, flips her body backwards, and falls in a straight line to the pool. She emerges from the depths and smiles a big, braces smile. There are two pools in Hope Senior High School, a pool for diving and a pool for laps. Both pools are empty except for us. Everyone else has headed to the locker room, but Kyra and I have hung behind, to get a few more dives in, ignoring the bell that has rung, announcing the change of classes.

Kyra wears a purple bikini, although the diving teacher has repeatedly told her that that is inappropriate for diving class. That's the way Kyra is. She never listens and always shows skin. I've never met someone my age that oozes so much sexuality. Her

skin glistens in the fluorescent lights. I wear a full piece, and hold my arms close around me, as if it could hide my zitty skin.

“I can do that, too.” I won’t be outdone by Kyra. I climb up the diving board and run, bounce once, and throw myself back. In a flash of white, I realize I’ve hit the back of my head on the diving board. I belly flop on my back into the water. In the depths, although in pain, I come to, and swim to the surface. I take in a deep breath and see purple. It’s a purple bikini.

Kyra has dove in after me.

“I’m ok,” I say.

Kyra pulls me to the edge and hugs me tightly, pushing her nearly naked body against mine. “That was so scary,” she says.

This was a month before the possession.

* * *

“Captain Howdy,” as innocuous as the name sounded, began to wreak havoc over the holiday season. One December night when Jason and Grandma Sophie were putting up the Christmas tree, and I thought I saw a person, a shadow, out of the corner of my eye. On Wednesday, December 21st, at 8:00 pm, I remember the exact time because *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer* had just started on the television, the claymation one (this show depresses me for some reason, even the happy ending feels dark and depressing, and what is up with those fucking misfit toys?). Anyway, on that day, I received the first three deep scratches down my back, staining my tank top in blood.

By Christmas, my first full onset of possession happened. Father Harris was called in and expedited permission to perform an exorcism from the Vatican (Harris, a sort of amateur exorcist himself—he dabbled—was proud to be thrust into the role).

As I drop a hardboiled egg into the coffee cup full of green dye, I think maybe this holiday will be better than the last, but I can feel the demon already seeping in and doubt anything will change— there's no going back. There will be no mother.

Chapter Four Last Words

It's the night before Easter, and I'm possessed, but this possession is different. I'm not in my cloud space. I'm in my body but I can't control it, like sleep paralysis in motion. I'm standing on top of the stairs, which look down at the wood floor below. My body contorts in unnatural positions; my bones crack with every unnatural movement, but it doesn't hurt, it just feels like I'm stretching.

My body arches backwards and my spine cracks, and I'm arched all the way over, so my hands are touching the floor. Like a bow, I'm hunched over. My tongue flickers in and out of my mouth like a snake. I don't like this. I want to go back to my cloud room. I walk down the stairs on all fours, like an inverted crawl. At the bottom of the stairs is the front door, littered with tennis shoes and coats and scarves thrown onto a little bench.

Uncle Jason walks over and puts an Easter Egg into a boot. "Hey Jason," I say, "go suck a doggy dick."

"Jesus, Morgan," Jason says, "you scared us." Jason looks like I've caught him in a covert operation. He carries a bunch of Easter Eggs in his left hand bundled against his chest. Two roll off of his stash and crack on the floor.

"Well, son of a gun," he says. Uncle Jason's handsome, even with the cracks around his eyes and nasally laugh. He retained some poise and suave, although he didn't push through his doctorate program in aerospace engineering unscathed by nerdiness; he often comes off as a geek with those geek glasses he always wears. Jason is my dad's younger brother and I see a little bit of dad in his shallow dimples, although his skin is

tanner than dad's pale tone and his hair is brown. At least, Jason looks like how I remember my dad before the bastard killed himself so long ago on that random summer night.

I descend down the stairs. Jason and Grandma Sophie are hiding Easter Eggs all over the living room. Above the fireplace, in the cushion of the couch. The floor creaks as they walk across the dusty wood. My body bends back into its proper shape and I follow them as they walk into the kitchen to retrieve more eggs. I'm wearing a white lace nightgown, one I've never seen before. I can't even tell if it is me telling my body to walk or if it's the demon. I just go with it, submitting. I accept that I have absolutely no control over anything in my life.

"Hey dickfaces," I (is it the real me saying this?) shout. "I said you should go suck a dick."

Jason and Sophie assess the kitchen, not looking at me. Jason puts an egg in the microwave.

"Yo, cocksuckers," I shout louder.

"Yes, Morgan, we can hear you," Jason says, not making eye contact. "We're not deaf."

I piss on the floor, watching the yellow puddle grow on the hardwood floor, soaking into white socks and pooling in the cracks in the wood.

And I say, "You're gonna die up there!"

Jason looks up. "Up where?"

"You know, up there!"

Jason shrugs and Grandma Sophie shakes her big head in exaggerated disapproval. I rotate my head around in a 360 degree circle.

“You’re going to get a kink in your neck if you keep doing that, child,” Sophie says, still not making eye contact.

“Take me back to my cloud room,” I say. “Send me back NOW!”

There is a purple flash of light, a purple so bright it might be a color I’ve never seen before, like a purple supernova bursting all around me. Then it dulls. But I’m not in my cloud room. I’m not in Grandma’s house. I’m somewhere new, confirming I have absolutely no control over what happens in my life. I’m scared. I’m not old enough for this. I want my mom. I cry.

* * *

I’m so gone from Grandma’s house. I don’t know where I am—this isn’t my cloud room. I wipe tears away. Now I know what people mean when they say, I’ve never felt so alone in my life. What a weird concept, to feel even more alone, an enigma felt that one doesn’t even know she could feel until it’s too late.

The room is dark; a street lights streams in the window behind the couch. I’m in an apartment on the second floor. A very familiar apartment. The room smells like cigarettes; I hear shouting. Across the dark room, light comes from door and, although I can’t see in room from here, I know it’s the kitchen. I so recognize this place.

“You’re not seeing her,” a voice, my mother, shouts. “If I have anything to do with it, you’ll never see her ever again.”

“Serena, she’s my child, too.”

I creep over the shaggy carpet, probably a remnant of the 70s; this apartment is a relic. I tip toe closer through to the door that leads to the kitchen in the back. I peek my head around the corner and there they are, my mom and my dad.

My dad isn't how I remember him. He seems like a boy instead of the man I remember. His dimpled face smooth, his blonde hair shaggy, his glasses more stylish than in my memory; he seems more like an older boy at my high school than a father.

The small clock radio next to the rusting stove is on – *I kissed a girl and I liked it, the taste of her cherry ChapStick.*

“You need to get the fuck out of here, Richard. Get the fuck out. Get out. Get out. Get out. Get out,” Mom repeats in sobs over and over again, as if her words could will his disappearance. They're both drunk. There are syringes on the table by a full ashtray, and some needles on the floor.

My mom, Serena, raises her hand and a bottle of Jack floats off the counter and hovers in the air. With a wave of her hand, it goes flying at my father. He ducks and it pounds into the drywall behind him.

“Fucking Christ,” dad shouts.

“Look deep into my eyes, Richard. Get in your truck and drive far far away and never come back.” My mother's eyes glow red.

“Seriously, Serena?” Dad says. “Even if your succubus shit worked on me, you're too fucked up to use your witchcraft properly right now.”

I'm in our old apartment, me and mom lived here, before we moved back in with Grandma, and mom started disappearing, first for days at a time, then weeks, then

months. Like I said earlier, I haven't seen her in over a year. The back door is open, and the Virginia summer air makes the apartment swelter. I turn around and see a little blond girl peering out of her bedroom door, afraid to go in the kitchen. I realize it's me, but not because I recognize the face, but the oversized *Hannah Montana* t-shirt I used to sleep in every night. I don't remember ever looking like this little girl; I was never that young.

Plus, none of this can be real. I don't remember any of this, only remember the apartment. This night, in my memory, never existed. I'm seeing a past that never happened.

I kneel down and look my 9-year-old self in the brown eyes.

"It's ok," I say. "Go back to bed."

My younger self doesn't see or hear me. I touch her face, feel her soft skin. I grab onto the child's arm. She yanks away. I can interact with her but, at the same time, I can't. I try to hold on to her again, and my hand swishes through, incorporeal. I don't sink through the floor and when I punch at the wall, it's solid and makes a thumping sound, although my younger self doesn't react to the noise. I try to interact with other objects, the bedroom door, the picture on the wall, but my hand just floats through.

"You're fucking Jason and now you're telling me can't see Morgan," dad shouts.

"You're a piece of work, you really are, you stupid whore."

I follow my little self to the kitchen and our parents come into view just in time to watch my mom lunge at my dad, slapping him and pounding on his chest. He shoves

her backward into the table and she falls to the floor, pounding her head on the tiles.
She wails.

“Serena,” my dad says.

On hands and knees, mom raises her arm and dad goes flying back into the oven. Now, it’s my dad who wails. On the ground, he pounds his fist against his head over and over again. I want to do something, anything, but the more I try, the less control I have in this environment. I seem to slip away even from my own body. I want to be back in the mist, into the clouds, even strapped down in Grandma’s bed. Anywhere but this place. *Please get me out of this place.*

Dad pulls himself up and pushes his way out the backdoor. My mom remains crumpled on the dirty floor among needles and dust balls. Little Morgan tiptoes in bare feet across the fake tiled floor and slips out the door. I follow, although no one reacts to my footsteps, or even hears that I slam the cheap metal screened door behind me when I leave.

The rickety wooden walkways out back overlook a courtyard of cracked cement parking lot and a rotting shed. Little Morgan runs down the catwalks, her unbrushed blond hair blowing behind her, and descends down the stairs. I follow.

Nine-year-old Morgan stops at the dumpster that Dad’s truck is parked in front of. I walk past her, into the open night air. Dad sits in his truck with the door open, chugging rail whiskey until he needs to take a break and gags and spits a long string of saliva onto the ground. He takes a deep breath, and takes another swig. He reaches into the back of his truck and pulls out a shotgun. He has hold the gun with his knees to point

it at his face. My dad, Richard Hoffman, looks at me (not little Morgan) and says, "I'm sorry Morgan. Daddy will always love you."

His brains splatter all over, a weird mixture of gray and chunks of skull, and red drip from the ceiling, ooze down the leather seats. I hear my little self cry; I don't look back. It's disgusting and shocking, but like in a movie because none of this is real. Still, I don't want to look back at the gore.

I think about what Dad said to me and say, "Those were some clichéd, retarded last words."

* * *

In a purple flash, I'm back in Grandma's living room. The room is dark and Jason and Sophie have gone to bed. I run to Sophie's room, and try to wake her, Grandma, wake up, Grandma Grandma Grandma. Please. Sophie does wake up and I crawl into bed with her and she strokes my hair. I tell her my dream, astral projection, whatever it was that showed me gray matter dripping down a truck window, the summer air so serene in the face of death. My mom and her needles.

"Oh Morgan, it was just a bad dream."

"No. No. It couldn't be."

"There's so much you don't know," Sophie says. "There's so much I don't know. The demons that haunt us are so, so powerful."

"Then how do we stop them?"

"Only you can stop them, child. You have to reach deep down, find truths to questions you haven't yet asked. You have to gain control."

“Grandma...”

Sophie snores, holding me close to her.

When I awake, I can feel an episode coming on, so I run up to my lime green room and strap my left arm into the restraints strapped to the metal frame of the bed. I feel like a moron once I realize can't strap my right arm in with my left one already tied down. I try to wrap the leather around my right wrist and tighten in my teeth, but realize I might just chip my teeth.

“Come on, Belial,” I shout, “I'm here for the taking! Just do it, just do it already.”

I float to my cloud room. I jump into the Laz-E Boy and reach down, pulling up the clouds at my feet like a comforter, and pull it around me, and I feel comfortable although this is not as warm as Grandma's arms around me. There are Cadbury Eggs and Peeps and pouches of Jelly Bellies floating all around the room and I remember its Easter. I'm shaking, but I'm safe here.

“Morgan.”

I open my eyes and look around but I'm alone in this room of fog, walls of cotton. The light that simmers through the clouds is setting and casts strange shadows on the fluffy walls. There's a vibe I've never felt here before, as if the real world had made its way even here. I hear my name whispered again.

“Who's there?”

“Surely you recognize my voice by now. It's me, Belial.”

“Oh, hi.”

“Howdy!”

“Ok, I’m going to binge watch *Daredevil*, so bye.”

“Okie dokie,” the demon says. Belial’s voice sounds like Matthew McConaughey.

“I just thought you’d like to know your dad says hi.”

I return the chair into the upright position. I pull some straggling blond hair behind my ear. “What did you say?”

“Your dad. He says hello. He’s down here in hell with me, ya know? That’s where suicides go.”

“Fuck you,” I shout.

“Whoa settle down, princess. I kid. I kid. Anyway, your dad’s not down here. He’s not even a suicide— not that suicides go to hell. That’s just a rumor some assholes made up as a big fuck you to mental illness.”

Belial talks too much. I recline chair again and shut my eyes. And tell Belial to shove it and that I have a headache and need some sleep so to please shut the hell up.

“Suit yourself, sweetheart. But before you drift off, let me let you in on this little secret. Your daddy didn’t kill himself. He was murdered.”

“What? What are you talking about?” I shout for Belial, but the cloud room swirls in silence. It’s a strange thing, I’ve never talked to Belial directly before, but I know him so well, an intimacy that can only be forged by the possessed and the possessie. This has something to do with the vision I had of Dad shooting himself. But how are Belial and my dad’s suicide (murder?) related?

Also, why does he sound like Matthew McConaughey?

Chapter Five
Normal-ish

I stare at the yellow pad in front of my on the desk in my green room. I'm trying to get my thoughts together, trying to find a way back to the cloud room.

August 5th 20, 2014 – my fourteenth birthday – the last time I've seen mom.

December: Possession starts.

January: Possessed daily. – taken out of school.

February: Have watched all four seasons of Gossip Girl, moving on to Pretty Little Liars

March: Same old, same old.

April: Weird vision of the night my dad killed himself.

I can't think of what else to write. I look around my room and realize something has changed. There are no restraints on my bed. It is morning, sun streams through the clouded window. When I started the list, it was night. I have no memory of the last 8 hours.

Easter – Time Jumping I add to the list.

Uncle Jason knocks on the door and when I tell him to come in, he's wearing sweats and a NASA hoodie., "Wake up, sleepy head. It's Easter Sunday Funday."

"You're so gay."

"Whoa! Hey, did you get any sleep last night?"

"Idunno," I say. It's not a lie.

I'm wearing my pink sweats, untorn. I hear Jason in the bathroom, brushing his teeth.

“Uncle Jason,” I say. “Where’s grandma.”

“In New York,” he shouts, voice gurgled, mouth full of toothpaste. “For the corporate retreat. Remember? Are you drunk? Get up already.” He walks to the bathroom, and I fling myself on the bed, the bed *without* restraints tied to the metal frame.

“Come on, Morgan. Rise and shine,” he shouts from the bathroom.

“I’m not going to rise, and I absolutely refuse to shine.”

He walks back into the doorway. “All I hear is blah blah blah I’m not getting my ass out of bed. It’s Easter Sunday!”

I step out of the bed and I remember that dream, that vision...

You’re fucking Jason...

When I finally walk down the stairs, the same stairs I walked down last night backwards in the bow position., and find Uncle Jason over a frying pan on the stove. Oil splatter up onto his shirt and he swears.

I sit on a stool and watch Jason try to cook scrambled eggs.

“Where’s father Harris?” I ask.

“Who?”

“You know, the priest. The guy expelling the demon.”

“You mean Father Karras?” asks Jason.

“Who?” I ask.

“Father Karras, from *The Exorcist*. You know, the movie.”

“Never watched it,” I say. “Where are my restraints? They’re not on my bed.

What if the demon takes over...”

Jason laughs, “You mean, like *The Exorcist*?”

“Stop laughing. I’ve been possessed for months. Remember, last week I puked all over Harris?”

Jason laughs louder. “That’s *The Exorcist*!”

“This isn’t funny. Belial stabbed my crotch with a cross. I yelled ‘Fuck me. Fuck me. Fuck me.’”

“That’s *The Exorcist*! I mean the demon’s name wasn’t Belial, but everything you’re describing happened in the movie.” Jason slides brown seared scrambled eggs onto a plate. He pulls burnt toast of the toaster and slides it in front of me.

“Remember last night. My body contorted and I crab walked backwards down the stairs and peed on the floor. I told you ‘You’re going to die up there.’”

Jason slaps his knee, hunched over laughing. “That doesn’t even make sense. I’m not an astronaut. I just work at NASA.”

“Uncle Jason, stop fooling.” I recount how the possession started in December, about Cap’n Howdy, although I leave out the part about the cloud room. No one needs to know about the cloud room.

“Captain Howdy,” Jason says, “that is straight out of the movie. If you wrote a book about this, you’d be sued for copyright infringement.”

“Fuck you.”

“Hey,” he says. “Watch it. Quit acting like a punk kid just because you’ve suddenly learned to swear. If Sophie heard...”

“What’re you going to do, ground me?” I push the plate away from me. “You’re not my fucking dad.”

Jason stops laughing. “Whoa, things just got real.”

After a burnt breakfast, I walk around the house, looking for Easter Eggs. I find an Easter Basket with the Mortal Kombat game I wanted— the one where you can download Jason Voorhees as a playable character. There’s Cadbury eggs above the fireplace, a chocolate bunny behind the TV. There’s a lightness in the air I can’t quite describe. Almost like the stuffy, stale air of winter has been sucked out of this place and replaced with the rebirth of spring. Or something fucking poetic like that.

Jason insists there are more eggs to find, but I ignore him and put my video game into my Xbox 360 and start fighting it out on the screen as Scorpion.

Get over here.

The funny thing is, I start remembering things that didn’t happen. A New Year’s Eve party where Kyra made out with Ty at midnight and I wanted to punch them both in the balls. Molly’s birthday party, but a normal 25th birthday party, not one where I levitated and puked green. All these “memories” come flooding back, and I can barely concentrate on my game. Sub-Zero finishes me off with a fatality, freezing me and shattering me into a million pieces of ice.

It’s like I’m remembering two time lines, one where I’m possessed and one where I never have been consumed by a demon.

* * *

I'm on the bus on my way to school. It's as if the possession never happened. Things are back to normal-ish.

"Did you hear," Kyra Chan says, her brown legs crossed toward me on the bus seat, "that Mrs. Nelson's dead."

I ask how she died.

"Choked on a donut." Kyra laughs with her mouth wide open, exposing her braces. "Serves the fat bitch right."

Kyra's turquoise skirt is short. She once got sent home in 8th grade because her short shorts were too short, but she keeps buying short clothes. She told me last week that she gave Ty Lindberg a blowjob in the backseat of his Chevy Malibu over spring break and always talks about how she's going to sleep with him. In January in Spanish class, I overheard Ty and the football players talk about how easy Kyra was and I wanted to punch them all in their dicks. And then I hated Kyra. I hate Kyra lots of the time.

I stare at her smooth legs turned toward me. She's so perfectly proportioned, a kind of flawless I wish I could be. My arms, long, gangly, covered in red blotches, my front teeth too big for my mouth; her arms skinny and hairless, Crest White-Strip white teeth. I don't like my pale skin, red eczema the doctor said I'd grow out of by the time I was ten but then never faded away. Even her boobs are perfect. In the locker room, after diving class two weeks ago, she stuck out her chest, topless, and said, "Isn't it funny how I'm Asian, but I have such big boobs. Way bigger than yours." I covered up

my flat chest with my hands and slid out of my swimming suit cowering behind the gray locker door. I would have crawled in if I could fit.

Wait. How do I remember diving class last week? Oh yeah, I was there. Wait, no, I was possessed. I'm confusing time lines. What year is it? 2008?

You're fucking Jason...

"... that's why mom and I go to Zumba and Yoga every Tuesday and Thursday, because the last thing I'm going to let happen to me is dying a fatass choking down a cream filled Long John..."

"First of all, giggity. Second of all, you're looking too thin. Kyra, you need to eat more."

"Ugh, I'm so fat."

"What's the date today?" I ask casually.

Kyra pulls out her iPhone. "March 28th."

"No, I mean, the full date..."

Kyra scrunches her tiny forehead. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing," I say. I don't know what year it is!?! "Did I tell you about the dream I had. About my dad shooting himself." I tell Krya about the whole dream—I call it a dream although it was more like a vision, or an out of body experience; call it what you want, it was real. I was there, in 2008. I tell her how I watched his brains drizzle down from the roof of his truck.

"It's so selfish to kill yourself. What kind of pussy asshole does that?"

"Fuck you, Kyra."

Kyra smirks.

“No, really. Fuck you, you stupid chink.” I punch Kyra in her pretty face.

* * *

Principal Ryan rubs his temples with his hands. The counselor assigned to me, Ms. Barnes, a lady with huge orange hair, sits in the corner, a yellow notepad in her lap. “Ms. Sweetser,” he says and runs his hand through his short gray hair, “tell me why I shouldn’t call the police. Charge you with assault, or even a hate crime. You were shouting a racial slur, no less.”

I shrug, playing with plastic bracelet around my wrist.

“Well, what do you have to say about yourself?”

I lean forward, so far that the front of my shirt hangs down. “What I have to say is: ‘Mr. Ryan, I’m not going to fuck you. But you can take a good look.’” I gasp.

Ryan rests his head back in his temples and presses harder.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “Mr. Ryan, that wasn’t me. That was Belial.” Was it?

“Ms. Barnes, she’s all yours.” Ryan gets up and walks out of his office.

Ms. Barnes stares, looks down at her notepad and jots down something, and looks back up at me. I sink into the seat, twirl my plastic bracelet. Ms. Barnes reminds me of a chicken. I look around Ryan’s office, glancing at the cloth banner behind his desk that proclaims: *Hope Senior High School is #1* in green and gold. Ryan’s framed College degrees, the picture of his douchey grinning family, a shining example of everything wrong with white people.

“So,” Ms. Barnes says.

“So?” I ask.

“So.”

I look through the half closed blinds behind Ms. Barnes, at the parking lot outside.

“Morgan, how’s your mother?”

“Fine.”

Ms. Barnes rambles on about how she was my mother’s high school counselor and asks if everything is ok at home and a string of other questions which I answer with “yes’s” and “no’s” and “I don’t know.” Oh Serena Sweetser, she was a troubled one. But she had a good heart, she really did. Deep down, she loved you. Boy, did she love you. Sometimes people...

“I haven’t seen my mother since I was 13. Don’t tell me she fucking loves me.”

This shuts Ms. Barnes up. She just looks down at her notepad, and after minutes, jots something down. “Ok, Ms. Sweetser, time to get back to class. We’ll be calling your grandmother later to talk about punishment or something.” She ends her sentence with a sigh.

I walk down the deserted halls of HSHS and enter my calculus classroom. Like I’ve said, I’m the only freshman in AP Calc. I’m surprised to see a sleek red-haired woman in the front of the class instead of plump Mrs. Nelson, forgetting for a moment that Mrs. Nelson is dead.

The woman wears a deep red lipstick, barely darker than her auburn hair. She wears a red dress as well. Her hair is pulled back tight into a pony tail. She takes off her

black rimmed glasses and says, "You're late." This lady looks younger than any other teacher I've ever had, like she'd just graduated high school a few years before.

"Sorry," I say. "I.. was..."

"Speak up. I can't hear you when you look at the ground and mumble."

I look up at the slender woman. "I'm sorry I'm late."

"Who are you?"

"Morgan Sweetser," I say.

The bell rings and I turn to leave.

"Not so fast, Morgan," the woman says. "Come here."

The classroom is a windowless cube of white cinder blocks and green blackboards, a high definition projector hanging from the ceiling, a testament to the uneven funding history of the Hope school systems, new equipment from millages passed, stubs of chalk hoarded during budget cuts.

The auburn woman tells me to sit, and my legs feel instantly weak. As a child, me and Mom had an old dog named Dexter, an orange and white timid Collie, whose back legs would always give out when he was nervous. I felt just like Dexter, unable to bear the weight of my whole body. I clung onto the plastic desk top, supported by a single metal bar, and used my arm strength to set myself in my seat.

"I'm going to be late for Spanish," I say.

"I'll write you a note." The woman walks out from behind the desk in the front and leans over toward me, so close I can feel her breathe on the top of my head. I cross my legs.

“Morgan Sweetser,” she says, as a question and a statement and a command all at once.

“Excuse me.” Ms. Barnes, the student counselor, is at the classroom door. “I need to speak to Morg—“

The red woman, more like a girl really than a woman, extends her arm and points at Ms. Barnes, not turning her face from the top of my head, and the classroom door slams shut. I hear the deadbolt click.

She walks backwards from the desk, and then turns toward the blackboard.

“Do you know who I am?”

“No,” I say. “Should I?”

“No, I suppose not. We do, however, have a mutual friend or two.”

“Can I go to Spanish now?” I uncross and recross my legs; I can’t sit still.

“One question, first. What year is it?”

“Um,” I say. “Um. Ah. Two thousand...”

“Uh huh.”

“Fifteen?”

“No,” the substitute says. She approaches me, again leaning in close. “It is two thousand and sixteen. But you haven’t been staying in 2016, have you, Morgan?”

“I don’t know what you mean.” I look down at the yellow plastic surface. In smudged erased pencil, I can see that someone drew a dick.

“You’ve been time traveling. I can smell it on you,” She takes my chin and lifts my face to meet her gaze. “Do you know what you are?”

I'm scared, more scared than I've ever been of Belial or Father Harris or of the Mothman, my number one monster fear.

"You're a wizard, Harry," auburn girl says.

"What?"

Auburn lady drops my chin laughs, "Oh, I'm just fucking with you. I've always wanted to say that to someone." She repeats, in a Goofy voice, "You're a wizard, Harry." She walks around the desk I'm sitting in, looking me up and down. I feel too weak to move. I've never heard a teacher say 'fuck' before.

"But you do have powers. Magic, if you will."

I giggle, quietly at first. I put my fist to my mouth, trying to hold it in, but laughter spills out of my body. "Are you on Ambien?"

Auburn-haired girl has made a full circle around my desk and stops in front of me, again. She again takes my chin in her arms and I stop laughing. Her irises are brown and look like they're spinning in her eyes, optical pinwheels.

"You don't believe me? Let me show you another reality."

She places her lips on mine, and I feel her tongue in my mouth.

I shut my eyes,

Chapter Six Crucifixion

and when I open them, I'm levitating above my bed, facing the ceiling, in my dark bedroom. I'm in my pink sweats and moonlight streams in the old window, the only light in the room. I hear a scream, someone in agony, and I fall onto the mattress. I must be back in the possession timeline. The air tastes like rubber, like when you bite into a bouncy ball as a child. I stare at the weird patterns in the ceiling; the room is as cold as winter.

Father Harris is in the room, his back facing me. A girl is crying.

"Harris," I shout.

The priest turns and faces me, a wide grin on his face. His body is a silhouette of space vacuum black, minus the white square of a collar. He bows and extends his arm out, like taking a bow after a play. He holds a hammer.

Behind him, someone is hanging from the wall. Like Jesus.

It's Kyra. Kyra's hanging from the wall.

"Behold, my masterpiece."

Kyra's naked, crucified into the wall. Metal barbed wire is wrapped around her head, and rusty railroad pegs in her hands and one in her crossed feet. There are metal hooks protruding out of various points of her body. This is horrific, this is worse than anything that's happened before, the masturbating, the scratches and scars on my body... this is monstrous.

I stop levitating and fall on the bed and roll off the bed and fall to the wood floor, screaming. What has the red haired woman done? Where has she sent me?

“You see, I had to improvise with some hooks to get the bitch to stay up, the pegs just weren’t enough.”

“Kyra,” I cry out.

“Ah, brings me back to Porta Esquilina, the days of my youth!”

“Morgan,” she whispers. “Please help me.”

I’ve had enough. I clench my fists and the metal pegs are pulled out of her flesh and fall to the ground. I take a deep breath and Kyra lifts from the metal hooks. I can move her, control her. Blood gushes from her wounds, falling from her floating body and splashing onto the floor, not in real time, like a slow motion rain drop hitting pavement. The blood leaves a trail from the wall to the bed, and when I set her gently onto the bed, the white beady blanket soaks up red expanding from away from Kyra’s body from all sides.

I turn towards Father Harris and raise my arm, red from eczema. Three rusty railroad spikes float into the air. I point at Harris and the spikes fly toward him, ripping through his chest, and lodging into the drywall behind him.

“You just got *Carrie*’d. Chloë Grace Moretz, not Sissy Spacek. Yeah, Hit Girl, bitch!”

Harris falls back against the wall behind him, hitting his head on the spikes behind him and slumping to the floor. Shit smell permeates the room.

I sit next to Kyra on the bed; its wet and blood soaks into my sweats. I take her head in my arms and run my fingers through her silk hair.

“I’m so sorry,” I say. “Sorry for everything. I love you, Kyra. I love you so much.”

“Those are really clichéd, stupid-ass last words,” Kyra whispers.

“They’re not going to be my last words!”

“Oh yeah,” Kyra says. She coughs up blood and dies.

I stand up, wave my hand, and the naked corpse rolls off the bed. I snap my fingers and the overhead light, and the lamp switch on.

“Seriously? You expect me to believe any of this is real?” I shout, although I don’t know who I’m shouting to. I point to the bloody hooks on the wall. “You think I’d believe you could crucifying someone to drywall. Really? That’d never hold all the weight.” For the first time in a long time, I feel in control.

“Oh my God. You’re calling me fat,” Kyra says.

“Kyra, you’re not fat and you’re not the real Kyra.”

I walk down the stairs and through the house, snapping my fingers, turning on every light as I go. “Also, I wikipedia’d *The Exorcist* in the school library this morning. I can see through your little game. Everything you put me through, it all came from that movie.”

I look in the kitchen. “So where are you?” I shout. “Who’s behind this charade? Belial? Ginger lady?” I open up the backdoor, and peak outside. “Mom?” I walk back into house.

A purple flash of light takes me, and I’m in my cloud room. Sunlight trickles through the cloud walls from an unseen sun. Thank gawd I’m back here. A Snickers bar floats by, almost hitting me in the forehead. I sink into the marshmallow-esque floor and bounce toward my recliner, but stop in place when a long haired, skinny blond guy

wearing ripped jeans and a white wife beater tank top walks out of the wall in front of me. He lights a cigarette and throws the match into one of the liquid metal puddles.

“Matthew McConaughey?”

“No, Morgan. I’m the demon Belial.”

“No, I’m pretty sure you’re Matthew McConaughey, like how he looked in *True Detective*.”

“I’m sure my likeness is purely coincidental.”

“Ok, B. Can you please tell me: What. The. Fuck. Is going on here?”

He takes a long drag of your cigarette. “You, sweetheart, have a potty mouth. And you don’t need an explanation from me, you already know what you have to do.”

“What the cock is that supposed to mean? I’m had it with all this riddle shit.” I raise my arm and try to hit Belial with my newly realized powers, but nothing happens. He blows smoke at me and it knocks me onto the ground.

“Really?” Belial says.

I pull myself up on my knees and stand up. “I’m sorry, ok? Can you please just tell me what is going on, or what I have to do, what quest I have to go on or whatever. Please just straight up tell me something, anything. Please mister.”

“You need to figure out what happened to your father.”

“My dad’s dead,” I say.

“That, little girl,” Belial takes another drag, “is only part of the story.”

“Why don’t you just tell me the rest?” I ask.

“I don’t know? I’m just the messenger.”

“Messenger for who?” I ask.

“I’m forbidden to tell you.”

“Just tell me!”

“No can do,” he says. “I mean I’m really forbidden. Magically forbidden. You see, even demons can be subjected to spells.”

“This is so gay.”

Belial explains that, and he’s not kidding, something bad is plummeting toward our realm. Something really bad, and its approaching really fast—really, really fast. I ask him what I can do about it, and he says that the Coven may be Earth’s only hope from a fiery, explosive death. But the Coven is falling apart... well, that’s getting ahead of ourselves, now isn’t. For now, you must figure out what happened to your father. What *really* happened. Only then can you heal and take control of your real power.

“You have to find Serena.”

I want to ask about mom, but push it to the back of mind. “Even if this didn’t sound like the plot to a god awful Michael Bay film,” I say, “why should I even trust you. You’re a motherfucking demon. You’re evil.”

“You Americans with your good and evil. Everything has to be so black and white for you all. Not everything has to be the ying or the yang. Sheesh. No wonder y’all vote Republican.”

I sit in the recliner, and I want to stay there. Forever. I shut my eyes. “Go away,” I say. When I open my eyes, Belial is gone. Who cares what timeline I’m in anymore. I’m safe here, away from it all.

I don't want to face Kyra and her black eye, to have to apologize for the awful thing I said. I don't want to think about the bullet that exploded dad's brain all over a truck cab, or to remember mom sticking dirty needles into her veins. I wish to forget how I hope my math sub to kiss me again, forget Kyra's bare legs hitting mine on the bus. I want to not remember the coming Armageddon. Let this world die; it has it coming.

I will never find my mother.

I hear fake Kyra's agonizing screams again, like the screams when she was being tortured by the priest. The screams resonate all over the cloud room and when I open my eyes, the room is no longer fluffy and white, but a dark crimson red. The walls drip downward like candle wax or partially coagulated blood. My cloud room is being torn apart. The candy in the sky is ripped and dirty, Crunch bars melting, wrappers half ripped, covered in hair and lint.

Belial appears in front of me.

"Sorry, sweetheart," he says, lifting me out of my chair like the Huntsman carrying a poison apple'd princess, "but you can't hide here. Not anymore." Belial throws me into a liquid metal puddle, which is surprisingly lukewarm.

Chapter Seven Full Disclosure

I'm resigned to apologize to Kyra but she's not on the bus in the morning. I walk down the sticky steps to the front of Hope Senior High School, and head to my first class, which I don't have my homework done for. I don't have my homework done for any of my classes but Calculus actually. The air has a tinge of winter left in it, and the cloudy day makes it hard to breath for some reason, like I keep having to remind myself to take deep breaths.

By the time Calculus rolls around, I'm too exhausted to enjoy the class, which I usually do. The red-haired lady is at the front of the class and has "Ms. Marigold" written on the board.

Her name is Regina Marigold, and she's dressed more conservatively today, than she was yesterday, in a black skirt and red shirt. She wears black rimmed glasses on her nose. I have my books packed in my backpack and am ready to go the minute the bell rings, but Ms. Marigold stops me.

"Sit," she says, and I obey, my legs instantly weak.

She sits in the desk behind me and places her hands on my shoulders. I watch, out of the corner of my eyes, her red fingers press into my shirt as she massages. Her nails burn a bit like cigarettes in my shoulders and back, a burning protected by my sweater but about to burn through and sear my skin.

"Oh, darling, so tense." I don't like her touching me, not today. The feeling of me wanting her to kiss me again fades instantly, and I feel sick to my stomach. She slips her

hands lower down my back. “Oh, a stress knot.” Suddenly, she pushes my back forward, and sighs, as if bored.

“Ms. Sweetser, you really should get out. Have some fun. Go to Cooper’s party this Friday.” How does she know about Cooper’s party? She leans in, and I can feel her breath on my ear. It smells like hand sanitizer. “Your girlfriend will be there.” I shut my eyes tight; Ms. Marigold’s voice is like a mugger in a back alley assault.

“I can help you. But only if you help yourself. Help me help you, Morgan. Help me, help you.”

“What do you want?”

“Very good question. A sign of a smart student is a girl who asks smart questions,” Ms. Marigold whispers in my ear. “I need your help. You scratch my back,” I feel a sharp nail slide down my back, “I scratch yours.

“I want to know where your mother is, Morgan. She has something of mine and I want it back.”

I can hear, inside my head: *Serena stole from me, and I just want back what is mine...* The voice goes dead.

“Ms. Sweetser, were you just reading my mind?” Ms. Marigold says. “Naughty girl.

“The world of magic,” Ms. Marigold says as if answering a question I didn’t ask. She holds her hand in a fist, her red nails reflect the fluorescent classroom lights, opens her fist and a glowing firefly emerges from her palm. The firefly weaves through the air

in sporadic circles. He lands on my nose but I brush him away; he lifts to the ceiling near the lights and flies back down, hovering in front of my face until I go cross-eye.

Marigold continues, “is in a state of decline.” The bug turns black as if burnt by an unseen blowtorch, falls on the desk on front of me on its back, insect legs still shaking back and forth. Marigold pauses for dramatic effect, apparently. She smashes the bug with closed fist and brushes the chard remains onto the floor.

“Your grandmother,” Marigold breaks the silence, “was once the greatest American Clairvoyant this side of the Mississippi. Now she can’t even read *your* mind, her own granddaughter. Grandma doesn’t know about me, or your little cloud sanctuary, does she?”

I shake my head no.

“Magic is dying. But it doesn’t have to be this way. I offer redemption.”

“What do you want with me?” I feel so uncomfortable I want to cry. Ms. Marigold looks like fire.

“With your mother’s help, I can release all the Covens from their misery. They will no longer suffer the humiliation of watching their powers wane. Go ahead, Morgan, read my mind. See that I’m telling the truth.”

Every last Witch and Warlock will be freed from their suffering once I get that locket open.

“Ok, I believe you.”

“Do you, Ms. Sweetser?”

“It’s just that this is all a lot to take in. You’re saying that Grandma Sophie and Mom are witches. You’re saying I can read your mind. You know about my cloud room! That there’s Covens throughout the world. And I have to put up with Belial being a dick and...”

“What did you say?”

“Belial, the demon that possessed me...”

“Belial’s here,” Marigold mumbles, “what’s that asshole doing here?”

“You know Belial?” I ask.

The bell rings.

“I’m late for Spanish,” I say. “Gotta go.”

“No worries. I’ll write you a note. After all, I’m the motherfuckin’ teacher.” With a motion of her hand, a pen levitates on her desk and writes something on a white note pad. The paper rips off the pad and floats to my desk, landing on front of me.

I grab the note and run to the exit, but the doorknob won’t turn. I face Marigold. She’s sitting at her desk, correcting papers. She doesn’t look up.

“Oh more thing,” she says. “If you bring me your mother, I’ll teach you to concoct the Juliet love potion, perfected under the reign of the virgin Queen, the most powerful love spell known. That little girl with the mouth of metal, she’ll be yours forever.”

* * *

The bus pulls up to Kyra's house and stops but some kid up front informs the bus driver that Kyra's not on the bus today. Ok, so if I can read people's minds (sometimes), maybe I could read Kyra's. Maybe I can control her, make her forget about the punch, and then I wouldn't have to say I'm sorry. I could make Kyra stop being suck a retard and making out with Ty and Cooper and any other stupid football player that she talks about constantly.

I play with the seashell locket around my neck. I watch Kyra's large house as the bus pulls away.

You're fucking Jason... Kyra remembers her father saying in her vision. Did your mother have an affair with Uncle Jason?

I can't think about that now. I have to focus on Kyra. I clutch the seashell hard, and close my eyes. Get into Kyra's mind, I say over and over again. But somethings wrong and...

Purple washes over my vision like a 4th of July smoke bomb. I sit up on my couch, groggy from sleep. I don't remember anything since that time on the bus—but it all feels like a dream. What a lousy plot twist that would be, if this all were dream, right? That would be some lazy ass writing.

Yet, I don't feel any of my magic. Ms. Marigold feels like a concoction of my imagination. I glance over at the television remote—it sits on the chair across the room. I reach out my arm and nothing happens so I drop it to my side, off the couch. The remote stays there, unmoved. I want to be back in my cloud room, forever.

I can hear someone in the kitchen. I stand up and itch a big bite on the back of my neck. My leg's asleep and I hop around, trying to shake the feeling. I limp around the room in a circle. I bet I was in some coma and the possession was an elaborate dream. Ms. Marigold, a product of my teenage imagination.

I walk into the kitchen; Grandma Sophie sits at the table, eating a sandwich.

"Grandma, you're home early. Where's Uncle Jason?"

"He called me this morning, saying he's at the Pentagon and that he won't be home for dinner." She turns her big head from side to side. "Bad feeling, bad bad bad." She takes a big bite of her ham sandwich and chews it slowly. "Morgan," she says, "want to explain to me why I got a message from your principle saying you punched a girl while shouting racial slurs."

"Grandma, Kyra was being so mean—"

"Shh," Sophia hisses. "I don't want to hear it." She rubs her temples. "Morgan, also will you please want to explain to me what happened upstairs?"

"Explain what?"

"Oh, don't play dumb with me, child." She throws her sandwich down and stands, her stern face wrinkles like crumpled stress ball in an unseen palm. She lifts her dress and I follow the wide woman as she huffs and puffs her way up the stairs.

Grandma stops outside my bedroom. "Explain this."

"Grandma, nothing real happened. It was all a dream..."

I look in the room and, sitting slumped in the corner, is the corpse of Father Harris, his chest torn out. The room smells like shit.

Chapter Eight
Kyra and the Black-Eyed Children

Kyra Chan stares at her puffy cheekbone in the mirror. How could Morgan punch her? How could Morgan call her that name? She cries.

Kyra's alone in her mom's big house; her mom's working on the campaign at the office in DC and won't be back for the weekend. She'd try to call her mom, to tell her how Morgan had called her a chink, how Morgan had punched her. Kyra wants to tell her mom what a stupid twat Morgan is. What a horrible fucking day this had been and they could eat ice cream and Xanax to ease her throbbing, bruised cheekbone.

The house is large and resonates echoes of EVPs, sounds that vibrate walls but remain unheard. Kyra strains to make out words but hears nothing. Nothing, because it is in her head, right? She stands still, because maybe she hears a spider, and because moving will shake the web, alerting the unseen of her presence, and her stillness is the only thing keeping her from fangs, venom, annihilation.

But I can't stand here in the mirror, motionless, forever, Kyra thinks. Still, she does not move. Perhaps the emptiness has trapped her, like a black hole, into a point of singularity from which she has no reprieve, no escape. There are dull, shaded lamps on, but she only sees the darkness in the corners of the room. Everything is so cold now; spring has been slow to move back to Hope.

When Kyra had got home from school, instead of her mom waiting, there was a note saying: Linda [the housekeeper] will be there in the morning and will cook dinner tomorrow night, but for tonight, to order pizza. Love you. Mom.

And here she is alone in a mirror, brown eyes staring back, but still alone and alone and alone and the reflection of a bruised girl staring back at her isolates her further from the world, mesmerized in a stare from a soulless image. Both images frozen in fear, lost in aloneness.

Kyra breaks herself from her nightmarish reverie and walks into her large bedroom, sits at her desk and checks Facebook. Morgan hasn't been online. She wants to text Morgan and call her a dumb bitch, to tell Morgan she has no idea how it feels for Kyra, the only Korean girl in the whole high school, and how could Morgan call her that... that awful name? And why didn't Morgan have a cell phone? What asshole doesn't have a cell phone in 2016? It's because Morgan's poor white trash, that's why—they can't afford cell phones. Her stupid junkie mom that had to move back home with her Grandma Sophie; no wonder Morgan's dad killed himself. Fuck them. Fuck all of them. Fuck fuck fuck.

Kyra stares at Morgan's Facebook. Morgan's profile picture was taken at the shore, at Kyra's summer home. Morgan's freckled face pressed against her own; salty, curled, sun bleached hair rest against Kyra's straight black locks, Morgan's sunburnt arm outstretched, holding the camera. Morgan's lips are pouty, chapped. She wears a yellow and white striped bikini top, similar to the blue striped bikini top Kyra always wore. That

was so Morgan, always copying Kyra's style. The way Morgan would imitate the way Kyra dressed and talked. The way Morgan hung on every word Kyra said. So pathetic.

Kyra clicks on the "Message" button and types *Fuck you, Morgan* and hits send.

Kyra waits. One minute. Three minutes. Sixteen minutes. Kyra goes to the bathroom to pee and when she hears the message sound, she runs back into her room. She's let down to see there's a message from Ty Lindberg.

Ty: Hey Kyra, are you going to Cooper's party on Friday?

Kyra: I don't know.

Ty: You should! I miss you. I miss the way we'd hang out.

Kyra: Yeah, all that time in your Malibu was so fun.

Ty: For sure.

For a moment, Kyra contemplates telling Ty her mom's away. Let him come over and do what he's been wanting to do to her all year, because what they'd already done together wasn't enough to satisfy and he begged and begged to be inside.

A breeze of chilly air blows into Kyra's room, as if someone had opened a freezer outside her bedroom door and the stale trapped air had been released. Kyra shivers; she quickly opens iTunes and plays her Nicki Minaj playlist, but rap beats do nothing to break the overwhelming silence of the house. The walls feel like they're growing taller but that's fucking retarded, Kyra thinks, because her room is always the same size, but she swears her walls stretch when she looks away, outside the corner of her eye.

Why is it so cold?

Kyra should let Ty do it to her and get it over with and Morgan would be so mad. It would serve her right. Kyra could take pictures of herself naked with Ty and send them to Morgan but, oh yeah, the bitch ain't got no cell phone.

And Ty was a nice guy, he really was. He scribbled out *For a good time call (555) 080-5780. Ask for Kyra* in the boy's bathroom that someone else had written. He was nice, even after he started dating Jenna, and Kyra started making out with his teammate Cooper but stopped when she realized that making out with Copper still wouldn't make Ty care.

Kyra types: Ty, I'm home alone. Come over. I'm so horny.

Her pointer finger hovers over the ENTER key. Come on, Kyra, hit the button. The computer screen goes black and her lights flicker. Kyra taps on the power key and the laptop slowly starts to reboot. Another cold wind, stronger this time, blows through the room even though the windows are shut. Maybe the AC turned on?

Bang bang bang, she hears from below.

Bang bang bang.

Kyra gets up out of her seat, grabs her smartphone, and walks to the top of the stairs, overlooking the entryway below. She waits, knowing they'll go away sooner or later. She descends the carpeted staircase, into the foyer, watched over by a crystal chandelier. She stands face to face with the white door.

Bang, bang, bang.

Who doesn't use the doorbell? If I wait they'll just go away, she thinks, and holds her arms crossed close to her because of the overwhelming coldness, like a leftover gust of winter has somehow broken in and swirls in the empty home.

Bang bang bang.

"Help us, please. Help us." The voice is a child's, a girl, maybe, no, a little boy.

Kyra straightens her turquoise skirt and opens the front door a crack, the chain still hooked.

There are two children standing on the front porch, their heads down, hoods up over their heads. One wears a maroon Hollister hoodie, the shorter kid wears an orange one with a green Nike swoosh. The taller boy seems a little older than Kyra, and the shorter one seems looks a bit younger, maybe twelve, although it's hard to tell because she can't see his eyes. Kyra thinks that they are laughing underneath those hood, although no sound is audible. They just stand there, heads down. Why won't they say anything. Why can't I shut the door, Kyra thinks. Slam it. Slam it goddammit.

"Hey girl, can we come in? We're lost and we need to call our mom."

Kyra feels enchanted, but not like Disney movies. The cold lifts to numbness, and she drops her arms to her side. As if filled with helium, her skinny arm floats up and slides the brass chain lock free and opens the door some more. Suddenly, she's overcome with fear and the cold returns tenfold. There are goose bumps on her arms and becomes so chilled and she has to pee again. Even though she doesn't want to, her body steps back, hypnotized, and she starts to pull the door open—

"Wait," she says, "here, use this." She extends her arm, offering her smartphone.

“Come on, can’t we just come in,” Maroon hoodie says.

“Please, girl. We’re lost and really scared. Can’t we just come in? We need to call our mom.”

Kyra’s so cold. “Call your mom on my phone.”

“We can’t come in unless you tell us we can. Let us in,” the older kid growls.

“Please, I’m so scared. Out here all alone without my mom. I’d feel so much safer inside,” orange hoodie growls.

Kyra snatches her arm back and looks down at her phone. It’s dead, although she had it on the charger since she had gotten home from school. She swipes futilely at the smooth touch screen. She turns her back to the hooded boys, ready to run for the landline phone and dial 911, but why, they’re only children?

“Please, girl. I’m so very much alone without my mommy.” This time Kyra, swears that they are laughing underneath the hood, but doesn’t know why she feels this way, there is nothing but silence and nothing and nothing and nothing and nothing.

The foyer’s so cold Kyra can see her breath. She hears the plea in the stagnant voice, a glint of humanity in the monsters. *So alone without my mommy.* Maybe it’s the faux emotion these words invoked, maybe it’s the immobilizing cold, but Kyra says:

“Ok fine, come in,” and bursts out crying. Kyra doesn’t want to let them in, but has conceded she has no choice in matter. They will do what they want to her. She undoes the chain on the door. She walks backwards and falls on the stairs. The two children enter the house and pull their hoods off. Their eyes are pure black, no irises, no pupils, just a shiny shoe polish black.

Kyra walks backwards until she bumps into the carpeted stairs with her calves, and falls on the carpet. “What do you want,” Kyra says, crying like she hasn’t cried since she was a child.

“We’re here to collect you,” orange hoodie says. He reaches out his hand toward her. Kyra swipes at her dead smartphone, one last gasp of breath for help from the outside world. Their eyes are the blackness of space without any stars, and Kyra knows that any hint of humanity invoked in their words was a ruse, and it’s too late because she’s let them in and now they can have their way with her soul and if she falls limp it will be easier on everyone.

Both boys are standing over her now, black eyes peering down. They’ve paused a moment, staring at her, as if sizing up the prey. No, she won’t stay limp. She throws her phone at them and kicks one of them in the leg but has no effect.

Coldness and some other force weighs down on her and she can’t move. “Why?”

“We’re here to collect you,” repeats the younger boy. Kyra can’t move, can’t fight, only lay there like a doll.

“You can’t have me,” Kyra says. She shuts her eyes.

Then she opens them and runs up to her room and locks the door.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Kyra grabs her laptop and crawls into the corner of her room. She tries to get on Facebook, but the only thing that comes up on her web browser is: *Google Chrome can’t display this webpage because your computer isn’t connected to the internet.* She refreshes and refreshes but there’s no Wi-Fi to be found.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

“Go away.”

Then, there is a *Bang Bang Bang* outside her window. She stands and reaches toward the curtain. *Bang Bang Bang*. It’s impossible, her room is on the second floor. She reaches until her hand grabs the curtain. She doesn’t want to pull it back, she will be hurt if she pulls the curtain back. But she needs to know what is there, what is out there in the dark?

The knocking happens again. This time louder and Kyra wonders what will happen if the glass shatters. She pulls her hand away but then bites her lip and reaches out and grips the curtain in her hand, throwing it to the side.

There, standing still, is the face of the black-eyed child, the Nike child, fist up, ready to knock again. Kyra turns and runs out of her room, down the hallway to the top of the stairs standing at the bottom of the stairs is the maroon hoodie child, blocking the open front door.

“I’m to co—“

“Collect me, I know.” Kyra charges down the stairs, “But it’s not going to happen. Get out of my house.” She pushes the kid out of the front door and slams it shut. Kyra latches the door, turns, and slides down, back against the door.

She waits for another knock.

Chapter Nine
Kyra and the Games She Plays

Kyra didn't feel like going to school, and so she just didn't go. She doesn't feel like seeing Morgan or putting up with the stupid bullshit. She is going to go all the way with Ty this weekend at Cooper's party, just to get back at Morgan. Her black eye better be healed by then.

Speaking of black eyes, the black-eyed children never came back last night, but that didn't mean she could sleep, even though, deep down, she knew that those creatures wouldn't return. They would return someday, though. They would eventually collect her, one way or another.

But not today.

Kyra sits on her bed and wonders if she should call Morgan. Downstairs, she can hear Linda [the housekeeper] cooking dinner. Linda [the housekeeper]'s cooking is so much better than her mother's. Mother's solution is take-out, take-out, take-out.

* * *

Kyra's in her underwear, flopping around on the couch, giggling hysterically. I don't like when she's like this.

"Just have a drink," she says, pushing the Twisted Tea bottle in my face.

I don't want to, but I take a drink. Over her shoulder, I watch Kyra text Ty on her phone: *I'm so drunk!*

Kyra reaches down behind her couch and grabs another bottle, twists off the cap, and hands it to me. "Drink."

I obey Kyra's command. She picks up the remote and turns up her stereo:

I've got one less problem without you. I've got one less problem without you.

Kyra makes me do a chugging contest with her. She wins. This is only the second time I've ever drunk in my life; I don't like it when Kyra does. She steals her mom's liquor all the time; also, she has a pothead neighbor who buys Hard Lemonade for her. I think her mom even knows and doesn't mind. Once, when I stayed over for dinner, Kyra's mom let her have two glasses of wine.

I never see my mom drink anymore. Then again, I never see my mom do anything anymore.

I'm on my second bottle of tea, and am starting to get really annoyed with Kyra. I inch closer to her, but she jumps to the floor and runs around in her underwear and white socks, sliding on the floor, shouting, "*Risky Business!*"

"I don't get that reference," I say.

Kyra approaches me and raises my bottle to my lips and dumping it upside down. I try to swallow but there's too much and I cough, booze dripping from my lips. She's been drinking all day; this must be what it's like for someone to be *hammered*. She straddles me; suddenly, she looks a decade older, at least 25 years old, not fifteen. She's had tastes of the world I've never had and she's aware she knows things I won't learn for years. With Kyra's face so close to mine, I can see the cover up around her swollen cheekbone.

"This is what you want, isn't it?" she says. She takes small breaths, pants like a Chihuahua but I can smell her breath, crisp and clean. I feel her move chest in and out.

I've never had anyone this close to my lips before, besides Ms. Marigold, and her lips glistening with ChapStick, and if I inch forward I will taste her.

She rolls off me, laughing hysterically. "You're such a dyke."

I cry.

There's a knock on the door. Cooper and Ty walk in the front door.

Kyra's face lights up and she slides off the couch to the floor.

"We couldn't get any beer," Ty says.

"We can drink my mom's. It's in the garage. Here, I'll show you."

"Put some clothes on," I say.

"I like feeling free," Kyra giggles, leading the boys to another room. I run out the front door, deep into the dark trail, wiping tears away, wanting to forget Kyra. Forget dad's brains dripping off the cab roof, forget witches and demons. Wanting to forget it all, like amnesia.

* * *

After a long cry in the front yard, I return into Kyra's house. At 9 pm, Kyra kicks Cooper and Ty out, which surprises me. She suddenly felt annoyed, she said, and made them go home, even after they complained. She has her sweatpants on now and sits close next to me.

"I still don't forgive you," Kyra says.

"Fuck you," I say. I hate Kyra so much sometimes.

* * *

Kyra is sick of everyone. She's mad about her black eye. She's mad that Morgan doesn't even mean it when she says she's sorry. Kyra can tell, she sees the loathing hate Morgan has against her. Or was it love? Either way, it pisses Kyra off and she would kick Morgan out, too, if she wasn't still scared of the Black-Eyed Children.

"Kyra, I'm sorry," Morgan says, "I watched you die yesterday and it was awful."

"Watched me die? Are you trying to kill me? What's wrong with you?"

"No, that's not what I mean. I mean, please stop this. I'm tired."

Kyra sinks into the couch. She's tired, too. She wants her mom to come home. It's been three days. Kyra asks Morgan if she'll help clean up. Linda [the housekeeper] will there early tomorrow morning, and will report back to her mother that Kyra hasn't been going to school.

"At least you know where your mother is," Morgan says.

After Morgan and Kyra clean up, they sit back down on the couch. Kyra explains how Morgan can't know what it's like, what it's really like to be one of like three Asians in all of Hope Senior High School, and how the kids always joke that she should be good at math, and that she hates math, and they think their being funny when they say stuff like Kyra ching chung and that it's ok because they're all friends and that she's part of club America, for sure, because they let her be, always the reminder that she is the brown girl, not black and not white, that brownness will always define her at Hope. Like how, instead of calling her pretty, Ty says she's got the Asian persuasion, or how his best friend Cooper said that he wants to bang her because he's "never had an Asian before."

“I’m practically white trash, if it makes you feel better. My Uncle Jason’s the only one making us any money in the family.”

Kyra takes Morgan’s hand in hers and studies her brown fingers intertwined with Morgan’s pinkish skin. “It’s not the same,” Kyra says, “but thanks for saying it.”

“And I think you’re very pretty.”

Kyra’s phone vibrates. “Ugh, it’s Ty. He wants to make sure I’m going to Cooper’s party on Saturday.”

“Are you going to go?”

“Only if you come with. My mom doesn’t like me hanging out with Ty. Did I tell you she asked me if I was sexually active? I was like, Mom, I’m not talking to you about what I stick in my pussy.”

“Hot,” Morgan says.

“Ugh,” Kyra says, “I hate it when adults use the term ‘sexually active.’ What does it even mean? Am I gonna like deactivate some day or is it a permanent state of being?”

“Settle down, Diablo Cody.”

Kyra laughs, “She used to be a stripper, ya know?”

Morgan looks up at the clock on the wall, “I need to get home or Grandma Sophie will kill me.” I get up to leave, and Kyra hugs her tightly.

* * *

This path through the wooded park that always creeps me out at night. The street lights cast weird shadows when leaves shake in the wind. I’m sure snakes are slithering through the bushes, ready to inject death through slimy fangs. The trail

descends and all light from the streetlights disappear, and because tonight's sky is lightless; I can't see a thing. I keep moving forward, however, braving the occasional branch I walk into. I pull a strand of spider web off my face.

Ahead, street lights begin streaming through the tree branches signaling the street. I emerge from the woods. Kyra's big house is down that street, but something above her roof catches my eye. It looks like three separate lights, in a straight line, moving slowly across the sky. As it gets closer, I see that the lights are all connected to one large, cigar shaped craft. There is no sounds, and the strange ship moves at a leisurely pace through the sky.

"Well that's something new," I say out loud.

In an instant, the craft speeds off into the night, as if Picard had said, "Engage."

Chapter Ten
More Disclosure

"I assure that dead body is very real," Sophie says. She clasps her hands together and the room instantly smells of lilacs. She pulls me into the room and sits me on the bed. She walks around the room sniffing, like a dog, and finds an old rag doll off the floor, a doll made of old potato sack cloth, with fish hooks stuck through it. The doll has button eyes.

"Talisman misdirection."

"Is that why I saw Kyra in this room?" I ask.

Sophie nods her head. "This talisman created the illusion of that Kyra being here."

"I saw here get crucified," I say.

"Yes, a vision from magic."

"Who has the power to do this?"

"Anyone with any magic talent at all, really," Sophie says, "It's classic Talisman Misdirection. Basic magic. You learn it in Freshman Voodoo 101." She smells the doll. "However, this has the stench of demon all over it." Sophie stops, and turns in a circle, taking in the whole room. "No, not demon," she corrects herself. "Angel."

"Grandma, I didn't mean to kill Father Harris. Even though he was a dick!"

"No, no, of course you didn't. I want you to listen to me, Morgan; we're all in great danger. We're a hunted breed. There are entities in this world and beyond who would revel in the genocide of us all. That's why we rarely use our powers." She fidgets

with one of her brass bracelets. “But it’s too late, now.” Sophie calls upon the pagan gods, names I don’t recognize; she glows white.

When she stops glowing, she tells me to stand up. When I do, the beady blanket on the bed floats through the air to the dead body of the priest. The blanket wraps around the body and, with a wave her hand, flies into the hallway.

“We’ll deal with the good Father later.”

She places her hand on my head and runs it through my blond hair.

“Oh Morgan, you’ve been strung through different times, different realities. Right now, existence is fragmented. Your realities will soon merge, but until then you’ll feel much disorientation.”

I ask Grandma what I should do, and she says to live life as normal as possible and to use my powers as little as possible until further notice. Grandma says she will concoct a potion to ease the distortion of converging realities, but this won’t excuse her from school. This seems so anti-climactic and begin to cry. What a stupid-ass world where even great magic can’t save us from the mundane.

“The Coven, for so long, has tried to suppress our children’s powers. So you’re not hunted and killed like wild game,” Sophie says. “That’s why we never told you, Morgan.”

I think that explanation is stupid—With these powers, how could any hunter stand a chance against us?—but I say nothing. But I don’t trust Grandma. I tell her nothing of Belial or the visions, not yet. Grandma’s clairvoyance doesn’t seem to work on me, either. Maybe she can’t see through me. It does seem, even with the open

revelation of the strength in her magic, that the powers have limitations. In this moment, Grandma looks like a frail, like a painted Easter Egg that has had its guts sucked out of it and is now just a colored, brittle shell.

Grandma snaps her fingers and the blood and the rusty spikes are gone. I'll sleep in Mom's room tonight. I get up to leave.

"One more thing, Morgan."

I sit back down on the bed.

"You've been cursed. An Amnesia spell. I'd recognize that anywhere."

"How do you know, Grandma?" I ask.

"Because I cursed someone I loved very much with the exact same spell."

"Why would someone do this?"

"It's one of the reason you've been experiencing different time lines. Someone's making you forget something. For good."

"How do I remember? What is being kept from me, I mean."

"There's someone who is powerful enough to break the spell," Sophie says.

"Your mother."

* * *

I lay on my bed in the green room and look at my journal, the one on a yellow legal pad. I write down:

- *I'm a witch. I have the power to (sometimes) read peoples' minds.*
- *I've lived in (at least) two different timelines – because I was cursed.*
- *Witches are being hunted by genocidal maniacs.*

- *Belial warned me of some impending doom.*
- *I have to find my mother.*

I asked Grandma where my mother is, and all she said was that “Serena doesn’t want to be found. I’m not powerful enough to find her.”

I don’t know how to find my mother. Then I feel him there, even though I can see no one. Suddenly, the air is heavier and smells like stale cigarette smoke. “I know you’re here.”

Belial appears, smoking a cigarette. His hair is long and uncombed.

“You are such a scrub.”

“Hello to you, too.”

“You can’t just drop in any time, ya know.”

“I can do what I want. I’m a motherfuckin’ demon.”

I roll my eyes. “Was my mom cheating on my dad with Uncle Jason?”

“Morgan, I wish I could tell you more but I can’t. I’d tell you all about...” Suddenly B. grabs his throat as if he’s choking and falls to the ground. He stands on all fours gasping for breath. “See,” he says between wheezes. “I’m cursed, just like you. I can’t tell you anything. I can’t even tell you who cursed *me*. I’m forbidden.”

“Ok, let’s play a game. Thumbs up for yes, thumbs down for no. Did Ms. Marigold curse you?”

“AH,” B. screams, grabbing his hand in the other. “Dammit, it burns. Stop. I can’t tell you!”

“Fine,” I say, “I see you’re of no help at all. So why’d you come here. Just want to hang out? Shoot the shit? Play some Mortal Kombat?”

Belial runs his hands through his raggedy hair. He’ ashes his cigarette into the air but it disappears before it hits the ground, landing in some invisible ashtray.

“You have a pretty dirty vocabulary for a 15 year old.”

“Get to the point,” I say.

“I just need one more thing from you and then I’ll be on my way.”

“You can’t have anything of mine. Especially after all you put me through.”

“Don’t blame me for your dirty mind,” Belial laughs, “Seems to me that’s not even real anymore. Perhaps, it was nothing but a dream. Look at your stomach.”

I lift up my shirt to expose my stomach, and there are no scares, no hints of HELP ME scars when those words protruded up from my skin. “So maybe it was an alternate timeline, it still happened in some universe.”

“All I need is one more time in your head, I can get what I need and get out of here.” He lunges at me and there’s a flash of purple light.

* * *

After the purple flash, I’m back in my old apartment, back in 2008, with the old shag carpet and my old dog, Dexter, and Mom and Dad fighting in the kitchen. It feels like the same vision as before. A sort of time travel, like Ms. Marigold has said?

“You’re fucking Jason,” my dad shouts at my mother. I hear the commotion, Dad being thrown into the wall, the bottle of Jack crashing into the wall.

I'm in the vision again. The same rules apply... I can't really interact with the physical world around me (although I don't fall through the floor). I see my seven year old self, crying in the corner. There's needles on the kitchen floor among shattered glass. Dad leaves through the back door, and goes down to his truck.

"Morgan," he says, "I will always love you."

I feel his depression. I sense of hopelessness I've never felt before. He wants to die. But it's not him that's talking, it's some weird chemicals in his brain. They're taking over, some drunken imbalance and I can feel it, too. The depression... the strongest curse of all.

I know what happens next. I walk behind the dumpster and here the gunshot echo through the courtyard. I stand face to face with Belial.

"Why do you keep bringing me here?" I ask.

"If you just give me what I need," Belial says, his Mathew McConaughey baby blue eyes growing red. He begins growing larger, fangs growing from his mouth. "Just let your guard down and give me..." I walk over to him and kick him in the shin.

"Ouch," he says, shrinking to his normal size. "That's it! I give up. I'm done."

There's another flash of purple and I'm back in my room. This is all so exhausting. I lay on my bed, my last thought about how I need to see Kyra. I watched her die, even if it was a spell, and I needed to see her alive.

Chapter Eleven

Alone

Kyra holds up her cell phone, as if looking for a signal. There are no texts. She wonders what it's like, where her mother is, working on the Senator's campaign. She opens Facebook on her phone and looks at her mother's profile. Her mother, a Hillary supporter, has the Hillary logo (an H with an arrow), but she scrolls through the pictures and stops at one of her and her Mom at the beach house. Her mom, red haired, slim, nothing like Kyra looks.

Kyra's dad was from Thailand, a physicist, brought over to the United States on some top secret project, something Kyra never learned about, although there are, online rumors about work on nuclear reactors in orbit, something she suspects he might have worked on or some such thing. An eccentric man, with long gray hair, he is big on personality, but small on appearances in Kyra's life. Kyra has watched his Ted talk thirty-one times.

Would it have been bad to kiss Morgan tonight? Is that what she really wants?

A headache begins to form in her temples, and Kyra rubs the sides of her head. There is a text, but it is from Linda [the housekeeper] asking Kyra why she'd been skipping school. Apparently, someone had managed to get in touch with her mother about her absences, which was delegated to Linda [the housekeeper] to take care of.

Kyra ignores the text and lays on her bed staring at the ceiling. Is this what it feels like to be utterly alone? Kyra considers calling Morgan on her landline, even at this hour, but decides against it; her Grandma would bite Kyra's fricken head off if she called this late. Morgan isn't on Facebook, either. Why doesn't that bitch get a cell phone?

She could call Ty, invite him back over, but Ty was so dumb. Just. So. Dumb. And Kyra's scared. She's made out with Ty and Cooper, but they both want more. She has to do it on Friday, at Cooper's party. She has to. The thought of being so close to a person makes her feel more alone than ever.

* * *

When I get home, Grandma Sophie is sleeping, snoring rather loudly. I wish I'd stayed at Kyra's. I tiptoe up the stairs, careful not to wake Sophie in her first floor room and walk by the guest bedroom, the one that Uncle Jason uses, on the way to my lime green room. I stop.

Jason stays at the house once or twice a week, helping out Sophie with cooking and cleaning and annoyingly watching over me. Even when he's not around, he calls to check in. But I haven't seen or heard from him since Monday. Where is Uncle Jason?

Without Uncle Jason around, I realize I feel alone; it's an empty feeling being unwatched over. Sure, Sophie is around, but Sophie always keeps an emotional distance. Perhaps I remind her too much of my mother. Mom hurt Grandma so much, and although they never talk about it, I've heard tidbits from Jason about my mother's "enhanced heroin" (whatever that means) use. Grandma shut down, I guess.

On my bed, I open my journal and write *Thursday, March 27th 2016*

- *Tonight, I saw a UFO*
- *Did Uncle Jason and Mom have an affair?*
- *Is that why Dad killed himself?*
- *Where is Uncle Jason?*

I've cranked the heat in my room (ever since the possession, I chill easily) and I'm sweaty so I take off my shirt. I look at the red zits on my body, the redness down my left arm on my pale skin.

Chapter Twelve Party

I borrow an iPhone from some senior in my Spanish class, Brody is his name I think, sign onto my Facebook account and message Kyra.

I haven't seen you for an hour. Where did you go?

I can see instantly that Kyra's seen the message by the little circle of her picture next to the message. I wait for an answer. And wait. Brody wants his phone back, but I duck through the crowded basement, past the beer pong table, and walk up the stairs to the first floor. Kyra left with Ty on some beer run and I haven't seen her. I don't really know anyone besides classmates I'm not really friends with and I'm tired of trying to make small talk with them.

Cooper's party is a success, and there's freshman through seniors from Hope High School packed into the basement and the first floor of the house. I heard there's even some college kids. Cooper comes up behind me, I can see him in the reflection of the window. He's holding a red plastic cup.

Cooper's house is a two story house, with nice white carpet on the first floor, with a white couch and a gas fireplace someone has turned on, even though this spring evening is warm and the house, packed with people, and the heat is uncomfortable.

"Where's Kyra," he asks.

"I'd like to know that exact same thing," I say. I turn around and when I look up to his face, I see a sadness on his face. Cooper's jealous of Ty.

There will always be people in line for Kyra. I feel sick to my stomach.

“Where can I get one of those cups,” I ask. There’s no way Cooper’s party won’t get busted. There’s too many people here, too many cars lined down the street of his country road. But I don’t care. Let the cops bust me.

Cooper tells me where I can buy a cup and I head downstairs to the keg. Brody is doing a keg stand and after he is done I approach him to hand him his phone back. I glance one more time at the screen and see that Kyra still hasn’t answered my message. I hand Brody back his phone, mutter thanks, and tell him to log me out.

This whole week, I’ve never felt so alone. Still no word from Uncle Jason, and now I’m surrounded by people, tons of people, and no one talking to me. I duck my head down as two girls shove past me. I hate this.

Finally, Brody, who is drunk, approaches me. He says something I can’t make out and I just nod. He’s standing too close to me and as people push by he continually pushes against my breasts, but at least it’s someone to talk to. He asks if I want to be his partner for beer pong, and I decline. I don’t know how to play. The people at the pong table are drinking so fast. I put the red cup to my lips and try to take a big gulp. The dizziness in my head makes this situation more bearable.

I head back upstairs, leaving Brody in half sentence, looking for Kyra. I push my way through the crowd of people. Some kid spills his beer on the white carpet and walks away, hoping no one notices. Two guys are almost making out in the corner. I don’t recognize them; I think they go to a different school.

I sit on the white couch next to a girl and a guy laughing. They laugh at everything—there whole conversations is laughing. I drink the rest of my beer. It tastes

gross. I can see the kitchen from the couch and people are taking something they call Jell-O shots. I can do that. It's Jell-O, right.

I walk into the kitchen and ask if I can have one.

"The frosh wants a shot," a girl from her Calculus class, Claire, who's earning a solid C, says, but laughs a kind laugh. She hands me a small plastic container with pink Jell-O in it. It tastes not horrible, but has a sting to it. I want another.

Claire is friendly, but not my friend. I have to pee, and after another shot, I find the bathroom. I lock the door and take a deep breath. This is too much; I need another beer.

When I return to the living room, it smells like skunk. Brody is sitting on the couch now. The two guys in the corner are still making out. The laughing couple are in the kitchen now, laughing. I sit next to Brody, and stare at his wild, black gelled hair. He has a dark five o'clock shadow stubbly on his jawline. He takes a drink from a glass bottle with a black label.

Jack Daniels.

I remember the bottle of Jack Daniels flying through the air at my father all those years ago. The bottle shattering among dirty needles.

"Can I have some of that?"

Again, Brody is too close to me. "Sure thing, baby girl."

I take a drink and spit it out. I'm coughing; Brody's laughing. He tries to take the bottle away and I say no, and take another, smaller drink, and force it down and keep my mouth shut as it burns my throat.

This is what my dad loved. Whiskey. I will love it, too.

Kyra walks in with Ty, holding a brown bag. Ty carries a case of beer. I make eye contact with Kyra, and she looks away. Kyra, please, I want to shout but I don't, I just stare, stare at her smooth face, straight brown hair. I stand.

I want more Jack.

I walk towards her but she ducks away, down the stairs to the basement. Ty lets out a howl and follows. I don't know what to do. I sit on the couch. I know what's happening, although I don't want to believe it. But I know Kyra. I know she'll follow through, no matter what the hurt. She's going to bang Ty.

I start to cry, and sit next down to Brody. I grab his Jack, and take another swig.

"What's wr—"

I jump to my feet and head down the stairs. Across the room, past the beer pong table, on the other side of the bar there is Cooper and Ty and Kyra and some popular guys and girls creating a clique like a fortress, a collective force of energy telling everyone else at the party that they do not belong with us.

I walk toward them, but those invisible walls look impenetrable. I squeeze in-between Cooper and one of his teammates up to the mahogany bar. I see bottles of liquor lined up beside it.

"Kyra," I say. "Can I talk to you?" Kyra won't make eye contact with me.

"We're about to play drinking games," she replies. Awkward pause. "Well, go get some more beer if you want to play." Kyra is disgusted.

I move to the keg but realize I have to go to the bathroom excruciatingly bad. I go upstairs and wait in line for the bathroom and when I finally get in I can barely take off my pants in time, and almost pee myself. I sit on the toilet and cry.

“Belial,” I whisper. “Are you there? Belial?”

I just hear the dance music now being played loudly in the living room.

* * *

I down more Jell-o shots. Hangs out with Brody, lets him lean in close to her even and tolerate his gross smoke breath in my face. I even play beer pong. Amazingly, the party has not been busted; but, it is winding down and when I walk upstairs, The dance music is off and people have gathered around to watch a movie.

Kyra is there, leaning her head on Ty’s shoulder. Please, please, don’t do this. I go into the kitchen, but never keep them out of my sight. They sink into the white couch, like two throw pillows meshing into one. I grab someone else’s beer, a Busch light, because there’s no Jell-o shots left and the keg has run dry.

“Kyra,” I say, “come here for a minute.”

I know she’s awake, but she doesn’t answer.

“Kyra,” I say again. I know they’re waiting for the rest of the party to leave to go up to Cooper’s parent’s room. There’s a lock on his door. I can’t stand this and walk to the sliding door through the back, onto the deck. There’s some girl sitting on a lawn chair, and a guy puking off the back deck. I’ve seen them around before; I think they’re juniors. I walk down to the yard and around the corner and I can see them through the living room window.

They are kissing now. I want to run and leave. No, I want to stay. I have every right to be here. I was invited to this party, too. Kyra is making the biggest mistake of her life.

How can she do this to me?

I burst through the front door and they jump up, acting like they're still watching the movie. They face straight forward. Finally, Ty says, "Oh, I like this movie. Ant-guy."

"You like Marvel movie?," Kyra says. "They're my favorite."

Kyra hates Marvel movies.

I want to stop myself but I can't. I say, "Get some," and sit down in the chair across the room. Pukey guy from the deck stumbles into the living room and sits down on the floor.

"Oh Ant-guy," he says, "He's funny."

"He's called *Ant-Man* you idiot! So are you two going to fuck," there are plenty of people in the room and I don't know why I don't stop acting the way I'm acting, but I can't. Kyra can't do this. She doesn't want to do it, she's just drunk. My beer is gone and I walk back into the kitchen shaking empty cans until I find a beer bottle that is half full.

Why won't she just come in here and talk to me?

I walk past them again, out the backdoor, to the deck. It's deserted and a cry. Cry loudly. Maybe Kyra will hear.

"Belial," I say, "Belial, where are you? Help me."

I can't take this anymore and so I smash a beer bottle, pull down my pants and cut along my hip. I can't take this.

“That’s what you like, isn’t it, B,” I shout, “to cut and damage me. To destroy me.” There is no answer, just the detached stars, stars long dead, lights from millions of years ago. An illusion.

“Belial, please,” I fall to my knees. “God, please.” Please make this stop.

* * *

Kyra knows she has to do this. She’s drunk enough. Her mom would be mad, she pretends to be this liberal, progressive mom who hands out condoms to teenagers in protests outside of Virginia schools that ban sex ed. Let them fuck, she says.

But Kyra knows her mom would be mad, her fifteen year old daughter having sex... her child...

Why can’t Morgan just leave her alone? She hears her balling on the deck, but she won’t go to her. Who the hell is she to ruin this night? Ty’s here and he’s drunk and she doesn’t care if he has a girlfriend that goes to a different school. He wants her before she gets on Cooper, and that’s what Kyra wants, to be wanted.

She’ll show her mom. She’ll show Morgan.

“Kyra, come here,” Morgan shouts from the deck, “Just please come here.”

“Just text me, Morgan,” Kyra shouts back. Ty grasps her hand tighter and she wants to pull it away. She doesn’t like how Ty’s breathing in her ear.

Morgan runs inside to the bathroom and Kyra hears her throw up. Her first instinct is to run in there, hold her blonde hair back, but not after she caused the scene. No. Kyra can’t let Morgan stop her.

“My mom’s not home,” Kyra says. “Let’s go back to my place.” Kyra stands up and let’s Ty pull her by the hand to his truck.

* * *

If I pull myself up, no one will tell I’m shi-wasted. The cops won’t know if I see them. I just have to act sober.

I wobble down the street toward and fall again, in someone’s yard. In the sky, deep into space, she sees three red lights that collide to form a long, cigar shaped craft. The UFO’s. Are they back? No, no, the sky is just spinning. The red shining cigar thing hovers and then floats away in a blur of yellows and midnight blues.

I text Kyra telling she’s being a “fucking moron” and making the biggest mistake of her life. All she texts back is that she’s going to get a restraining order against me if she doesn’t knock this off.

Some time goes by and I seem to gain some control of my movements. I gain some lost clarity and pull myself up. It’s a mile out from here, but I know where I need to go.

* * *

I’m on the cliff above the river. The landscape rises behind me, creating black shadows in the crevices and rocky caves. I’ve always been drawn to this place. I’m balling. The thought of Ty touching her in places only I’ve seen makes me shudder. Why couldn’t she make them stop? Why couldn’t she make Kyra stop, make Kyra come to her. I could just jump into the river and it would end this all.

“I’m going to get a restraining order,” Kyra had said.

Why doesn't she care? Why is she doing this to me? These questions flood my head and I can't stop asking them, over and over again, like someone spun a Price is Right wheel in my head, only the prices are answers like sex, abandonment, rejection. The eczema on my skin must repulse her. I am repulsing. I want to go back to the white room. I want to stay in the cloud room forever.

"Belial," I say between sobs, uncontrollable sobs that make my core heave, "Belial, where are you? I invoke you."

Belial appears beside me, smoking a cigarette. The rapids below are loud, water shwooshing between rocks and against crumbling cliffs.

"Oh man, kid. What's going on?"

"I hate her," I say, "I hate her I hate her I her," my words turn to sobs.

"Kyra," Belial ashes his cigarette, "I see. Well, um, there are other fish in the sea and well, um—"

"Everybody always fucking says that, but there's not another Kyra fish in the ocean. What about all those times we were happy, on the beach, in each other's arms. It was so perfect. We'd talk all night and now all those memories are gone."

Belial sits down beside her. "It always hurts worse when you're drunk," he says. "Trust me, I know. You know, I loved someone very much once. She was an angel named Belle and she'd give me some attention when she was drunk. Just enough to keep me hooked. Even slept with me once. But she ran with a higher crowd, she was friends with an Archangel, even. But, man, did she have me hooked."

I want to say something to console Belial, but he has no idea what this feels like.

“Your father suffered from crippling depression, ya know,” he said, than grabbed his temples as if he was hearing a high pitched screeching noise. The spell must hurt him when be hurting him because he’s talking about my father. “Just be careful.”

“I want to go to the sky room. Take me there.”

“Kid, you don’t want to spend all your time—“

“I demand you to take me there!”

“One day in the sky room can turn into an eternity here on Earth. You can get stuck there forever and not even know it. It’s not safe—“

“I said take me there you asshole.”

Belial takes a drag of his cigarette and exhales slowly, as if he can calm himself by releasing anger with the smoke.

“I’ll crush you with my powers. Take me there. I know you can.”

“You can get there anytime you want. There’s an entrance to it right there in that cave there. That’s why you’re drawn to this river bank. It’s the entrance to your white room. It was right in front of you this whole time.”

I look at the entrance to the dark cave. The inside isn’t visible in this dark, dark night. I stand and behind to walk toward it, carefully stepping on the gravel, one foot in front of the other.

“Fine, go there. Suit yourself, kid,” Belial says. He stands and teleports away.

But then appears in front of her. “You’ll never find your mother in there.”

“I’ll never find her anywhere,” I say.

“Save the sad song. You’re a witch, of course you can find her.”

I flick my wrist and this sends Belial flying to the rocky side of the cliff.

“Son of a dammit,” he says, and disappears in a flash of light. I enter the cave. It is dark and I can’t see anything. I trip over a rock and tumble into the black and when I land it is in soft cloud. And then light fades in, and I am in my cloud room. A Kit Kat hits me in the head and then floats away into space.

Chapter Thirteen In The Clouds

I wake up in my clothes in my cloud bed. There's vomit crusted on the side of my mouth. For a minute, when I wake up, things are peaceful, till the sadness pours in. Here, it shouldn't matter that Ty's touching Kyra. That Uncle Jason has disappeared. That my mom's a drug addict, or that my dad shot himself. Here, there's only light, only purity, a place that the world below can't touch.

But I can't shake it. The sadness. Even here.

I dreamt that I was back in 2008, at my old apartment. It was the same old dream, Mom and Dad fighting. My nine-year-old self, cowering, then sneaking down to the courtyard to see dad, to watch him blow his brains out.

The dream, that vision, repeats over and over again. But as I breathe in the fresh sky air, things start to get better. I start forgetting. In this place there is nothing but absolution for sins I don't even know I've committed.

Belial appears in front of my bed.

"This is the last time," he says.

"Last time for what?"

"The last time I can come here. You're drifting too far away. Too far even for my powers to reach you. Soon, you will be gone. Time is infinite here, it also freezes, all at once."

"Good," I say.

“Well, if that’s what you want. Just remember, you’ll forget the sadness, but forget everything else, in time, too. It will become a distant memory, like a lost dream you remember the gist of but none of the details.”

Belial sits on the foot of the bed. I pull the covers over my head, but he doesn’t leave. Finally, I sit up. “You know, you reek of smoke.” Sun shines off Belial’s hair like celebrity Matthew McConaughey on a red carpet, not the scrubby Matthew McConaughey he usually looks like. It’s so warm here, I’m sweaty, and throw off the fluffy comforter.

“Do you want a formal goodbye? Fine, goodbye.”

“What about Kyra?”

“I never want to see that bitch again,” I say. “After what she did.”

“You don’t even know what happened,” Belial says.

“Does it even matter anymore?”

Belial sighs and says goodbye, thanks for the memories. And I’m alone. Alone with candy and Netflix and a subscription to Hulu. There’s the endless closet filled with wardrobes and cups with hot chocolate, with little marshmallows, but not the instant kind, real creamy hot chocolate. All I have to do is think about it and it appears by my bedside.

I walk into the cloud kitchen. I don’t think I’ve mentioned the cloud kitchen before. I’m never really hungry here, but if I feel like eating, whatever I want appears. I feel like lasagna, so I open the white oven, and there it is. Everything I could ever want is here, right?

* * *

Kyra had made Ty drive her home. Suddenly she wanted her own bed. So even though Ty drunk drove his truck across town to her house, she did not let him come in.

I'm only fifteen, she told herself that night. Fifteen, and Morgan was nowhere to be found. Her Grandma Sophie called this morning. Sophie assumed that Morgan had gone somewhere with her Uncle Jason, although she hadn't heard from either of them.

It is Sunday, and Kyra's mother had returned home, looking tired. But before she went to bed, she gives Kyra a big hug in the landing.

"After I take a nap, let's go out to dinner."

Kyra realizes that she is not alone.

* * *

I keep floating away from the earth, farther and farther. I look into the metal puddles and they no longer show me any places on Earth, just stars and blue galaxies, foreign suns. Some scientists believe there's another star in our solar system, that the sun is part of a dual star system, but the other star is dim and we can't see it. A brown dwarf they say.

I think it's true. I think that this gravity is pulled be towards our sun's sibling, into a brown darkness so close, yet so unseen.

I look into the puddles and I see something. It's a green ball... a planet, speeding through space. I call out and time freezes. It is something magnificent.

I blue and green planet, hurdling through space. I can see the details of this planet, frozen land masses, huge craters.

I don't know how I know, but this planet is named Kia. She is heading straight towards Earth.

This is what Belial meant, I assume, when he said that something was hurdling towards our planet faster than a bullet. A planet from another star, knocked out of orbit by who knows what (an Archangel maybe—maybe this is his Armageddon?) .

Four thousand five hundred and thirty-three billion years ago, the planet Theia collided with a young earth. Both planets were liquefied. When I was a kid, I used to, laying in my grass, stare up into the stars in the sky. Uncle Jason would tell me all about the collision, the impact, which led to the development of our moon, our planet's sibling.

What would an impact like that be like? I would wonder. Something of such epic proportions. Me and Jason would sit there for hours, and I'd forget for a little while that mom had disappeared, or had come back, I don't even remember. And there, in the sky, was the reminder of the collision of worlds.

Just like what will happen when Kia reaches the earth. Would Uncle Jason, Grandma, Kyra... Mom... how fast would they be liquefied?

Chapter Fourteen

Home

I look into the metal pool trying to see Earth, but no matter how hard I concentrate, I can only see outer space. There's a silence that percolates through the clouds, and I turn up the television really loud, but I can still sense the silence, like if silence hissed like white noise in the background. But silence doesn't hiss, and this lack of soundwaves makes the silence a thing of terror.

I look around the cloud room. There's a dirty plate with a half-eaten piece of lasagna. The homepage of Netflix is on the TV (*Avalanche Sharks* is trending). There's everything I want here and no reminders of Kyra. It is warm here, always warm.

And yet, I think,

Am I too far from Earth?

Is this too late?

Ms. Marigold. Of course! I'd forgotten—she can make a spell.

I look into the puddle and concentrate really hard. I can see it: Hope, Virginia. A little spot of light on the terrestrial surface below. I stand but it fades away and all I see is a waning planet in the backdrop of space.

I try to concentrate again. This time, Grandma's house appears, I'm looking at it from the sidewalk out front. Then it disappears to a river of stars, a branch of the Milky Way.

If I can find my mother, Ms. Marigold will make Kyra love me.

I concentrate again, but just see stars. I think about what Ms. Marigold said about having the power to find Mom.

“Come on,” I say, “I’m a mother fucking witch.”

The puddle becomes clear and then focuses on a person standing on cliffs near an ocean. She stares off into the horizon, the day is cloudy and she shivers a bit. There she is, in Ireland, just like I’ve had in visions. I sigh. Will this work?

I jump into the puddle. It makes me nauseous; I’m in a bubble of what I can only describe as Mercury. I’m falling. Speeding towards nothing. I’m levitate in the middle of the bubble, and have nothing to hang on to. I begin spinning upside down. Back up again. I lose all perspective.

And then I’m on a rocky road. I stand and face the blond woman, turned away from me. She doesn’t notice me. The ocean roars.

“Mom,” I say.

She faces me, shocked.

“Morgan,” she says, and begins to sob. She runs and hugs me. I stand there, and don’t hug back, although I don’t want this to end.

Interlude

“She killed me,” Father Harris says. “That little Satanic girl ripped a hole in my chest me with railroad spikes!”

“Relax,” the shadowed voice, from the other side of the confessional, says. “That timeline doesn’t even exist anymore.”

The priest sits in darkness. “Real timeline or not, I still remember what it feels like to be impaled by a rusty spike.”

“You up to date on your tetanus shots?” The shadowed voice laughs.

“You find this amusing?” the priest shouts.

“Well you’re alive now, aren’t you? Because, if you’re not happy, I can make other arrangements.

The church is cold.

The priest pops a Xanax in his mouth. “I tried so hard,” he says. “So, so hard to expel that demon from that girl. To wash that sin away, to maintain her innocence. Even after the times she touched herself, fanaticized of sin with other girls, I sat at that bedside praying for her. I tried to save her soul. I tried...”

“You’re such a caricature,” the voice said. “I didn’t think they made them like you anymore.”

“I just don’t know what to do,” Harris says. “You dedicate your life, your soul to a belief. And then you see that you’re right. Your blind faith is right. There’s a demon, a straight from the Bible, an unclean spirit, takes over a girl and shows undisputable proof

of unnatural power. For the first time in my life, I knew there was a God. And for the first time in my life. I was terrified.”

“Glad you’ve seen the light. Now we have to kill the girl.”

“I’m want to save her,” says Harris.

“She’s a witch,” the shadow voice says, “a whore to Satan. There’s no saving her now. They’ll rot, and the righteous shall rapture,” the shadow voice laughs just like a comic book villain, “after I kill them all.”

PART TWO:
SERENA AND MOLLY

Chapter Fifteen
The Coven

August 28th 2015

Serena Sweetser sipped a glass of wine, her bare feet buried in the sand, and stared up at the full moon, and realized why her mother had wanted to name her Diana. Perhaps art does imitate life, mythology composed of realities. Of course, her dad forbade the naming of Diana and all its connotations. In one life, Dad had helped hang the witches in Salem, a Puritan soul incarnate. She fingered her seashell necklace, jewelry Sophie had given her, a “priceless heirloom, born from the same sea foam that bore Aphrodite.”

Serena lifted her buried foot from the sand and watched the sand fall from it. In the moonlight, she examined her three bigger toes, the smallest one missing. A stub was still there, and if one had to pick an appendage to lose, she supposed she’d pick her little toe. But still, a missing toe, even a pinky, is a whole different kind of scare, not a scar of pride or triumph.

Back in childhood, on the schoolyard (back in the 90s, when schools for the “gifted” were real things and not just fictional havens for mutants) the clairvoyant children told Serena her powers would peak on a super moon, and she would drink wine with the immortals. Those prophecies were schoolyard imaginings, not real magic, but Serena clung onto the notion, deep in her cortex, that the moonlight would bath her in power until the last of those dreams slipped away softly as she marched into her thirties, the hope of a regained youth dissolved like salt in the water at her feet.

A bat swooped in front of the moon, a cruel reminder of Serena's decline. The cruelest thing the gods could have done to her was to give her the power of flight, then take it away. Everything was taken away. Richard, her high, her daughter, and, if Morgan was to ever learn the truth of what Serena'd done to her, what Serena had made her forget...

She had to leave Morgan, she knew that. She had to do what she did, to save her daughter. Her daughter, too powerful, too inept to handle her power. So Serena hid Morgan's power. Serena had the power to do that; Serena was even more powerful than her mother, Sophie. Perhaps the reason Morgan was even stronger, the child outshining the parent. So much to hide from Morgan, so much to conceal.

Serena picked up a handful of sand and watched the sand sift through her fingers, and laughed out loud clichéd metaphor: "So are the days of lives. If only I had an hourglass." She was aware of the woman approaching from the road above, but did not turn around.

"Serena," the woman said, "the ceremony is about to begin."

"So let it."

"They're waiting on you. The coven needs you."

Serena grabbed a handful of sand from the beach. "The coven is useless. We," she said, twisting her body to face the old woman, "have..." Serena threw the handful of the sand at the lady, exploding over the black dress on her wide chest, "no power. Look at you, a clairvoyant who can't stop her own daughter from covering her in dirt."

Sophie Sweetser's gray streaked hair was on top of her head in two large braids. She wore three heavy necklace with some pagan importance that Serena had long forgotten. Sophie watched the sand fall from her silk dress back to the beach, hands on her wide hips.

Sophie drew in a deep breath and let it out even slower. Then, with a whip of her hand, a ball of beach sand levitated from the earth and flew at Serena, striking her in the face. Serena gasped and rubbed at her tearing eyes, forced shut and burning.

"No power, eh?" Sophie whispered. She turned and proceeded back toward the boardwalk. "Hurry up. The commencement ceremony must begin soon." Serena pushed her fist deep against her eyeball and blinked, and blinked and blinked and blinked and blinked and blinked. The sand was rough and felt like it was tearing apart the cornea, wet eyelids trying to wash away the scratches.

* * *

The regional leaders and the elected high council sat in a circle of chairs in the Hyatt Inn Conference Room B. Serena was the last person to enter. Her daughter, Molly, the council's newest junior member, said, "Finally, we can begin."

The leaders traditionally convened in a circle to forego hierarchy, and the titles of the members (vice prime leader, junior member, high leader) were supposed to organize a hierarchy of order and prestige, were now so convoluted they had been rendered laughably meaningless.

Sophie Sweetser, the high leader of the Southeast coven and Vice Prime Leader, held the responsibility of initiating the annual closing ceremonies. She put black-rimmed glasses on her large face and looked down at her iPad, scrolling to the attendance list.

“...Jill Wuorenmaa.”

“Here.”

“Michael Payne.”

“Here.”

“Molly Sweetser.”

“It’s Molly Berry now,” Molly replied. Molly, wearing a navy blue pants suite, sat back and set her folded hands in her lap. Her black hair was cut short and she wore dangly ear rings.

“Sweetser women always keep their name,” Sophie said. “And, I must say, Molly Berry is a hideous name. You sound like a Care Bear.”

“I’m married to Bo Berry. My last name is Berry.”

Sophie stared at Molly, and the silence went on for so long, the witches and warlocks began squirming in their seats. Serena finally said, “Mother” and Sophie continued the attendance list. “Now begins the formal commencement of the 2015 Eastern North American—”

Michael Payne, the skinny Brooklyn regional leader stood up; his blue eyes illuminated white. He levitated in the air, arms down, palms open, his head glowed a white light, not unlike a sunburned Jesus.

“It is coming,” Michael said, not in his regular voice, but a deep, booming baritone that resonated like thunder through the room. “The bringer of death will destroy us all.”

Serena rolled her eyes. “Fucking clairvoyants. Yes, we know, the Archangel is coming. He’ll kill us all.”

“Will you let me have my moment,” Michael said.

“Fucking A.” Serena nodded her head, “Okay, continue.”

“Thank you,” Michael said, still floating in the Jesus position. “Like I was saying,” his voice became deep again, “The bringer of death, which is not in any way related to the Archangel, is coming to destroy us all. It is hurdling its destruction toward us at 30 million miles an hour. Her name is Kia. We’re all going to die!”

Serena snorted. “We were all born to die.”

Michael continued to float in the middle of the room.

“Well—” Sophie said.

“So ends the prophecy,” Michael said. “I just have to wait for this to wear off before I can descend.”

* * *

Serena sat at the hotel bar, finishing off her fifth glass of wine. The bar, gray marble with sleek black leather seats, overlooked the spacious lobby of the hotel, an early season wedding party had was congregating by the escalators below. Two of the middle aged groomsmen high fived over some comment; Serena couldn’t make it out, not because they weren’t talking loud enough (they were shouting) but because there

speech jumbled into a slurred mesh their words were only translatable by a fellow drunk. That is why she rarely drank anymore, that, and because she's an addict. At least drinking wasn't hard drugs, right?

Serena was encapsulated with the drunken mess in the lobby down below, the faux happiness that weddings perpetuate, until the drunkenness goes bad, and then the marriage goes bad, and everything hurts. Those bro-skies will wake up tomorrow and won't admit that their lives are pathetic, that they peaked at 21, college was the last time they'd ever enjoy life, everything else is just fake. The bridesmaids brainwashed to cater to those dipshit groomsmen, till death do they part—fooled into thinking that this patriarchal world is of their own making, pretending not to notice the windows in the rooftops that let sunlight and happiness in are, in fact, glass ceilings.

"May the happy couple be blessed with eternal suffering," said Serena.

Even without her heightened sense of intuition, Serena could sense that her daughter had sat down next to her. But Serena didn't look away from the wedding party below; she doesn't want to fight. She took her glass of wine down in three large gulps and ordered another.

"You really need another glass?" Molly said.

"I really do."

"Well, then I do, too." Molly ordered herself a pinot noir. The bartender set down their drinks on the bar, and they sipped in silence.

Serena turned to face Molly and rested her bare elbows on the shiny gray bar.

"Did you really change your last name?"

Molly smiled, although Serena sensed reluctance. “I did.”

“Did you see the look on Sophie’s face when you told her?” Serena said.

Molly laughed and lifted her wine glass and Serena cheered it.

“Mom, what do you think about what happened? About Mike’s prophecy?”

“Oh, apocalypse schma-colypse. We face them all before and we’ve always survived. In medieval England, we won the game of thrones, prevailed in the Warlock wars of feudal China, defended Pride Rock in Africa, defeated the Dark Lord Louis XVI by inciting the revolution, Kennedy covered the missile crisis, and that Ash fellow dealt with the Necronomicon. Hercules defeated Dahok, Xena stopped Ceasar, and Gabby killed Hope. We neutralized the Courtney Love anti-Christ by introducing her to blow. We’ve protected this planet time and time again.”

“But, mom, they’ve sent an Archangel. They’ve never done that before.”

“They’ve sent him here to mock us. An angel to thrust the final prick into our bleeding wrists.” Serena felt anxious and needed to drink more. Drinking never worked to even take the edge off. She wanted something stronger. America’s dirty little secret: Rehab was a joke. It never took away the craving, and when you mixed heroin with the *jouissance magic*, well, after that... Dante wrote of damnation and Joss Whedon sent Angel to a hell dimension, but they both got it wrong. Earth is the inferno; reality is the hell. Serena knows this is not an original thought—not a secret lost on anybody but worth stating all the same.

“Our power is waning,” Serena said. “It has been for years.”

“So we just give up?”

Serena slammed her wine glass on the table, and was surprised she didn't break it. "I know when to fold. If the Archangel doesn't kill us, this Kia bitch will, whatever Kia is."

"You know, mom, I thought you maybe you would care about something for once in your life."

"Oh, ultraistic words coming from the daughter who ran away when she was sixteen," Serena said.

"That's two years older," Molly said, face red, "than when you got high and jacked up on magic heroin and got knocked up in a paranormal orgy."

"You don't know what it was like..."

"I'll make you a deal, Mom. I'll give a shit when you figure out who my father is." Molly jumped down from the stool and walked out of the bar. Serena watched her disappear into the elevator and laid her head in her arms. "Another, please."

"Lady," the bartender said, her thin hands drying a glass, "already gave last call."

Serena sat up and snapped her fingers. The bartender's face went blank and she stared off into space.

"I said, give me another drink."

"Yes, sir." The bartender poured another drink.

Serena twirled the glass in her hand, watching white wine whirlpool. "What do you want from me?" Serena said aloud to the bartender, but speaking to no one. "I used to fly."

* * *

Molly Berry lies on her hotel bed when there's a knock on the door, and it's Sophie. She tries to blow her grandmother off, to let her get some sleep, to deal with her tomorrow, but her grandma pushes her way into the room.

"Your mother's done something terrible," Sophie says, sitting on the white comforter. Sophie can tell that Molly's annoyed, and still mad at her from the conference, but doesn't acknowledge this. This conversation is too important.

Hesitantly, Molly replies, "Yes, I know. I can sense it, too."

"Let's talk to her tomorrow. Let's get the truth out of her."

"I agree," Molly says, "we need to figure out what Mom is up to."

Little did they know that Serena had already left the Hyatt, already left the state. Serena needed a fix. She needed the *jouissance* she could shoot up into her veins. She could forget all of this.

She was heading into hiding, where she would never be found.

Chapter Sixteen
In Exile

February 14th 2016

Valentine's Day

Serena walked onto the gigantic cliffs, the ocean crashing below. The waves were huge, deadly exertion of ocean slapping the shore, reminding land creatures where they came from and who still ruled this planet, the rage of Poseidon, a father and monster.

“Belial,” she shouted, her voicing echoing through the surrounding caverns.

“Belial, I know you can hear me! I invoke your presence right the fuck now.”

The ragged blond haired demon appeared under a flurry of moths circling a towering street light.

“Serena, what? I was sleeping.”

Serena ran up to the demon and slapped him across the face. “I gave you one job. One job and you couldn’t even do it.”

Belial rubbed his cheek and backed away slowly. “You listen here, Sweetser. I tried for months, for *months*, to pull that memory from your daughters head. I told you she was too powerful, but you and your hubris thought you could erase the past, and it all went to shit.”

“You’re a motherfucking demon. You can’t extract a memory from a teenage girl?”

“Serena, just tell her the truth. The amnesia spell won’t last much longer and she’ll know what happened. It’s better you just tell her and no more chaos will happen.”

“Nothing would have happened if you had just found the memory and erased it in the given time frame. Then reality would have altered back as if the possession had never happened, and the memory would be torn from Morgan forever!”

“It’s not an exact science, Serena and you know it. I specifically told you that she was too powerful—“

“I don’t want to hear your pathetic excuses.”

Belial rubbed his temples. He turned and looked over the cliffs, at the stars and breathed in the ocean air. Serena broke into his mind: *So bizarre, a demon breathing, and yet, in this human realm, I still needed oxygen. Who would have thought that such power could be contained in the mortal coil—*

“Hey,” Belial said, “get out of my head you crafty broad.”

Belial looked distracted, not focused, but he reminded Serena of the Archangel hell bent on killing them both. He couldn’t tell what form the angel would take, or where he was, but could feel it, could feel the tinge, even in the vacuum of space, that the angel had arrived on this plane.

The angel could be anywhere.

The ocean retreats from the cliffs, rumbling like white noise, before another wave crashes.

“You can’t tell me where the angel is. You can’t break my daughter’s will. She’s just a child. You’re useless,” Serena said.

“I don’t much care for your tone. Months of work and I haven’t even been paid yet.”

“You’ll get paid when this mess is cleaned up.”

“That was not the agreement,” Belial shouted. “I will be paid as promised. Heed my warning, mortal woman. I am Belial, ruler of the order of the Sons of Darkness, begotten by the dark lord Damascus, anointed by the blood of...”

Serena snapped her fingers, casting a silence spell, and Belial lost his voice.

“Go back into Morgan’s mind, uncover the memory, and destroy it. Then you will get what you want.”

Chapter Seventeen
Doomed

September 1st 2015

Molly punches her fist into the drywall of her and her husband, Bo's, tiny DC apartment.

"Molly, please," Bo says.

"Molly that is enough," Sophie says, sitting at the kitchen table. "Serena ran away. Like she always did, and always will. But you need to keep it together."

"Why do I always need to keep it together?" She runs her hand through her short black hair. "She's supposed to be the mother."

"Well, we need you now. More than ever. They've sent an Archangel here to kill us," Sophie says, her hands folded. "That's apocalyptic level seriousness. And this thing's coming. It's coming fast."

"That's what she said," Bo says, laughing.

Molly snaps her fingers and an invisible hand slaps her husband across the face.

"Hey, quit with that witchcraft shit," Bo says, defeated.

"You need to be there for your sister," Sophie says. She stirs the cup of tea in front of her. "Serena's gone and you know she's using her magic to hide. We'll never find her unless she wants to be found. It's up to us now to protect this family. To watch out for your sister—"

"Half-sister," Molly snaps back.

"You don't know that," Sophie says.

Bo, dark haired and deeply brown eyed, looks at his watch. "Since y'all are witches," he says in his slightly southern drawl, "why not just cast a spell to figure out once and for all who Molly's father is."

"Serena's magic is powerful. She cast a spell blocking any paternity spells long ago. As for as Mom's concerned, I'll never find out who my father is."

"It can't be broken?" asks Bo.

"Trust me, I tried. Serena denies doing it, but she did it," says Molly. "The blocking spell has my mother written all over it."

"There's one way," Sophie says. "Oh dear, I shouldn't have said anything." Sophie puts the cup of tea up to her lips.

"What is it?"

"Well, Serena is a very powerful witch," Sophie says, "we all know that. Even the best of us could probably not break the spell. Breaking spells are much harder than casting them. But maybe a family member capable of astral projection into the past could bring you to the past, to see what happened all those years ago."

"Who are you thinking?"

"Your sister Morgan."

"My half-sister!" Molly folds her arms across her chest. "As far as we know, she has no powers at all. Nothing has manifested in her."

"She's still young," Sophie says, "and I've sensed power in her. Astral powers."

"Grandma, that's out of the question. I'm not asking Morgan."

"Honey," Bo says, "why do you hate her so much?"

“I don’t hate her. She was just Serena’s golden child. The one destined to have all these powers. But now Mom’s gone and Morgan’s a spoiled let down.”

The house is chilly. There’s silence, and the three of them listen to the cars drive by on the street outside. It’s a strange feeling, Sophie thinks, to have an Archangel chasing her and her kind. What kind of power must he have? Was this the end, the six extinction come to fruition? The end is inevitable, sooner or later, Sophie supposes. They say that when the asteroid that killed the dinosaurs hit the earth, the dinosaurs on the other side of the world could feel it.

If a gamma ray hit earth would strip away its atmosphere, leaving its species there to burn. In 1.5 billion years, our sun will grow to a red giant. The very land you’re standing on now will be dried to dust. All the water on the planet will evaporate. There will be climate changes and someday the orbits will become so distorted planets will collide.

The earth is doomed. Humans are doomed.

But there have been asteroids and planetary collisions and climate changes before. A gamma rays may have caused mass extinctions in the past. Life always bounced back, sooner or later.

But the world had never seen the wrath of an Archangel. What new kind of terror could this bring?

* * *

Serena sat on the cliffs, looking down at the ocean below. There was a time when she could fly out, into the sky, under the moon. Before it all went to hell.

Serena's greatest power was to turn herself invisible and fly. She would sail above the land, above the ocean. She would fly long after Sophie went to bed, looking down at the lights of city of Hope below. Serena would fly so high she could see her breath and cold winds gusted, and she would go higher, until she was tossed around, losing control, tumbling down toward the earth until she could reestablish herself in the air.

Serena's father was a witch hunter. Her mother was married to him for years, the hunter in deep cover. And yet he loved his family, he loved Sophie from the start. He turned from his hunter ways and they moved to Hope.

But it was too late. It took years, but his organization never stopped trying find him. His Witch Hunters organization had tracked him down, tracked her family down. The hunters, two of them, attacked in the dark. They used magic camouflage, just enough to overcome Sophie's clairvoyance, and by the time Sophie realized her household was under attack, one of the hunter's had cut off Serena's smallest toe, binding her to the ground— she would never fly again.

Sophie and her Coven managed to send the hunters away, cursing them with amnesia. She cursed her husband, Serena's dad, with amnesia and left him somewhere up the East Coast with no memory of his life. The last time Serena saw her father, it was on the sidewalk outside of Sophie's house in Hope. He had no memory of who Serena was, who he was, where he was. A blank slate of a man. Sophie took him away the next day.

"He is dead to us," Sophie said to the 11-year-old Serena, "your father is dead."

My own father, Serena thought, brought this upon me. Grounded me until a die. A few years later, Serena ran away. She found others like her, a commune of wayward witches and warlocks and a few mortals thrown in. That's where she met Richard. It was a free love community full of magically enhanced heroin. They would get high, make love, sometimes there were even orgies.

Soon after, Serena got pregnant with Molly.

The ocean below her was so loud, it was able to drown out the pain, if only for a second. Serena had rented a small apartment in the small town down the road a mile. She was an hour out of the city, where she could go to score what she needed.

Serena knew she must stay in exile. Morgan and Molly could never see her like this. Is this how dad felt? Alone, by the ocean, having no connection anymore to the things that always will matter to them, just out of reach. Is this what Richard felt like before he was shot in the head?

Serena's thoughts always went back to one single time. A time when she could honestly say she was happy. It was summer, and they were in a field, just outside the commune, near Lake Michigan. The commune just outside Kewanee, Wisconsin. She was fourteen years old.

The bugs were terrible, and the weeds made her sneeze, but she still lay there, in Richard's arms, who was almost 16, still a child himself. But they had already lived lifetimes of drugs and free love and all things she was too young to do, but did anyways because fuck them, Sophie and her dad. Fuck them for causing her little toe to be cut off, to be maimed.

Now here she was, 37 years old, pushing 40, with little to show, little different from her 14-year-old self.

Belial appeared behind her.

“Serena, W. T. F. What are you doing here?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“You’re using again, aren’t you? That’s why you left.”

“Just get that memory cleared from Morgan’s memory, I will give you what you want, and then we can part ways and I don’t have to see your ugly mug.”

“Serena, I—“

“Please get that memory erased. She can never know the truth.” They say the truth will set you free, but not for people like me, Serena thinks. Not with the life I’ve lived. The truth only destroys.

Chapter Eighteen

Reunion

I stare at the mother I haven't seen in months, after her long embrace. The air is chilly and I'm dressed much too cold for this weather in my jeans and t-shirt. I still feel hung over. Wind blows off the ocean, and it is raining a little bit.

"Why did you leave?" I ask.

"Because," Mom says, but hesitates. "So many reasons. I see you've realized your powers."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Despite the cold, my mom is in a sun dress and wears sandals. She points to her foot, her pinky toe missing. "This is what they did to me," she says. "The price I paid for being a witch."

"You can't shelter me from the world forever. I'm not a child. God knows, I went through a possession"

I notice something behind my mom, in the distant horizon. There are three glowing lights over the ocean, which combine to form a long, cigar shaped craft. Mom finally turns around and sees a long ship in the sky as well.

"What kind of X-files shit is that?" says Serena.

The craft disappears in a blink across the horizon to the west. I wonder if the destination is Hope.

Chapter Nineteen Going Home

Serena knew, standing there on the cliff, face to face with her daughter, she had to go home. Her daughter had discovered her magical powers and used them to hunt Serena down. Sooner or later, the amnesia spell would wear off if she wasn't there to make sure the spell stayed in commission.

Morgan could never know the truth. It would destroy her. That was Serena's gift to her daughter: the gift of ignorance.

Serena returned, with Morgan following behind, her little blond daughter with teenage zits on her face, to the little cottage in the little town she's been hiding in for almost a year.

What would Molly think when she returned back to Hope, Virginia? Would her mother, Sophie, scold her? What kind of monsters waited at home?

Teleportation is not a power witches have. So how had Morgan found her?

Belial, thought Serena, I'm sure that dumb kid has something to do with it.

No, teleportation was not a power witches had. So Serena booked a flight for her and her daughter to the Ronald Reagan National Airport.

* * *

Serena waited in the living room. She heard muffled words between Morgan and Sophie, but she couldn't make out what they were. She hated this; she wanted to leave so bad, but she came all this way. Jet lag was killing her and sleep was so enticing. But she had nowhere to sleep. All that money that she stole from that bank using her magic was hidden in a Cayman bank worlds away. Until she got some funds here...

Sophie came into the room, her black pants suit too big for her body. She had lost weight since Serena had seen her last, that night on the beach so many months ago. Stuck on that couch, while the other Sweetser girls had talked in the other room, Serena had nothing to do but reflect. How did her daughter find her? Witches couldn't teleport. How did she just appear on the coast, out of nowhere?

Someone barged in the door. It was Molly; she stood face to face in front of her mother.

"Why'd you even come back?"

"Morgan found me."

"So, she knows."

"Yes, she knows." Serena sighed. "Well, about her powers at least."

"What else is there to know?"

"There's always secrets. You know that."

"Yes, I do."

Sophie entered the room, with Morgan following behind her. The Sweetser women, all together. Something that hadn't happened in years.

"I have to go away," Serena said.

"Of course," Molly said. "Of-fucking-course you do."

"Please, trust me. I will be back. Just have to go. For 30 days." She stood and walked toward the door.

"Mom," Morgan said, her blond hair falling around her small, zit covered face. She was a thing of beauty.

“I’ll be back. I promise. This time I will come back.”

Chapter Twenty
Morgan Goes Back to School

I see Kyra on the bus but don't sit by her. I don't make eye contact.

Kyra hates me.

I go to class and try not to think about her. I can't. All I want her to do is see me. I want her to see me not talking to her.

There's a man standing in the hallway of the school when I exit Spanish. I don't recognize him at first, and I think he's some janitor or maintenance guys until he says, "Morgan."

I look up and see Mathew McConaughey, or, um, I mean the demon Belial.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, looking around embarrassed.

"Don't worry, no one can see me. Meet me out back right now."

"I'm at school," I whisper, hoping no one sees me talking to a guy no one else can see. Ty Lindberg walks by with some teammates and I tilt my head down, letting my blond hair cover my face.

"You need to know the truth."

"I thought you there was a spell on you forbidding you to tell me?"

"There is, but I'm a demon, I can try to break the spell, as much as it will hurt."

"Why didn't you before?"

"Listen, kid, if I broke the spell I wouldn't get paid. But it's not even about payment anymore. You need to know the truth so all this madness can end..."

I turn the corner of the fluorescently lighted hall in a quick pace and push past a group of freshman, past my AP Calc classroom. Kids just walk through Belial without noticing, although a few people shiver as they pass through.

“Ok, fine, I’ll meet you out by the...”

Ms. Marigold walks out of her classroom and come face to face with Belial.

They both stop and time around me freezes, like literally freezes, with high schoolers frozen mid stride. At the end of the hall, Kyra’s frozen in a never ending nose scratch.

“You,” Ms. Marigold says.

“Oh, shit,” Belial says, and turns and runs down the hall but Marigold pulls a glass vile out of her purse and hurls it at Belial’s back with unnatural speed and force. It smashes against his plaid shirt and begins to steam and sizzle.

“Oh, son of a bitch,” Belial says, tumbling to the ground, falling through two senior goth kids. “This Holy Water stings like a bitch. It’s, like, extra strong, or something.”

Marigold shoves me out the way and shouts something in latin and a huge shiny bladed sword appears her hand.

“Demon,” she commands, “the power of Christ compels you.”

Belial pulls himself up, leaning on the lockers in the wall. In her free hand, Marigold throws another vial of holy water at the demon, and he crumbles back to the ground.

“Fuck shit balls that hurts,” he shouts.

“The power of Christ compels you,” Marigold repeats. Two huge red and black feathered wings unfold from her back.

“So this is where you’ve been hiding put, Regina? In a high school. Tapping the fresh meat?”

“Demon, by the power invested in me by the lord and savior Jesus Christ of Nazareth,” she raises her sword to the ceiling, “I cast you out!” She plunges the sword into Belial’s chest and blood pours from him like a fountain. There’s a flash of light that sounds of thunder, and after what feels like an earthquake, time resumes and the students shuffle down the hall.

I lean against the locker wall, gasping for breath. The angel is vanquishing my demon, and I hate her for it. Ms. Marigold has returned back to her normal, contemporarily black dressed teacher. She saunters back over to me and rips the locket off my neck.

“You killed him?” I ask and say all while trying to take in air.

“I slayed your demon. You’re welcome.”

“But you just stabbed him...”

Marigold grabs my t-shirt and throws me against the locker. The back of my head resonates against the metal and there’s a jarring flash inside my brain. My try to throw her with my power, but I can’t do it. She has. So. Much. Power. The bell rings and most students are in their classes, but the few that linger stop and stare at me and Marigold. She turns and hisses, like a snake, at them and they run away.

One of the kids, a kid in my English class named Mason, runs by and she reaches out and touches his chest. He clutches over and falls to the ground, shaking violently. Foam begins pouring from the lips on his tiny boned teenage face. He rolls around more like a cat in heat than a boy.

I scream. Marigold lets go and I fall to the ground.

“Goddamit, what’s wrong with you?” I say.

“Uh uh uh,” she says, waving her finger. “Name in vain. You see, Ms. Sweetser, we all must atone for our sins. Every last one of us.” She kneels down near me and she runs her finger down my face, and I feel her wipe away a tear with her long red nail. I won’t look at her but feel her breath in my ear.

“Ms. Sweetser, your salvation is on the line and my patience, although next to Godliness, is running thin. I know you know where Serena is, and only she can open that locket that you’re wearing around your neck. Only then am I able to save you. If not, there is nothing I can do for your wayward soul.”

Marigold stands and I reluctantly look up at her. She walks to the seizing Mason and kicks him.

“Ms. Sweetser, those who choose the path of the righteous shall have their rewards. And those who turn their back on our Lord meets the flame.” She kicks the boy again. “That girl, Kyra, I’d hate to see her meet a similar fate to this boy here. That really would be a shame, wouldn’t it?”

“Leave Kyra alone,” I shout angrily, although I stay huddled on the ground, powerless.

“Bring me Serena,” Marigold shouts back, “or feel the wrath of our lord.” Then she lets out a blood curdling shriek. I cover my ears. Marigold falls to her knees in fake horror. “Someone, help, please call 911,” she pleads, and leans over Mason’s body. “I think he’s dead.” She glances up at me and winks.

Ms. Marigold is an Archangel, a thing of terror.

Part II Interlude

The Archangel Regina Marigold sits on her alter, with her legs crossed. Her and Harris have built their base in Father Harris's church, a two tower'd stronghold of stone, a testament to darker times, a dark chapel, lit by dull lights and tiny candles. Regina has placed a protection spell on the church.

Father Harris sits in the front pew, a sweaty mess.

"Quite your shaking," Regina demands. "Nothing, not a single thing, from this world can penetrate this spell. You're safe here."

"You almost killed that kid," Father Harris says. "Why would you do that?" The priest sits in a pew in the front row. He holds a chalice full of communal wine.

"To get a point across. No worries, you fat bastard. If he dies, he'll just go to heaven."

"That doesn't seem right. How can you get away with that?"

"The big guy upstairs has empowered me with the power of the greatest angels. That power is mine to keep and the apocalypse is coming and, as prophesied, and guilty human race shall pay for their sins in explosions and blood."

"The melodrama," Harris mutters under his breath.

"What was that?"

"Nothing."

"I thought not." Marigold's red face matches her dress.

"Why must this end. What's wrong with this world?"

“You really have to ask that question. It’s the year 2016, and yet, who’s the American savior, white as purity?”

“I don’t un—“

“You wouldn’t understand,” Marigold says, “You’re a moron. The little blond girl as savior. The Asian as sidekick. That is why this world must burn. “

Chapter Twenty-one

Love Spells

Serena sat on the white sheeted bed and knew that Belial was dead. Sunlight streamed in the windows that overlooked the courtyard below. She felt dizzy.

He was just a demon, she kept reminding herself. He was just a demon.

She remembered the conversation they had had before all this had started. It had been Halloween, maybe, when she had first invoked him. In a nearly deserted Walmart parking lot built over an ancient dark temple, a place of revile and intrigue in the ancient world, she invoked him. First, she had snapped her fingers, breaking all the security cameras in bursts of flames.

Then she poked her finger with a needle, a tiny drop of blood dripping onto the pavement. That, and a short chant, was all that was needed, and the hot headed demon named Belial appeared.

Serena told him what she needed to be done.

“And if I do this for you. Go into your daughters head and get the memory, you will give me what I want?”

“That is the deal”

“You will help me win back Belle the Angel?”

“Yes, I will make you a love spell.”

“Love. The one kind of spell demons can’t cast,” Belial sighs.

“Not that I’m complaining, because I need your help, but I don’t understand why you don’t just possess Belle or something.”

“Possessing Belle couldn’t make her love me. Plus, it would be really rude, don’t you think?”

“I guess,” I said, “Ok, I scratch your scaly back. You scratch mine.”

“I don’t have a scaly back,” Belial protested. “That is a very offensive demon stereotype.”

Belial had disappeared, heading to Hope, to extract a memory from her daughter.

Now, on the bed, Serena looked at the courtyard and wanted to leave. She can leave, just sneak out, disappear like before, but the Coven here can help her. *Jouissance Heroin* is a powerful thing, but if she could get over the physical addiction, she could beat it, she knew she could. She would have to find away.

She would have to help Morgan now. Belial was dead.

Chapter Twenty-two
A Paranormal Orgy

The sun slowly sets behind the green hills that surround Hope. The days are getting longer, and the trees are turning green. Global warming may be the death of the world, but I'll never hate summer. I know what Molly is going to ask me even before she does. I have premonitions and can sometimes even read minds; I am psychic.

I still can't always predict events or read minds most of the time, well I can sometimes, but it's not an exact science, and people can block their secrets from me. But I have intuition. I know things I shouldn't know. I know Molly wants to figure out who her father is. She sits on the front porch next to me.

"You're my half-sister. You know that," she says plainly, quickly but with precision.

"You don't know that," I say.

"Our mother was a free spirit," Molly said, "You see, sometimes when a man and woman love each other, and love many other people at the same time, they—"

I roll my eyes and play with the broken concrete piece from a crack in the porch. I fit the jagged stone into the crack, and then pull it out again. I look at the concrete piece in my hand and use it to scratch M. O. R. G.

"I know mom was into free love," I say. "I'm not a child."

"I'm sorry," Molly says. A cold breeze blows through Molly's black hair and she, for a minute, looks like Mom.

"You want me to take you back, don't you," I say. "To figure out who your dad is."

“I need to know,” she says.

“I understand.” I grab her arm. “Well, we might as well do it then.”

Purple light engulfs me and becomes so bright I have to shut my eyes. When I open them, we are in a field. It is summer, and the pollen in the air makes me sneeze. Just like the time I was in the vision the night Dad killed himself, I can kind of interact with the environment, but yet I can't. The weeds bend sometimes when I touch them. The sun is setting, and it feels like it is the same time of day as it was when we left Hope. There's overgrown hills; this place looks like it used to be a farm.

“Be careful,” I say. “The more you try to interact with the environment, the more non-corporeal you become. If you lose too much footing, you might go sliding through the Earth to the core and burn up.”

“Really?” Molly asks.

“I'm not sure. Don't want to test the theory.”

“So is this, like, time travel?”

I tell Molly the truth: I don't know. Our solar system's moving about 45,000 miles per hour (I learned that in science class— hm, guess I did learn something in science class). If it was true time travel, we would end up in the vacuum of space, as the Earth is always moving. Yet this isn't just a vision, either. It's something in between.

“This is it. The day you were conceived.”

Molly steps away, and reach out to stop her, but she seems ok, so I let her walk ahead of me. There's a big tree up ahead and an old farmhouse. There are girls with flowers dancing around, a guy playing a guitar. Some of them look younger than me.

The whole thing makes me feel kind of weird. There's a danger with this group of kids lurking just below the surface.

Molly stops and turns to face me. "No," she says, "this way."

I follow her back out into the field. I push aside the weeds, and grasshoppers leap away. As I come closer, I see what Molly has seen:

A girl lies there, in this boy's arms. They're in their underwear and she slaps a bug away from her thigh.

I realize who it is. She was so young, I didn't recognize her at first. She's beautiful there, in the sitting sun, among the weeds. Her hair is unbrushed, her fingernails dirty.

"This is it," I say, although I know Molly already knows this, but I don't know what else to say.

"You're sure."

"Yes." We stare at the young couple on the ground. Mom is being held tight in Richard's arms.

"I always thought I was conceived in some kind of weird, paranormal orgy."

"Do you see now that Richard is your dad? We are sisters, Molly."

Molly grabs me in a strong hug and starts crying. "I'm sorry, Morgan. All this time, I was mean to you, pushed you away..."

"Well, I mean, they did have orgies," I say. "Don't get me wrong, there were probably some disgusting, cult shit, sweaty, orgies."

Molly laughs. "Yeah, this is some freaky seventies free love shit going on here, for sure."

“Wanna go home?”

“Yeah, let’s go.”

Chapter Twenty-three
It Was Only a Kiss, It Was Only a Kiss

Sophie walks up to the school. It's after hours, but the doors are unlocked, so she steps into the high school, but can't sense anything. Marigold must be too powerful to be tracked. She walks down the shiny, white tile hallways, the lockers are orange on the first floor, red on the second.

"Excuse me," she hears from behind. She turns to see Anderson Cooper. Well, a man that looks like Anderson Cooper. A very attractive man, thinks Sophie, what a hunk Anderson Cooper is.

"Hi, I'm Sophie Sweetser," she says reaching out her hand.

Anderson Cooper explains that his name is Karl Ryan, and Sophie says nice to meet you, Mr. Ryan, and he says call him Karl.

"Karl, I'm looking for a substitute teacher. Her name's Regina Marigold."

Mr. Ryan walks Sophie to his office and gives her Regina's number. Outside the school, Sophie dials the number.

"Hello Sophie," Regina answers.

"So you know who I am?"

"I know who you are and I have the Aphrodite stone locked in this locket. I just need Serena to open it."

Sophie leans against the hood of her car.

"Why don't you open it yourself?"

"I would if I could. But this here's some ancient magic. And somehow your coven has encrypted its power to open only if your daughter wills it."

“Hm, sounds like you’re not as powerful an Archangel now that you’re here on Earth, out of Heaven. You can’t even break the spell.”

“Once the locket is opened, I will have all my power back. And I will ravish the nations with the vengeance of God.”

“Why would we ever let you have that power?”

“If you want Morgan to be alright, you’ll bring Serena to me. Go ahead, check in on your granddaughter. You’ll know what I mean.”

Sophie drives home and when she arrives, Morgan and Molly are sitting on the front porch. She gets out of her car and tells her grandchildren what Regina had told her.

Sophie looks at Morgan in her brown eyes and brushes a strand of hair out of her face. Sophie asks, “Did she curse you?”

“It’s not me she’s cursed,” Morgan says. “I know who’s cursed, though. If we don’t comply, she’ll kill Kyra.”

* * *

Grandma Sophie has gathered us around the table. We’ve been doing these table meetings a lot lately.

“So this is what we know so far: Regina isn’t as powerful as we first thought,” Grandma explains. “If she was, she would have broken open the locket herself. She’s not powerful enough to curse me, a witch. That’s why she’s cursed Kyra.”

“Morgan, you’re going to have to go visit Kyra and see if you can sense what kind of curse is on her,” Grandma Sophie says.

“I’m not going over to see Kyra.” I still haven’t gotten over whatever happened between her and Ty. It makes my skin crawl. It’s a betrayal I’ll never forgive. I just want things to go back to the way they were before.

That day on the beach, when Kyra laid in the sand, she didn’t rub in her sunscreen enough and there were white blotches all over her tan skin. I lay next to her, close, my purple striped towel overlapping her blue one. There were two women in thongs walking by, then a ripped girl and a tiny girl in a one piece, with a Cross Fit-esque man between the two, but Kyra didn’t give them more than a glance. She giggled and looked at me.

The memory feels cheap, somehow, like the future destroyed the good memories from this past. Why go through all of that friendship for things to end up shitty like this?

Ok, back to the meeting:

“She needs to open that locket to bring her powers to full force,” Sophie says.

“Well, she needs me for that.” We all look to see my mom in the doorway to see my mom, a dramatic entrance just like when Captain America showed up just in time to save that little brave German man from Loki in *The Avengers* movie (seriously, it’s a cool scene. You should check it out).

“Mom, should you have checked yourself out of rehab so soon?”

“No,” she says, “but desperate times...”

I don't like this at all. Molly had explained to me about mom's drugs (magically enhanced drugs, no less) and that Serena had gone away to spare her children from her addiction.

"You can't do this," I say.

"Morgan's right. This is too risky," says Molly.

"I think I'll be ok," Mom says, although she doesn't look convinced as she says it.

I know that things won't be ok if mom doesn't get the help she needs. But what can we do at this point? I wish I had something, anything, in front of me to mess with and decide getting up and getting a can of Diet Coke is my best option for distraction. I pour a can into a tumbler and watch the soda fizzle.

Mom, Grandma, and Molly debate what happens next, but they all decide on one thing: I have to go over and see Kyra.

* * *

Kyra's mom is out of town again, and Linda [the housekeeper] is just leaving the house when I arrive.

"I think Ms. Chan is asleep," Linda [the housekeeper] says, but lets me in anyway and I locks the door behind me. I creep up the stairs, one step at a time. The house is too still, but in the silence, it has a message: to get out. I don't belong here. I stand in the middle, debating whether to continue up the stairs or go back down to the front door and let myself out.

"God, you're such a creeper," she says. She's holding a bottle of Short's Hard Cider.

“Are you drunk again?”

Kyra walks down the steps. “Mom had to go back to DC. Some sort of emergency or something.”

“So you’ve been drinking up in your room by yourself?” Kyra takes a step down one step. And then another. “Listen, I’m worried about you.”

Kyra takes another step, wobbles a little, and then another step. She wears an oversized flannel shirt.

“You have to stop drinking like this. You’re too young—“

Kyra is standing on the same stair as me. She reaches her face up to mine and kisses me. It’s my first real kiss and I don’t know what to do, so I just stand there, feeling her mouth move against my mouth, which I just leave half open. She sticks her tongue in my mouth a little bit and, in that moment, I know I’ll never have Kyra the way I want. She’ll never be mine.

* * *

When I return home, there are the strange lights in the sky again. They hover for a moment then blink away, to places, I assume, even farther away than my cloud room. With all the action in the past few days, I don’t think anyone’s realized that Uncle Jason isn’t around. He’s been gone for days, now that I think of it.

I walk in and Molly and Serena are crying. I realize, though, that they are happy tears.

“Morgan, come sit down,” Serena says.

I sit at the table, and Molly tells me she's pregnant. I'm going to be an aunt. It is such a surreal experience, I'm actually going to be an aunt! This must be what a real family feels like. A very flawed family, but one finally together.

"We can beat Regina," my mother says, "if we work together."

"What's the deal with Kyra?" asks Molly.

"I sensed that Ms. Marigold put some kind of curse on her head. If we don't comply with Regine in a few days, the spell will cause some blood vessels to burst in her head."

"Well, she may not have all her power, but she's got some left. A mortal couldn't put a death hex on another mortal," says Molly.

"I sense she's also put a spell on the church. A protection spell. Nothing on this earth can penetrate the force field around the perimeter of the church that she or Father Harris doesn't want to come through," says Sophie.

"What? Father Harris is alive?" I ask.

"Yup, back from the dead," Sophie says.

"Back from the dead, you say," says Mom. "That give me an idea."

Suddenly, there is a red bubble around my mom, and before I can think, I know there will be an explosion from outside the kitchen window. I close my eyes, and when I open them, nothing has happened except I feel my energy drained. I look outside the window, above the sink, there in a purple bubble of my own, I see a fiery explosion. I have contained the explosion with some power I didn't know I had, the purple bubble implodes, snubbing out the explosion.

My premonition foretold the explosion, and my powers had contained the bomb.

Regina had put a red bubble around my mom to keep her alive. She had hoped the explosion would have killed the rest of us. Molly runs to the porch and I follow. There's a man running away, screaming "Ahhhhh." I recognize him; it's Father Harris.

"Father Harris just tried to bomb us!" I say. "How is he even alive?"

"I can't believe it," Molly says, "A priest just tried to blow us up."

Meanwhile, at the Church Lair...

Regina Marigold senses that the bomb did not succeed and that Morgan, Molly, and Sophie are still alive.

"Why won't they die?" she says to herself. "That family should have imploded long ago. I've been laying the groundwork for decades now."

Father Harris comes barreling in the through down the aisle between the pews.

"They're chasing me!" he cries.

"Relax," says Marigold, "the protection spell is holding strong. They can't come anywhere near this church. Nothing from this world can..."

"...break the spell, I know I know. But those witches are powerful!" Harris slumps down on the first pew, gasping for breath.

"This the first smart thing you've said since I've met you," says Regina. "They stopped a bomb. No use hiring a sniper, those bitches will see that bullet coming from a mile away."

“Then what do we do?” Regina jumps down from the altar, grabs a bottle of communal wine and hands it to the Father. His hands are still shaking.

“We still have an Ace in the hand, or a 21, or a double king, or, I don’t know, I don’t play poker, but we still have a card to play. Morgan won’t let Kyra die. And she doesn’t know the truth about her father.”

The church is not the home for Harris that it used to be. The walls should be familiar to him, but in the shadows, with the moonlight streaking through the windows, he doesn’t recognize this place anymore. A stained glass window should be a stained glass window anytime of the day, but with streaks of moonlight illuminating the pews in such a way, he might as well have been in a Buddhist temple, as unfamiliar and ancient a place this has become to him.

“So our bomb didn’t work. Get some sleep, Harris. I have some lesson plans to prep for.”

“What?”

“I’ve got to go to school.”

Chapter Twenty-four So We Meet Again

The high school classroom is hot. I lean my head on my elbows, waiting for History to start. I don't have any of my homework done. I'm not going to be nervous, I tell myself, but my stomach is nervous and gurgles all day. It was embarrassing in English, everyone could hear while journal writing.

Kyra hadn't been on the bus this morning. She was probably hung over again, too sick to go to school. I wish she'd stop drinking.

I think about Kyra kissing me, about me running out of the house, running out into the driveway, looking up and seeing huge lights in the sky. Her mouth tasted like sweet alcohol and root beer. The day rolls by, I get admonished by my history teacher for not having my homework done, but I just roll my eyes. There's a huge planet heading toward Earth; this makes the Bacon Rebellion seem very miniscule in importance. (The Bacon Rebellion is a real thing. Look it up.)

I enter the classroom and Ms. Marigold sits on her desk, legs crossed. She looks surprised to see me.

"Ms. Sweetser," she says, "what a pleasant surprise."

I take my seat. "Wouldn't want to miss anymore school, would I?"

The class files in, but Ms. Marigold can only focus on me. She walks toward my desk, bends down, and wipes a blond streak of hair out of my face.

"You really are a pretty little thing, aren't you?"

I think about my zitty face and assure her I'm not.

“Fine, believe what you want. Time is running out, ya know.” My classmates are watching us intently, wondering what is going on, why this teacher is at my desk, touching my face. The bell rings and I ask Ms. Marigold why class hasn’t started yet. She says she supposes she should start the class and walks to the front, her back towards me. She turned around and winks.

My palms are sweaty, but I keep my composure. During her lesson, teaching about sines and cosines, I almost forget that this thing in front of me isn’t just a substitute teacher, but a power hungry creature fallen from heaven.

Once the bell rings, and class is over, Ms. Marigold calls me up to her desk but I bolt to the door. She snaps her fingers and the door begins to shut but I use my powers to keep it open. She lets out a gasp as I disappear out into the hall.

* * *

I wait for Ms. Marigold in the high school parking lot. The weather was hot and the skies are clear. It’s after five, and most of the students have cleared out. I can hear the marching band play in the distance. I sit on the curb, staring at her red convertible intently— a pretty nice car for a substitute teacher, I note.

Marigold saunters out of the school and I approach her from the side. She looks straight ahead, not making eye contact with me.

“Ms. Sweetser,” she says, “I’ve had a very long day. Please run along; I have a hell of a migraine.”

“You’ve won,” I say. “Please let Kyra live.”

“Once Serena opens the locket for me and give me the Aphrodite stone, I will release Kyra from the death spell.”

Marigold holds the seashell locket up in her red nail-painted hand. Serena and Sophie and Molly pull up in a car and park next to me. Serena gets out first and walks over to Marigold’s car. Ms. Marigold’s face grows red and I can feel power radiating from the Archangel. She stands by her red car (she has a thing for red) and my mom faces her, eye-to-eye. Serena reaches up her hand and touches the locket. A glowing green stone falls and Regina grabs it with her free hand.

“Finally, the power of the Ancient gods.” Black wings, like that X-Men Angel, unfold from her back. “I will bring about the...”

From behind the car, Belial jumps out and stabs her with a golden knife. “Brought that back from hell, ya crazy lady.” Her wings retract and she shutters.

“That’s how I felt when you doused me with your holy water. Stings, don’t it.”

“But your dead.”

“You forgot. I’m a mother fucking demon.”

20 Hours Earlier...

Serena pulls into a Walmart parking lot in a town in a 45 minute drive from home. She gets out of the car, the parking lot is mostly empty. She has taking a big kitchen knife with her. I although I know mom would never hurt me, the story of Abraham ready to sacrifice Isaac does cross my mind..

“Mom, what are we doing here?”

“You’ll see,” says Serena, and snaps her fingers. All the security cameras mounted on the light poles spark. Mom says some chants and then takes the kitchen knife.

“This is going to hurt,” she says more to herself than me, and slices open her hand on swears loudly. “It’s going to take more blood this time, but this just might work.”

There is a whirlwind of old newspapers and dirt and lightning flashes, although the night is clear. The wind pushes some shopping carts on their side. As quickly as it started, it stops, and standing there is Belial.

I run up and hug him.

He pushes me away. “Oh, come on now,” he says in his Mathew McConaughey drawl, “enough of that.”

“How?”

“I can’t just die. I’m a demon,” he says. “But, damn, did that stabbing hurt.”

“When you were talking about Harris coming back from the dead,” Serena says, “I realized we could bring Belial back.”

Belial pulls out a golden knife from his side. “Back in Hell, my dad gave me this. It might not kill Regina, but it will leave a mark!”

20 Hours Later...

Belial has stabbed Ms. Marigold in the back, and she drops the green glowing stone to the ground and Serena steps on it, crushing it into the rough pavement.

“You idiot,” Regina says, still shaking. “Without that stone, I can’t stop Kia.”

“You wanted to stop the rogue planet Kia?” I say.

“Yes!”

“I thought you wanted the apocalypse.”

“I need to bring the biblical apocalypse! The one with pain and suffering and horsemen and whatnot. Not an end by a rogue planet crashing into the earth.”

“Why didn’t you just say so,” I ask. “Would have been a whole lot easier.”

“I’m out of here, you morons.” The Archangel fades away.

“Oh great, she can teleport now,” Serena sighs.

“Where do you think she went?” asks Molly.

“Give you three guesses.”

“The church,” says Sophie. “The one place we can’t get to her.”

“We have to find a way,” I said. “If we don’t get to her, Kyra’s a dead girl.” Us three generations of women stand in silence, wondering what to do next.

Chapter Twenty-five
Back to 2008

I can't sleep so I'm playing Mortal Kombat (I've given up on homework). I'm in my pink sweats, sitting cross legged on the floor in my green bedroom. It's hard to believe that, in one forgotten life, I lay strapped to this bed. I lose my video game fight and throw down the controller. That's when I hear the voice in my ear.

"Morgan," it says, "Morgan, it's me, Ms. Marigold."

"What do you want?"

"I want to do you this favor. You're being lied to. Lied to by your mom. That's all your mom does, isn't it? She lies and she runs away. And your grandma, nothing but an enabler."

"I'm coming for you," I say out loud.

"You can't get to me, little girl. I put a protection spell around the church and nothing from this world, not you, not a nuclear bomb, nothing can get through the spell. I'm just here to help you, Morgan. To help you learn the truth."

"Why should I believe anything you say?"

"I swear to God on holy texts. The truth, as they say, will set you free. Listen to me very carefully: Go back to the night your father died. Then you'll know the truth about your mother."

I ask more questions but get no reply. It's almost midnight, and I lie on the bed but still can't sleep. What was she talking about, going back to the night my dad died? I know I shouldn't do this, but I close my eyes, and somehow, somehow, in a purple flash I am back at that night.

I kissed a girl and I liked it. The taste of her cherry ChapStick plays on the radio. It's the situation I've seen played out in my visions before. The bottle of Jack shattering on the wall, the dirty needles on the kitchen floor.

"You're fucking Jason," my dad shouts. I know what happens next. He goes down to his truck and blows his brains out. And my little girl self follows him down to the courtyard.

I walk past my mom, on the kitchen floor, crying, following me and Dad to the courtyard. Things are playing out always the same. The summer night is warm, the wooden stairs down to the courtyard are squeaky.

I am by the dumpster near the truck. Dad sits in it, crying. I know what happens next.

But this time, Dad doesn't pull the trigger. The gun levitates into the air and floats into my nine-year-old self's little hands. With strength only a little girl with magic powers could have, the younger me holds the gun, aim it at my dad's head and pulls the trigger.

What. The. Cock. Just happened?

The scene rewinds and I see the same thing again: the little girl in the *Hannah Montana* shirt pulling the trigger and shooting my dad in the head. I look up and see my mom, the younger self mom, running down into the courtyard.

Serena throws her arms around the younger me, and I start wailing. She holds me tight, and then places her hand on my forehead. My forehead glows and I slump into her arms. She makes the gun levitate back into the truck just as the police arrive. Now,

neighbors are looking out at their apartment. It's amazing none of them have seen what happened.

"Amnesia spell," Serena whispers. "You will never remember what you did."

I killed my own father.

I'm jolted out of the vision, back in the room at Grandma's house.

"I told you the truth would set you free," Ms. Marigold's voice says in my head. I run out into the hall, down the stairs, and out the door. I run. I run past Kyra's and then to the deserted highway. I run until I'm at the river and tumble into the cave until I'm back in the cloud room, pulling my knees to my body, shaking.

PART THREE:

JASON

Chapter Twenty-six Abduction

In 1987, author Whitley Strieber released a non-fiction book called *Communion*, where he claimed to have been abducted by non-human entities. Although there are accounts of this happening throughout history, Strieber's book thrust the concept of Grey Aliens into popular culture. The Greys are beings that look like grey humanoid insects, with long black slits as pupil-less eyes.

These monstrous beings communicate telepathically. They seem to have little concept of human emotion, and although there have been some reports of compassionate beings, more often than not, they are reported to be cold and unloving. These creatures also seem to have as a sense of entitlement to these abductions. Some abductees claim being shown apocalyptic images (one person claims he saw a vision of the Earth being blown up), causing some to speculate that these creatures are here to help us, and that these abductions are a necessary evil to save our species.

Many alleged abductees claim to have been taken in the middle of the night (or even during the day) and subjected to horrible test subjects, seemingly focused on extracting DNA from the human test subject. There have been reports of experiences with hybrid alien-human creatures. Whether real or fake, these alleged victims seem scarred by the events. The abductees' experiences can be recalled through hypnosis.

These beings take Uncle Jason at night. They have all his life. He knows it, deep down, he knows it, and that's why he was drawn to studying space debris for NASA. All the space junk he maps is an attempt to catch a glimpse of something bigger— to catch a glimpse of the Greys in space.

Jason sits at his monitoring station deep within the NASA building. He watches his monitor. There is a blimp streaking across the screen, gone as fast as it appeared. He was briefed at the Pentagon yesterday, and then some men in black suits took him, in a military Humvee, back to NASA headquarters.

Right now, Jason has bigger problems than the Greys. (that's quite a statement to make, because if one has bigger problems than being taken at night and subjected to horrible tests such as probes in the genitals to extract DNA, then one does have bigger problems). Jason has been monitoring the rogue planet heading straight for Earth. The collision will break both planets apart, into molten entities, no longer recognizable as planets at all.

This has happened before. When our solar system was still forming, two planet that formed in the same orbit circling the sun—Thea and Earth. The two planets collided and annihilated each other. Over millions of years, as the aftermath cooled, Earth and the moon formed. The moon remains a small reminder of its Thea glory.

Jason's watching the screen at his NASA station. A blurry, pixelated image is frozen in front of him.

"So that's Kia," he says. "She's about twice the size of Earth."

"And she will hit?" the unidentified woman in a business suit behind him says. She hasn't offered her name, and hasn't spoken of her credentials, but it's obvious she's in charge. His normal project director is nowhere to be found.

The room he's in is dimly lit with screens, glowing with red maps, and sonar screens, and a makeshift command room. The room is usually docile, but today all his

colleagues are in the building and people in military uniforms enter in and out frantically. People in business suits, like the woman behind him, lurk in the shadows. They talk in whispers to each other.

“Yup,” Jason says, “Kia will collide with Earth. It’s a mathematical certainty.”

“You,” the woman says (she hasn’t bothered to learn his name), “you’ve been at your station too long. Time to rest, soldier.”

He wants to argue that he isn’t a soldier, and she is not his commander but he’s too tired and, anyway, the woman behind him, he honestly suspects, might be Hillary Clinton. He’s not arguing with her! He’s led to the quarters in a sub-basement of the headquarters. There he finds folded sweat pants and a white t-shirt. It’s going to be a long night.

* * *

Jason lies in his bed in the windowless room that NASA has put him up in. He doesn’t know if he’s allowed to leave or not, but no one’s offered him a ride home. He faces the cinder block ceiling and knows *they* are coming for him tonight. As a kid, he used to think of them as guardian angels. He wonders if that’s really why he got his PhD, to ultimately try to learn to communicate with these entities.

But how to talk on to them on their level? To them, he is a specimen. A genetic experiment.

All he can do in this room is wait. Wait to sleep. Wait for the aliens to abduct him. Wait for a rogue planet to collide with earth. All there is to do in this concrete box is wait.

Chapter Twenty-seven
Unrequited Love

Hope, Virginia

2008

Jason lies in bed, wishing Serena was beside him. But she's with his brother. Always with his brother. But Serena and Jason had kissed, that one time, in this very bedroom. The bedroom is dark, the walls are blue, and there is a camera mounted on the wall. Being watched by the camera makes him feel better. He also sleeps with the television on. He's watching a rerun episode of *Family Guy* on Cartoon Network that he has seen probably a hundred times. It's not really what's on the TV, more that the TV is on that matters. He's not sure what psychological sense that makes, but it's his nightly routine.

Then the room is white. The room is always white. Once, he had confided in a close friend about his visits at night, and the friend claimed that his abductions were actually regressed memories from birth: that is the first thing one sees out of the birth canal: white light.

But this isn't birth, this isn't a growth, this isn't something that one can dig deep down and find an enlightenment or catharsis for the sins of the human race in the face of higher beings. No, this is just a form of torture, events that he won't remember in the morning, not until hypnosis, but now it is happening all the same.

He floats like a possessed child levitating from his bed. He moves through the walls— The beings are not tied to our dimension. No, they exist not quite with us, but not too far apart. When he lands he is on a white, cold table.

“You have no right,” Jason says.

Let us show you the right.

In Jason’s mind, he sees the Earth, as if he’s on the moon. And then an explosion, shattering the earth into molten rock. It’s spectacular thing, an explosion that doesn’t even make a sound, since he’s watching it from space. Silent destruction.

“Jesus,” he says, although he’s pretty sure the Greys don’t get his reference.

Then they stick a needle in his eye. His vision blurs, but he’s pretty sure one of the Grey aliens, with slender fingers and big black eyes, has cut into his side.

“Hands off the liver, asshole,” is the last thing Jason remembers saying. As he blacks out, he thinks about Serena’s pale face in his hand, her smile cloaking a desperate need for a fix.

NASA Headquarters

May 2016

Jason waits for them to come, to take him, but it is not the Greys that appear. It’s Serena, a glowing vision—he doesn’t know if he’s awake or asleep or that it even matters because she’s here. He remembers that time, in his bedroom, when Serena leaned in and kissed him. She is here now.

“Jason,” she says.

“You’re here.”

“Yes.”

“Finally.”

He wants to reach out, to touch her, to make something solid out of a dream, but he can't move. His side aches. He is mad at himself for being happy. She was never his to lose. She was with his brother, Richard, and Richard had found out about the kiss somehow, and then Richard shot himself. It was my fault, Jason thought. He knew it. Sure, he could help raise Morgan, he could support her financially, but could that ever atone for what he did to his brother?

It was only a kiss.

It was only a kiss.

"I'm sorry, Serena. I'm sorry for everything."

"What do you want me to say?" vision Serena asks. "You were the stable brother. You were beacon of light in the chaos of my life. So I kissed you."

"And Richard saw us kiss. Saw it on the video from the camera mounted in my room."

"Did you ever wonder how Richard knew to watch the video of that very night we kissed?" Serena's arms are turning long, spaghettified, floating in the foreground of the cement bricks. "Someone else told him about us."

Jason had never stopped to wonder how Richard just happened to watch the video from the night Serena and Jason made out. There had to be more to the story. Serena's face pales, her cheekbones rise and eyes widen.

"The world's ending," Jason says. "This is it. The end of times."

"I know."

"I want to spend it with you, Serena. You and Morgan and Sophie. My family."

“You can’t spend it with us,” Serena says, and points to the sky. “You have to spend it with them.”

“But I love you.”

Serena’s large black eyes turn red. “Go. Go.”

“Please.”

Serena ignites in red and yellow flames. “Go!”

Jason is thrown back onto his bed, closes his eyes, and levitates off the bed through the ceiling, through the control centers, the office cubicles, above to the sky, leaving Serena far below. He can’t help but feel like Icarus, wings dripping wax, so close to the sun.

Chapter Twenty-eight
In Outer Space

They try to stick a needle in eye, but Jason moves out of the way and leaps down from the table. The grey creatures are taken aback, but do not try to restrain him. They communicate telepathically, so Jason thinks really hard.

You need to stop the planet Kia from colliding with earth.

There is no answer. Just grey faces, black eyes, staring back at him.

I know you have the technology to stop this. To alter its course. To save our planet.

The beings only stare.

“You will help me with this,” Jason says out loud. “I know you’re not humans but you are creatures of science and math. That is why you study us. You know math.” Jason wishes he had a chalkboard to write on or something. Or anything. How to communicate?

But it’s too late.

The next thing he knows, he’s sitting on his bed in his bunker with nowhere to go. He tries to leave but there’s a soldier standing outside his door.

“I’m not a prisoner, am I?” Jason says, sweat building up on his brow.

“Of course not,” says the soldier. “You just can’t leave.” She laughs, “ya know, in case they might need you.”

“Need me for what?” Jason mutters underneath his breath. “All I do is look at rocks.”

* * *

He's woken from sleep and sees the silhouette of a woman in red lingerie standing in the darkness, seemingly being illuminated by a light of her own.

"Serena," Jason whispers.

"Yes, it's your beloved Serena." She steps closer, and he sees her blond hair slightly pulled back, revealing Serena's freckled face.

"I don't know why you loved me so much. After all those free love days, the nasty STIs I contracted in all those disgusting orgies, and yet you still loved me. Your own brother's wife. And even after it all, all you got away with was one kiss." Serena leans over his face so he can feel her breath, "Tell me, was it true love's kiss? Like a fucking Disney movie."

Jason shoves the Serena's face away from his own and sits up.

"I'm sorry. Did I push a wrong button." She runs her red fingernail from her lips down between her breasts and lets it slide casually between her legs before dropping it to her side. She reaches to run her hands through Jason's hair but he stands, moving out of reach.

"I just don't get why you loved me so much? I guess there's no time for that now; better save that story for the sequel."

"Are you in my imagination?"

"I think I can imagine what you'd like to do to me."

"This place," Jason sits back down on the bed. "It's driving me insane."

“Oh, we all go a little bit crazy in the end times. It’s prophesized. Now get some sleep. How long is it? One day, or two days before the collision? You’ll have to be up bright and early to watch this world die.”

* * *

You can’t tell what time of day it is in the control room that Jason works in. There’s no windows and is dimly lit, illuminated mostly by screens on all sides of the room. There’s usually one table in the center, but many more folding tables have been set up.

No one says much, and just watch a pixelated blob on the screen move. Every minute, that much closer to Earth.

He overhears the high ranking government woman from the other night and someone who he assumes is a high ranking military man talking.

“... the planet’s much too big for a Nuke to do anything to it.”

“If we could just nudge its trajectory a little bit.”

“... careful not to hit the moon. That would be as apocalyptic as hitting the Earth itself.”

There’s nothing to do here. They’ve taken away everyone’s phone. There’s a small TV in the break room, but it doesn’t get cable due to government cutbacks. There’s some VHS tapes including *Armageddon* and *Independence Day*, but nobody feels like watching those movies.

He misses Morgan. He misses his bed. He's going to miss a lot more, he decides, after the impact destroys them all. Jason was never a religious man, but it was times like these that he wishes he was.

In his notebook, he scratches down some ideas. The math is rudimentary and scattered, but in his quick deductions, he theorizes that if there was a force to nudge the planet just enough, it would fly by the Earth, slingshot around the sun, and blast off deep into space to threaten some other galaxy far away. Maybe it would crash into the Greys' planet and blow up those little bastards.

* * *

To Jason's surprise, they come back for him that night. They don't restrain him to the bed like they usually do. He still has his clothes on; usually he's naked when they abduct him. The white light isn't as bright and he can see the scope of the room around him. It's smooth with white paint. There are no visible controls or computer screens, just a table and a machine that doesn't look unlike a hospital surgery room on earth, although much more streamlined. No metal instruments lying around.

A taller Grey approaches him, a leader of sorts, perhaps.

So, talk. it says in his head.

Jason pulls out his notebook from his pocket.

"Oh, and after we get done with this," Jason says, "you're taking me home."

* * *

Jason opens the front door and is shocked to see Serena at the table.

"Jason," she says, and runs and hugs him. "Where have you been?"

“The Pentagon, then NASA. They’re actually going to come looking for me once they notice I’m gone. We don’t have much time. But I wanted to warn you that there’s
Kia, this...”

“Rogue planet that’s going to collide with Earth and kill us all,” Serena says.

“Yeah,” Jason says, “How did you know?”

“Have a seat,” says Serena, “There’s a lot for you to get caught up on.”

Chapter Twenty-nine
Forgiven

I open the cloud drawer and take out a knife. Maybe I need to do to myself what I did to dad: kill. Why had Mom kept this from me? I sit on the cloud bed, grab a Kit Kat out of the air, and rip it open. I'll just get fat. It's the one vice left when you're dead meat.

I sit on my cloud bed, and hold the knife to my skin. This will hurt so much; I don't know if I can do it.

"Morgan, stop." It's Uncle Jason. He's in the cloud room.

"What are you doing here? How did you..."

"This Belial guy showed me the way. I guess he's... a..."

"Demon, I know."

"Ok, I have to say that this is a lot to take in."

"Have a seat."

Jason sits down. "So, you're like, a witch. Can I say witch, is that a derogatory term for you people. Oh, and I don't mean 'You People' you people"

"Uncle Jason, it's fine."

A Laffy Taffy hits him in the head. "Geez, why is there so much candy floating around here? That can't be healthy."

"It's time you knew the story about me and Richard and your mother." Jason explains that he has cameras put up all over his house because things visited in the night. He was hoping that he would catch some evidence of the creatures abducting him

but also, it was comforting knowing he was being watched, even if just by an electronic devices.

“Your mother and I kissed once. Richard had run off on one of his benders and we were so upset and it just happened. But we only made out. But your dad, he wouldn’t believe us. He was spiraling down in depression and... well, I will never forgive myself.”

“How did Dad find out?”

Jason explains that Richard had watched one of the videos. The kiss happened in the bedroom and the cameras caught it all.

“The one thing I don’t get is that, I don’t know how Richard knew which tape to watch.”

“Ms. Marigold,” I say. “She’s been plotting against our family for years. I bet she did it.”

“So Ms. Marigold is who again?”

“My substitute teacher who’s also an Archangel.”

“Oh jeez, this is a lot to take in.”

“Says the guy being abducted by aliens.”

“Morgan, you have to forgive your mother.”

“She ran away.”

“She ran away for your own good. She’s an addict. She did it for you. Another world is going plummet into our own in about a week anyways. This will all be over; there’s just no more time for grudges.”

“Another world?” I ask.

“Yes, a rogue planet. “

“Another world,” I say again. “That’s it! I have an idea.” I run over to one the metallic puddles. “Show my Grandma Sophie’s house.” Grandma’s house, from above, appears in the liquid. Uncle Jason walks over the puddle and says “That’s amazing.”

I push him in the puddle and jump in after him.

* * *

When we appear in the front yard, Mom is waiting on the front porch. When she sees me, runs up to me and hugs me but I push her away. Uncle Jason walks into the house, and it’s me alone with my mother.

“Why did you lie to me? All these years.”

“Yes, I lied,” Serena says. “Thought I could protect from the truth. Deliver you from evil, spare your innocence and youth.”

She runs her hand through my hair. “That I could simply will it was the real untruth.”

“I killed dad, shot him right in the head.”

“Morgan, I never wanted you to know. I wanted the memory gone because I didn’t want you to blame yourself. Because it wasn’t your fault.”

Tears run down my cheek, “But I shot dad.”

“You’re the most powerful witch I’ve ever met,” says my mom, “you have telekinesis, the gift of prophecy and premonitions. But you’re also an empath. You can take on other people’s pain.”

“Is that what I did with dad?”

“You felt his pain, his suicidal thoughts. He was going to shoot himself, and you felt the suffering, so you did it for him. You were too young to know about powers, most powers don’t manifest themselves so quickly, but yours did.”

“But I killed him.”

“No,” Serena says. “Depression killed him.”

I hug my mother and break down. “He loved you very much,” I hear her say between sobs.

“Don’t hate me. Forgive me?”

Belial appears. “I hate to break up this lovely dovey moment, but the worlds going to end soon. Isn’t anyone worried about that?”

“Mom, I have a plan,” I say. “Let’s call another kitchen table meeting!”

* * *

“I can get my little Grey friends to come through. They have this sort of Gamma Ray gun,” Jason says. He drops a spoonful of sugar into his coffee and stirs.

“And what about Regina Marigold. Even if we could break through her spell, Marigold can still teleport anywhere she wants to,” says Sophie.

“She can’t teleport if we freeze time,” Molly says. “But no witch is powerful enough to stop time.”

“I can take you where we can freeze time,” I say. “I know a place.”

“Ok, then you can freeze time,” Molly says.

“No, you’re the one that’s going to have to go to the place to freeze time,” I say.
“You’re the one who’s prego. You shouldn’t be anywhere near this planet when shit goes down.”

“Morgan,” Mom says, “you’re not staying here. It’s too dangerous.”

“I think I’ve figured out a way to break Regina’s spell,” I say.

We plot out our plan and when we’re done, Jason runs out to the front yard.

“Come on you Sons of Bitches, I’m ready for you.” A triangle craft appears over our house and in a flash of light, Jason is gone.

Molly and I hop in the car and start driving toward the cliffs above the river. I’m going to show her how to get to my cloud room.

The Final Chapter End Game

The Grey Aliens aim their weapon at the rogue planet. If Jason and the Greys' calculations are correct, this should work. The aliens shoot their Gamma Ray gun at the planet Kia, nudging it enough that it will no longer hit earth. Maybe the Greys were here to help us, after all, thinks Jason.

The chunk of Kia's rocky outer crust is expelled by the Grey's Gamma Ray Gun blast shoots through space at five percent less than the speed of light. It flies past Jupiter, whose gravity alters its path just slightly. It shoots past Mars in the blink of an eye. From this point of view, Earth is just speck of light on a black backdrop, just another twinkle in the speckled Milky Way.

Twelve and a half minutes later, the little piece of Kia tumbles into our atmosphere, becoming a flaming meteorite. When it breaks through the Ozone layer, it is the size of a basketball. The atmosphere has slowed its velocity, but it still flies faster than a bullet over the Atlantic Ocean.

Sophie stand outside St. Peter's cathedral, looking at the large stained glass window facing East. She looks at her watch.

Inside, Regina sits on the altar, legs crossed, in her signature red dress. Father Harris sits in the first pew, holding a bottle of communion wine.

"What is that woman waiting for?" Harris says, taking another drink of wine.
"She's just standing out there, staring at the church."

"She's waiting for her death," Regina says. "Once my Archangel powers are back to full capacity, I'm going to go out there a rip her spine out."

“How much longer will that take?”

Regina looks at the priest and his wine bottle levitates. He throws his arms in front of his face, expecting an impact, but Regina brings the bottle to her. She takes a drink, and levitates it back to the priest. “Ugh, disgusting.” Harris wipes sweat from his brow.

“Will you relax? I don’t know how long this recharge will take, ok? I’ve never been assaulted by a Satanic object before.”

“That old woman. She just keeps standing there, staring.”

“It’s called a Protection Blessing because it will protect us,” Regina says.

“Nothing in this whole world can come in here unless we let it so relax.”

Outside the church, the sun is setting behind the bell tower, casting long shadows on the street out front. Sophie looks at her watch again. 7:53 pm. One more minute. A young couple walks down the sidewalk across the street, near the front of the church, with a little dog on a leash.

“Excuse me,” Sophie says. “I’d get away from the church if I were you.” The guy holding the leash looks at Sophie like she’s crazy, so Sophie levitates them and drops them into the bushes. The dog yelps and the girl screams and they run down the street, the way they came, as fast as they could.

“Should have let them burn.” Sophie glances at her watch again. “This better work.”

Finally Sophie sees the Kia rock from space streak across the sky, and it crashes through the front door of the church, resonating a loud sonic boom throughout the town of Hope. The circled stained glass window shatters and falls to the sidewalk below.

Sirens go off in the distant and people from nearby houses gather on the sidewalk.

In the cloud room, Molly stares down at the destruction in the metal puddles. She sits on the marshmallow floor cross-legged, in front of the puddle. "This better work," she says. She touches the puddle with her finger, causing ripples in the scenes below. Molly closes her eyes.

And all time in Hope stops.

* * *

I hear the explosion echo through town, but and then there's nothing but silence. I walk out of Grandma's house, and squint my eyes at the setting sun. I sit on the crumpling front porch, examining the white convertible that had been driving past in the street, the woman's black hair blown back by wind, frozen in the air. I fiddle with some loose pieces of broken porch in a crack

"So this is it, isn't it? One apocalypse thwarted, one to go." Belial has appeared behind me.

"You have to stop sneaking up on people like that."

He sits down beside me, wearing a yellow button up shirt, and smells like cigarettes. I put my hand above my eyes to see him in the sunlight. He takes the brown, 70s sunglasses off his head and hands them to me. "They're yours."

“Really?”

“Yeah, the sun’s not going to hurt my eyes like it hurts yours.”

“Cool, thanks!” I slide the sunglasses on over my eyes.

“Ya know, I didn’t lie to you when I said that I knew your dad.”

I put the rocks in my hand down and pull my knees to my chest. I finally ask, “Is he in Hell?”

“No, of course not. No suicides go to hell, that’s just something some religious asshole who didn’t know anything about mental illness made up a long time ago and it stuck. Contrary to popular belief, God’s not a dick.”

Belial tells me he met my dad once in passing, in a park in Purgatory. Her dad had just finished filling out an application and needed some clarification on who to give the paperwork to. “I told him he could drop the app off with Eddie at the Reincarnation Office on the corner of Third and Crescent.”

“Is Dad reincarnated?”

“No, not yet. He’s waiting.”

“For what?”

“For his daughter. For you. You’ll both be together again, sometime in the future.”

I turn and kiss Belial on the cheek.

“Oh, come on, why’d you have to ruin the moment with all your lovey dovey human kissy bullshit.” His face is red. “Stupid girl.”

I punch him in the arm.

We sit in silence for a while, staring at the motionless world. “Well, about time for me to hit the dusty road,” he says, standing up. “Don’t wanna be around if Regina survives this and decides to come at me with all the powers of heaven. Already died once. Don’t know what will happen if I get killed again.” I watch Belial, from behind brown sunglasses, walk down the uneven sidewalk to the front gate. He turns around.

“Hey Princess,” he says. “Regina may be a vengeful bitch, but she was right about two things. One, the days of magic are fading, the age of Angels and Demons is in its final act. The next time around, spells and enchantments won’t save the world,” he points to his head, “this will.”

He turns and walks away.

“Hey B, what else was Regina right about?”

He turns and faces me again. “She was right when she told you not to define yourself in the eyes of others, men or women. If she doesn’t want you, forget her. Girls come and go, but do your damn Calc homework. That’s the shit that lasts.” He turns again to walk away.

“Hey, B.”

He reaches the iron gate, and turns back, “Yeah, what?”

“Stop going around possessing people. That’s fucked up.”

Belial laughs, “Hey, I just created the illusion of possession. Your subconscious filled in the details. Teenage libido and repressed memories of *The Exorcist*.” He looks down for a minute, kicks a broken chunk of sidewalk with his boot. “You’ve got nothing to be embarrassed about, ya know. Never be ashamed of who you are or who you love.”

“Thanks, B.” The wind blows my hair across my face, and I pull a strand out of my mouth. “But you’re still a perv.”

Belial shakes his head, “Fuckin’ teenagers.” He winks, takes out a Marlboro in his front pocket, lights it with a match, and walks away.

“Hey, B,” I call out, but this time he just keeps on walking.

I rest my chin on my knees. In frozen time, there’s nothing to do but wait.

“Hey.”

Kyra is standing at the iron gate. She runs down the uneven sidewalk and sits down next to me.

“How?” I ask.

“I don’t know? Maybe I’m immune to the spell.” She rests her head on my shoulder. “If the world’s going to end, I wanted to be here. With my best friend.”

“Let it all crumble,” I say, “or not.”

Strange shadows are cast across the front yard from a sun that will never set.

* * *

Sophie climbs over the crumbled church walls and shattered glass, walking down the aisle among the pews like a bride clad in black.

Regina sits on the altar, legs hanging down, swinging shiny black leather boots.

“How is this possible?” she asks “Nothing from this world can break the Protection Blessing.”

Suddenly, Father Harris jumps to his feet. “Ahhhh!” he shouts as he throws the wine bottle over his shoulder and runs past Sophie, out of the church.

“That rock,” Sophie says, pointing to dust on the floor, “is of another world. Your Protection Blessing only protects you from things of *this* world.”

Regina jumps down from the altar. “What are you going to do now, Sophie? What can you do to me, Regina Marigold, infused with the power of the Saints, the might of the Martyrs?” Regina raises her pale arm and Sophie lifts off the ground. Regina clenches her hand into a fist and throws it sideways. Sophie’s left arm rips from her body and goes flying into the pew.

Sophie gasps for air. Regina clenches her fist and makes a downward motion, and this magically causes Sophie’s right leg is ripped off. Blood spills on the church floor like from a faucet. Regina uses her magic to pull Sophie through the air, towards her, until the auburn lady’s face is inches from Sophie’s. Shattered stain glass levitates in the air and impales Sophie in the back; she coughs blood.

“What were you thinking?” Regina throws both her arms to down to her side and this causes Sophie’s body to slam, chest first, onto the floor. She punches her fist into her palm, and this causes Sophie’s face pounds into the ground again and again and again until her face is nothing but a bloody pulp. “How did you think this would end, old woman? I’m a motherfuckin’ Archangel.”

Regina turns away from the body, towards the altar, and is face to face with Sophie. Sophie reaches a glowing arm into Regina’s chest and pulls out a beating heart.

“Well, I’m a motherfucking grandma. And you messed with my family.”

Regina falls to ground, crawling around on hands and knees away from Sophie, feeling her power fade away. She looks to the spot where Sophie's dead body was, but there is nothing there but a torn rag doll with button eyes.

Sophie kneels down next Regina. "Classic talisman misdirection. Freshman Voodoo 101." Sophie tosses the beating heart to the floor and exits the church through the side door, the door she'd snuck into the church through in the first place.

* * *

Time restarts and Kyra and I sit on the porch in silence. Soon, it's dark and the crickets chirp and the bats swoop around the old trees in the yard, and I see two hooded boys across the street. They stand there, on the sidewalk, hoods up, under the streetlight, staring at us with black eyes.

"Who are they?" I ask.

"Some friends. Someday, they'll collect me. But not today."

Epilogue

November 2016

(6 Months Later)

I sit in a comfortable gray chair on wheels at a new, polished desk. The fresh paint smell of the high school, is finally fading. The classrooms all have been refurbished over the summer and new dry erase boards have replaced the chalkboards, but the new boards don't erase well at all, and the teachers all grumble about it.

Principal Ryan, who is teaching AP Calculus until a permanent replacement for Ms. Nelson can be found, is handing back tests. Ryan's told me that he really wants to get a female calculus teacher to replace Ms. Nelson, because "America needs to encourage more girls to love math."

He places a stapled test face down in front of me and when I flip it over I see: *102%. Nice job, Ms. Sweetser.* Mr. Ryan always makes me laugh, the way he constantly rubs his temples and always looks super stressed, but I've realized he's really smart, and he's even bought me some books about experimental physics and quantum theory and black holes. Between those books and the ones Uncle Jason brings me home from NASA, I'll have a lot of reading to do over Christmas break.

If I keep doing awesome this semester in Calc, I'll be able to take some math courses from Virginia Tech in the winter semester, the youngest person ever from Hope Senior High to ever do this.

The bell rings and I leave the classroom into the shiny new hallway and walk around the corner to my locker. I see Kyra leaning against the yellow lockers, holding a

History book to her chest, laughing at something Ty says. She touches his back, and then sees me. She walks down the hall.

I put my math book in my locker.

“Hey stranger,” I say.

“Hi Morgan, I’m sorry I haven’t been around lately. We’ll hang out soon, I promise. It’s just I’ve been so busy with cheer practice, and I wasn’t around last weekend because Ty had this party and I had a few drinks and got too drunk to drive home.” Kyra’s sixteen now and has her license. She touches my cheek with her skinny hand. “I’m sorry, Morgan.”

“You don’t need to apologize. You’re my best friend, no matter what.”

“Please don’t be mad.”

I force my lips into a smile, although I don’t feel like smiling, not at all. “Kyra, we’re just sophomores. Let’s enjoy being young for a while. We’ve got plenty of time to figure things out.” I hate this, it hurts as much as ever, but I say it all the same.

Ms. Barnes, the school counselor, comes running out of her new office, which is a few doors down from my locker. “Morgan,” she squawks, “Morgan. Morgan. Your Uncle is on his way. It’s time! It’s time!” Ms. Barnes is visibly excited. I think she’s happy that, after trying to counsel my troubled mother so many years ago, that we’d pulled it together. We’d survived.

I grab my coat, slam my locker, and run out to the front of the school.

Uncle Jason shows up in his new-used BMW (NASA gave him a big promotion).

When we arrive at the hospital, Mom and Grandma are already there. Ten hours later, I get to hold the newborn in my arms. Molly lies in the bed, tired and happy, and her husband Bo has drifted off on the private room's small couch.

Mom and Jason sit in chairs by the small table.

"What's her name?" I ask.

"Serena Anne," Molly replies, "after her grandmother."

A tear slides down mom's cheek.

So, the six of us sit here, huddled close in the middle of a winter night, and each day creeps closer to Christmas; we're happy and guilty. Guilty of committing greatest atrocity of all—for better or worse, we saved this whole wicked world.

End Credit Scene

Regina Marigold, the evil Archangel, lands in a puddle, on a concrete sidewalk. It is raining. She pulls herself up, her red dress soaked in the downpour. She looks down where her butt landed and there's a dead worm.

She kicks at the worm. "They should call you Deadington," Regina says, and laughs at her own joke. She realizes she's been transported to some alternate universe, some strange, whimsical world. She knows she needs to get back to where she came from, to kill Morgan Sweetser once and for all.

Regina turns around and bumps into a tall, blond girl with an umbrella. "Watch where you're going," Regina says.

"Sorry," mutters the girl.

"Wait," Regina says. "Where am I?"

"Brooklyn," the girl says. "Where do you think you are?"

"Where Archangels go to die, apparently," Regina says. "What's your name?"

"Elliot," says the blond girl.

"Isn't that a boy's name?" asks Regina.

"I'm Elliot the girl."

"Oh. Well, Elliott the Girl, I used to be an Archangel, a bringer of death, the destroyer of nations..."

"Ok, that's great, I gotta go now. Bye crazy lady." Elliot the girl walks swiftly away.

Regina walks by a pawn shop, deciding to pawn her ring, to get some cash. She's starving, a feeling she's never felt before. She needs food.

In the window of the pawn shop, there's VHS copies of some cartoon called *Spookster Kids*. Regina walks in holding her ring in her palm. She would get back to her own universe, and when she did, she would kill Morgan Sweetser once and for all.