



TAKE

THE

LEAD

STORIES

LEADERS  
UNLOCKED





# TAKE THE LEAD STORIES

## OCTOBER 2023

Thank you to the Arts Council for England for funding Take the Lead Stories.

Thank you to the wonderful young writers for taking part:

- Jordan
- Ellis
- Serena
- Khaleeq
- Krystee

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Thank you to the team at Bristol City Hall for hosting our showcase.

Project team:

- Project Coordinator and creator: *Romaine Murchison*
- Project Manager and writing mentor: *Daniel Knag*

Publication design: *Bhavandeep Bains*

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# FOREWORD

A few years ago, I found myself fighting a relentless mental battle against anxiety and depression.

I was told that I had no place here, that I was without hope, destined for deportation. The journey from those dark days to the present, 2023, has been a profound transformation. This past year, I embraced a remarkable role, one that saw me facilitating "Take the Lead Stories," a project that was begotten following a pioneering one-year pilot in 2022.



My decision to deliver this project in Bristol, the city of my roots, my growth, and my profound love, was an act of dedication to the place I hold closest to my heart. Bristol, a city teeming with history both illustrious and ignominious, bears the imprints of diverse cultures and carries the scars of historical wounds begging for healing. It's a city steeped in heritage, marked by an exuberant multiculturalism. Yet, it also harbors wounds that need mending. Over the past year, our city, especially our young people and young adults within the urban communities, has weathered numerous trials and tribulations.

In navigating this second chapter, I've learned crucial lessons in operational dynamics, the intricacies of recruitment, and the competitive nature of youth organisations within the city, where the scene is notably distinct from the advanced structures observed when working in London. Amid these challenges, there exists a glimmer of hope. There are a few organisations that share our vision, and they are poised for collaboration. Their collective aim is the betterment of our youth and the empowerment of our communities, with a steadfast focus on fostering genuine impact rather than mere numbers or reputation.



Bristol's urban communities, by their very nature, nurture a deep emotional interconnection among its inhabitants. It's a unique place where emotional bonds are as sturdy as steel, especially during trying times. These recent years have posed a severe challenge to our beloved city, particularly in the context of youth violence. Some of our young writers have been personally affected by the heart-wrenching tragedies that sent shock-waves through the city. Despite it all, resilience shines through, and our young souls have shown remarkable strength.

It is a genuine privilege to work alongside these talented young writers, as their stories are nothing short of awe-inspiring. Each narrative stirs deep contemplation and reflection.

I hold steadfast to the belief that even a single young person inspired can initiate a ripple effect of transformative change.

My personal journey, marked by obstacles and labels that I've challenged and refused to accept, stands as a testament. It shows young people that you can fail but failure isn't the end, failure is just the lesson and a loss is an opportunity to reflect and to grow, and I'd like to think that I have done a lot of growing as have our writers here on this project.

I dress authentically, I speak authentically, and I am unyielding in the face of conformity. I yearn to convey a message to all young individuals - that you can be yourself, that you can stand out, without ever feeling the sting of shame related to your origin, clothing, or appearance. My appearance may mirror that of many boys and girls in underrepresented communities, but I stand true to my individuality. I aim to inspire young people, demonstrating that embracing your uniqueness, asserting your individuality, and expressing yourself should never carry a burden of shame, irrespective of your background or style.

In closing, "Take the Lead Stories" is more than a platform, it is a stage where voices, often ignored, can finally be heard. It's not about giving them a voice, they've always possessed that. It's about providing them with the opportunity they may not have encountered otherwise.



Our mission is to ensure that young people can voice their thoughts, and our responsibility is to listen, encourage, and support their growth. There are countless paths awaiting these young souls, and it's our solemn duty to ensure that the dark alleys and dead-end roads born of adversity, lost opportunities, and negative stereotypes give way to a brighter, more promising future. In conclusion, I extend heartfelt appreciation to my manager, Daniel, whose unwavering support and guidance have been instrumental in achieving the goals of our project. Together, we look ahead to the continuation of this transformative journey, where young lives are empowered, and the spirit of the community rekindles its vitality.

# **DREAMS BECOME REALITY & YOUR STORY INSPIRES OTHERS..**

**ROMAINE MURCHISON**

**OCTOBER 2023**

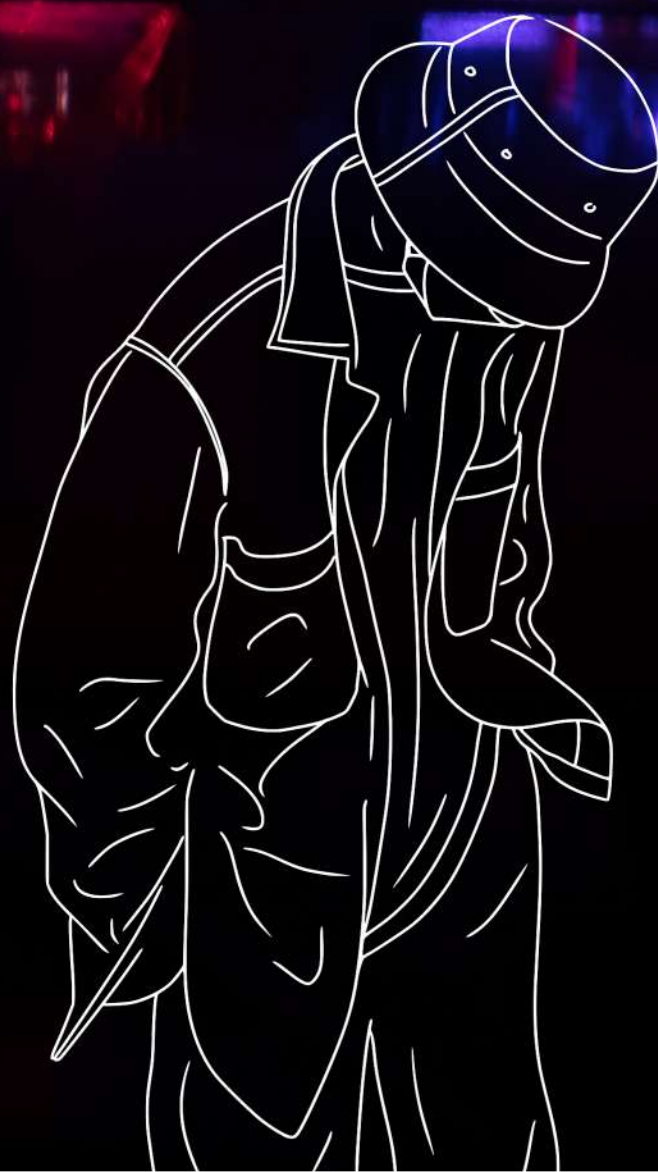






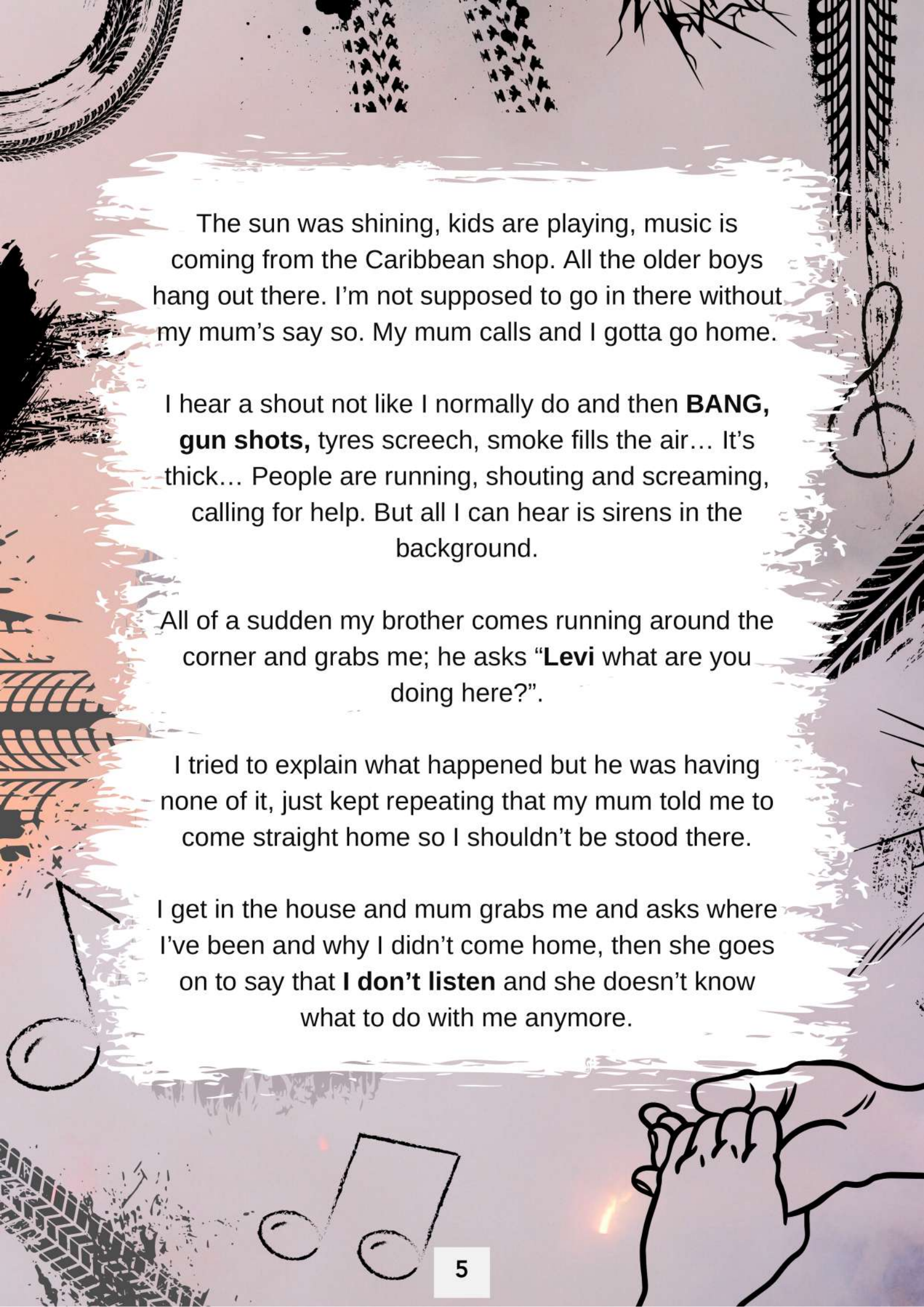
**JORDAN'S**

**STORY**



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The sun was shining, kids are playing, music is coming from the Caribbean shop. All the older boys hang out there. I'm not supposed to go in there without my mum's say so. My mum calls and I gotta go home.



I hear a shout not like I normally do and then **BANG, gun shots**, tyres screech, smoke fills the air... It's thick... People are running, shouting and screaming, calling for help. But all I can hear is sirens in the background.

All of a sudden my brother comes running around the corner and grabs me; he asks "**Levi** what are you doing here?".

I tried to explain what happened but he was having none of it, just kept repeating that my mum told me to come straight home so I shouldn't be stood there.

I get in the house and mum grabs me and asks where I've been and why I didn't come home, then she goes on to say that **I don't listen** and she doesn't know what to do with me anymore.







I go upstairs and change my clothes. My mum shouts to remind me that she has a lot to do and she doesn't have time to run around behind me so I need to bring down my clothes to get washed.

It's getting late and mum would have called me for dinner so I went downstairs to ask her if we are eating today, but she says she's waiting on my brother and **he should have been back by now.**

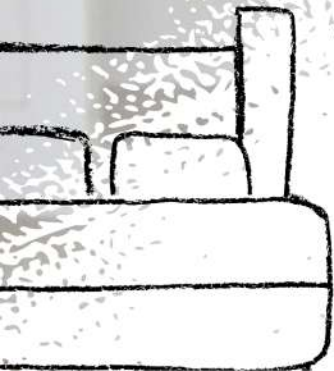
She said she's been calling him but he's not answering.



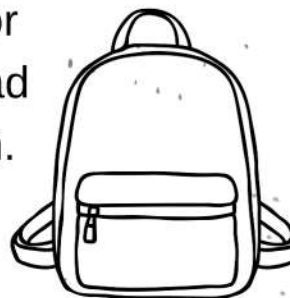
It was my brother's friend **Tyreek** that got shot but I don't want to stress my mum anymore so I keep quiet and wait.



It's got to 9:30 and mum has called me down to eat. She says she can't wait on my brother any longer and I have school tomorrow so I need to eat and get to bed.



The light beams into my room. I forgot to close the curtains last night, **I was soo tired.** I get ready for school. My mum has already left for work so I head out to wait outside the estate for my friend Logan.







As we are walking we go past the tape where the shooting happened. Police are still standing there and there is a white tent.



As we get to school **everyone in the playground is talking about what happened** but I pretend to only know as much as them.

The bell just rang and it's time to leave school. I'm walking with Logan and I see Simone.



Simone is in our year but she's not like everyone else although we all live in the same estate. **Simone is different**, she's top set in all lessons and you don't catch her out in parks unless she's going somewhere.



My phone keeps ringing and it's my mum but I don't want to go home yet so I let it ring. As I get in it's 5:45 and my mum is **raging** saying that I don't listen and why did she buy me a phone if I can't answer it when she calls?

Tyreek is going away tomorrow and he wants me to come. I keep telling him no but at this point I feel I want to go.



Mum won't get off my back and **I'm having to fill my brother's place as well as mine.**

Mum was working late today so she left around 7. I had two pieces of toast with butter with a cup of tea and after that I went to bed.

When I woke up in the morning I decided that I was going with Tyreek so I put extra clothes in my bag so I could put them on after school.

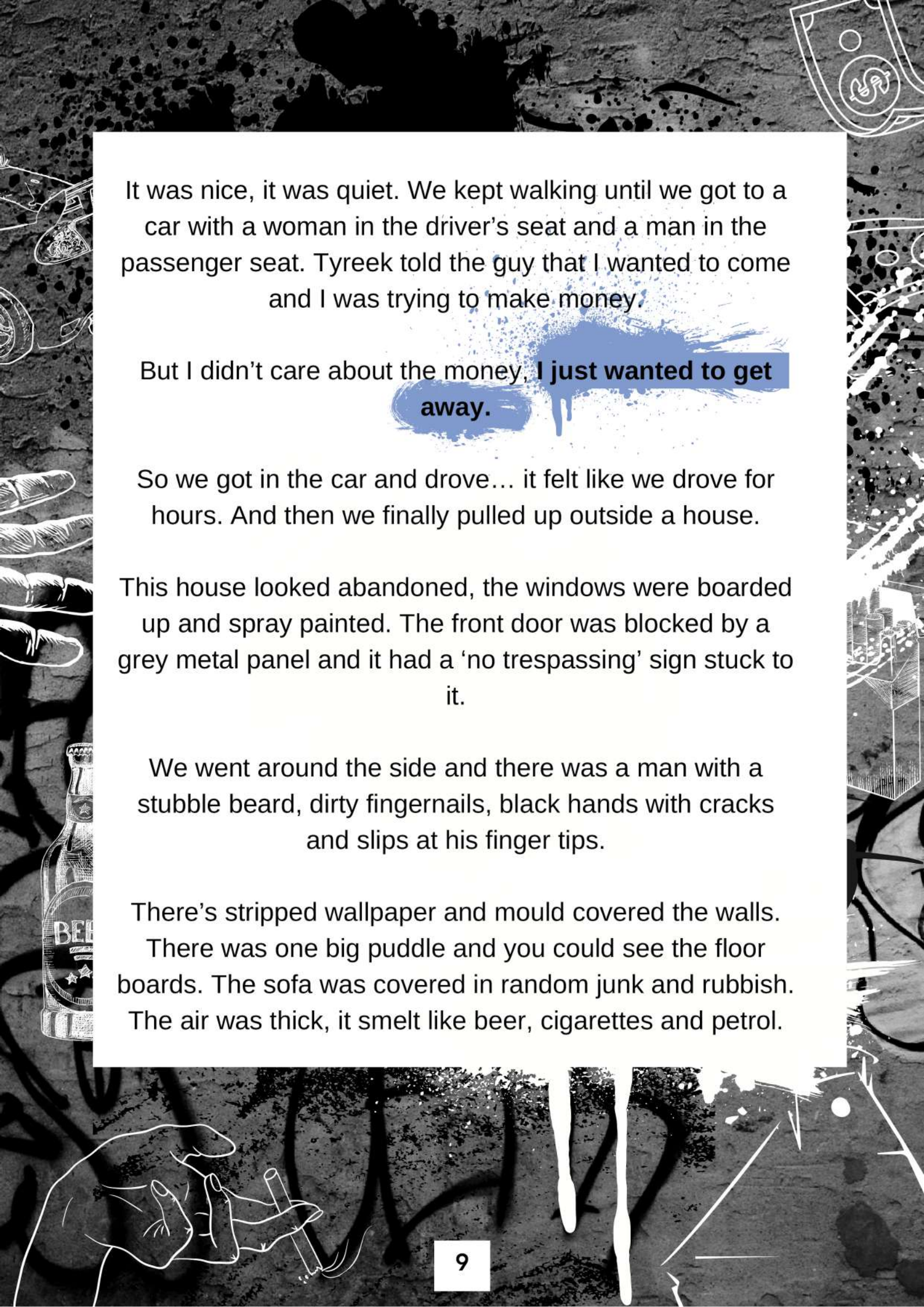
I waited outside the estate like usual but when Tyreek came down I told him I was down to come.

**The way his face lit up**, his smile went from one ear to the other he was jumping up and down talking about how rich we was gonna be.

When the school day was finished we went to Tyreek's house. I put my school clothes in his room and changed into one of my other outfits. When me and Tyreek was ready we walked to the park near the shooting.

The air felt moist but smelled damp from where it was raining.





It was nice, it was quiet. We kept walking until we got to a car with a woman in the driver's seat and a man in the passenger seat. Tyreek told the guy that I wanted to come and I was trying to make money.

But I didn't care about the money, **I just wanted to get away.**

So we got in the car and drove... it felt like we drove for hours. And then we finally pulled up outside a house.

This house looked abandoned, the windows were boarded up and spray painted. The front door was blocked by a grey metal panel and it had a 'no trespassing' sign stuck to it.

We went around the side and there was a man with a stubble beard, dirty fingernails, black hands with cracks and slips at his finger tips.

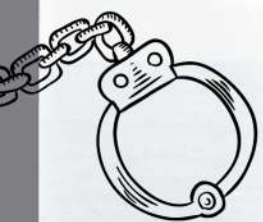
There's stripped wallpaper and mould covered the walls. There was one big puddle and you could see the floor boards. The sofa was covered in random junk and rubbish. The air was thick, it smelt like beer, cigarettes and petrol.



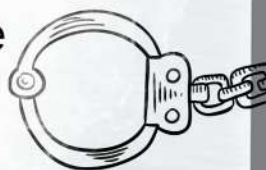


The guy took us to a room with just a mattress and told us this is where we would be sleeping and he's gonna come back for us next week.

At this point **I regretted even coming**. I wished I stayed at home but I was here and I just had to deal with it. After all, all actions have consequences. We was here for three days and Tyreek kept going in and out of the room.



On the fourth day we went out to get food and we seen the police but I wasn't paying attention. And then all of a sudden they took Tyreek into the back of the van with handcuffs!





When I asked what they were doing with him they asked for my name and age. **I told them I was fourteen years old and my name was Levi.**

They said that I had been reported missing and that I was coming with them too. Me and Tyreek got split up and all I could think about was what my mum was gonna do when I got back.









I was sat in the police cell for six hours before my mum came to get me. When we stepped outside we walked to a car. I could see a man in the car but couldn't see his face. When I got into the car and the lights turned on I still couldn't recognise this man.


He asked if I was alright and said that he hadn't seen me **since I was a baby**. The car ride back was awkward... too much tension...




When I was about to open the door I saw my brother... I was shocked but happy to see him. I tried to ask where he had been but he said I wasn't in the position to ask questions.

He asked me where I was. I told him with Tyreek and he got mad and started shouting, saying that he told me not to hang out with Tyreek.

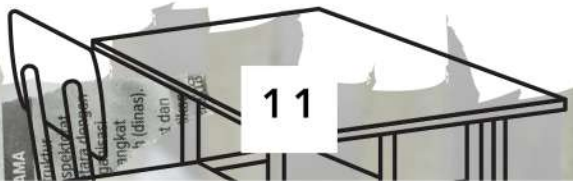
I didn't reply **I just stayed there in silence** I got up and went to my room and I could hear my brother and mum arguing.




I went to sleep and woke up the next day to go to school.



I had to put on my old uniform from last year because my new one was still at Tyreek's.








As I was walking I heard someone call my name... it was **Simone**... she grabbed me and hugged me **as if she was gonna die if she let go.**

She told me about how much she missed me and that she was looking for me and I had everyone worried. She asked what's going on with me and why I never tried to speak to her about my problems?







# ELLIS'

# STORY




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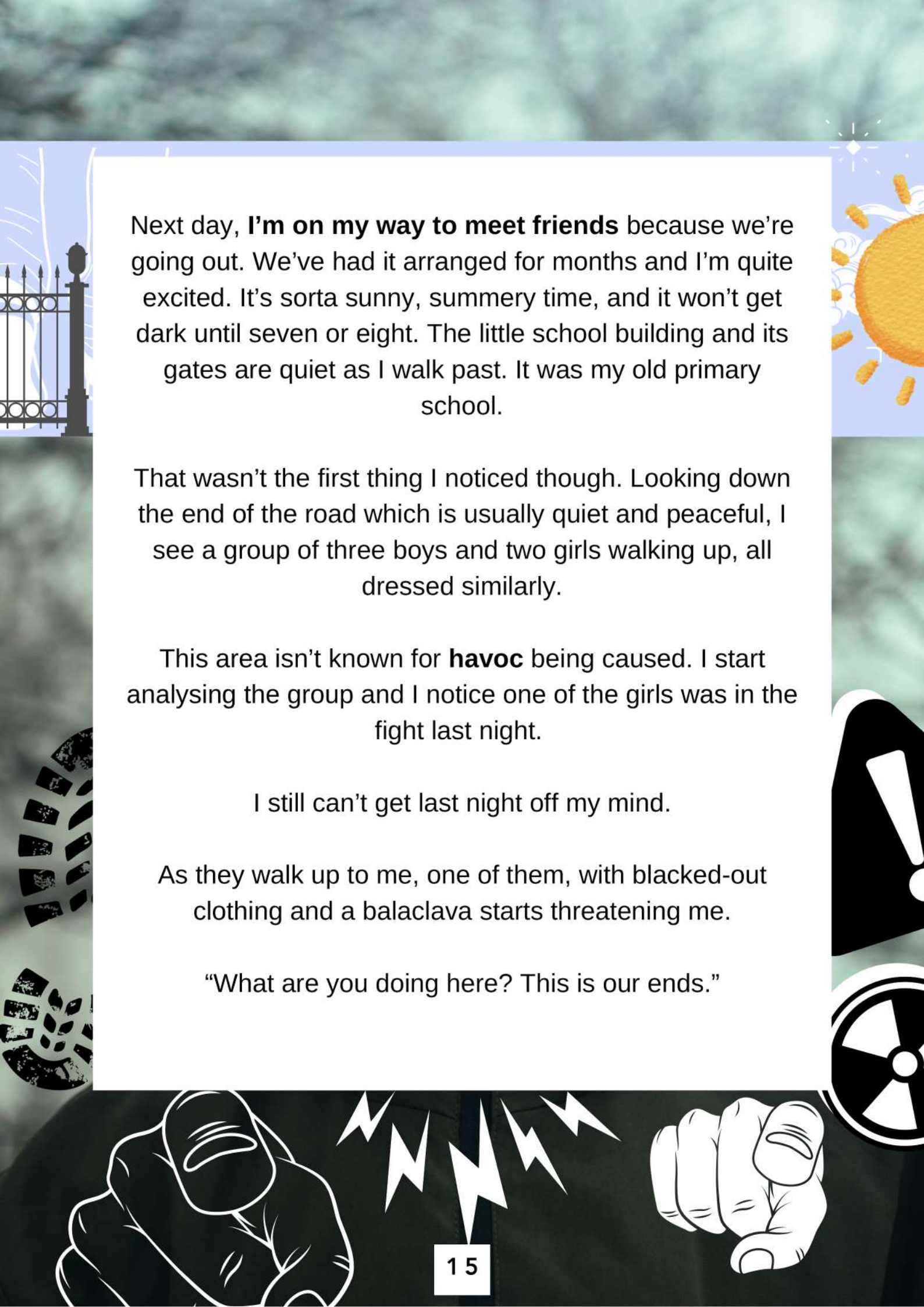


My dad  
listening



A stylized line drawing of a vintage portable radio. It features a large, rounded rectangular body with a carrying strap attached to the top left. The front face is dominated by a large speaker grille with horizontal slats. Above the grille, there are two circular knobs, likely for volume and tuning, and a central horizontal slider control. A long, thin telescopic antenna extends from the top of the radio. The background is a light blue gradient with a vertical yellow and blue brushstroke on the left side.





Next day, **I'm on my way to meet friends** because we're going out. We've had it arranged for months and I'm quite excited. It's sorta sunny, summery time, and it won't get dark until seven or eight. The little school building and its gates are quiet as I walk past. It was my old primary school.

That wasn't the first thing I noticed though. Looking down the end of the road which is usually quiet and peaceful, I see a group of three boys and two girls walking up, all dressed similarly.


This area isn't known for **havoc** being caused. I start analysing the group and I notice one of the girls was in the fight last night.

I still can't get last night off my mind.

As they walk up to me, one of them, with blacked-out clothing and a balaclava starts threatening me.

"What are you doing here? This is our ends."





I automatically feel anxious. I sorta get a weird feeling in my throat, I also find it really **hard to concentrate**. I had been feeling safe and able to concentrate on all the details around me... now I start looking around and don't really know what's going on anymore.

They start making fun of my weight. Even though it's my community and I've lived here for ages I feel unwelcome.

I stay silent, looking around. **It's obvious I'm scared**. I put my hands in my pockets and look to the ground.

"You scared, babber?"

\*\*\*


*'Babber' was something my mum might say as a playful jibe taking the mick because she hasn't got as strong an accent as me. I start thinking and thinking. **And our character is a fast thinker.***

*I see a lot of things that a lot of other people don't see. I read people really well. Suddenly I can see that these people threatening me are not the people they look like on the outside.*

*He doesn't have any more right than me.*

\*\*\*





I get mouthy. They go “who do you think you’re shouting at?”

I try standing up for myself. I’m fed up. I don’t want to do it but lash out and swing out, actually hitting one.

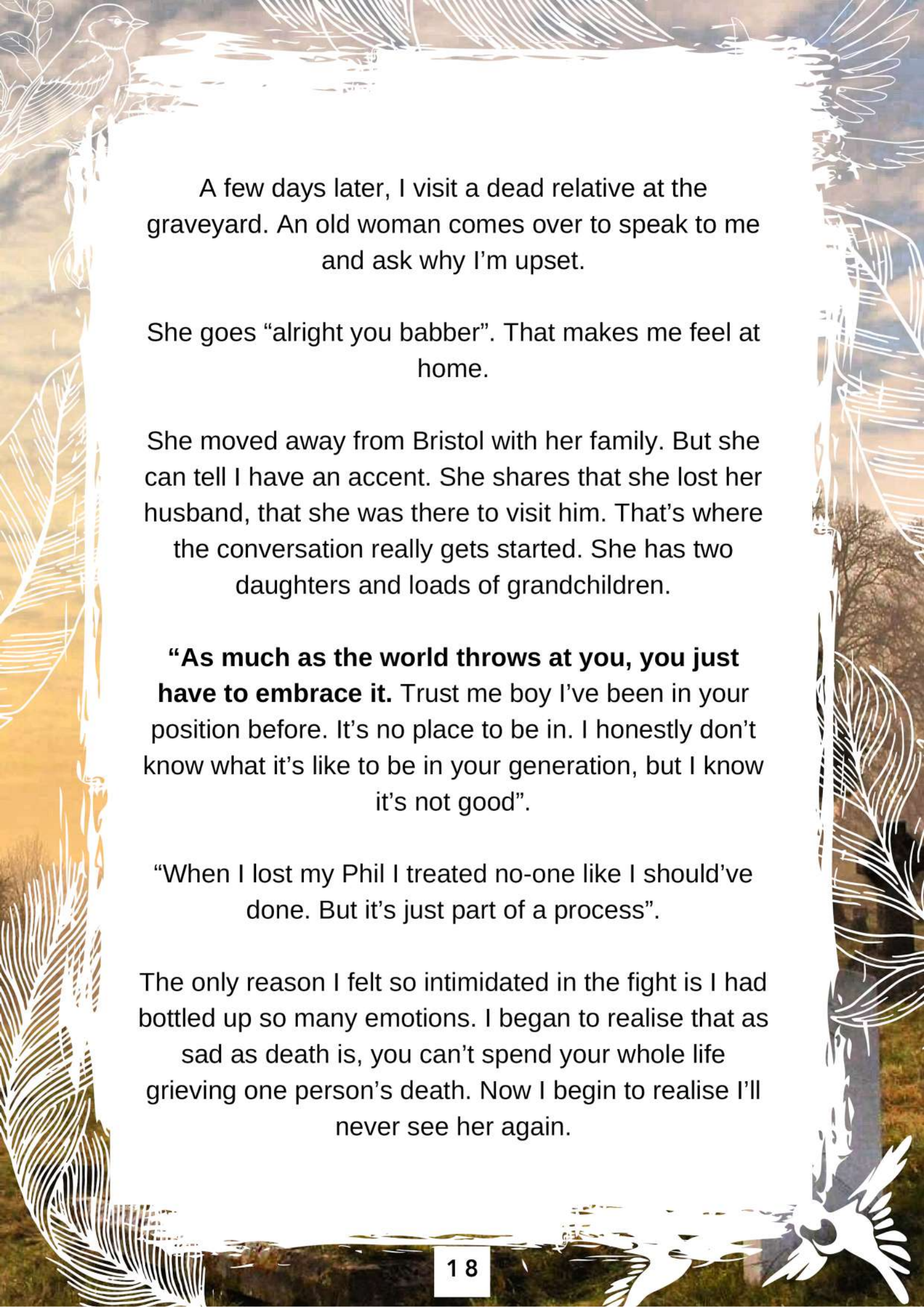
“I’ll stab you! I know where you live, I’ll come to your house!” he shouts, but he carries on walking past. Maybe he wasn’t as tough as he was acting.

I say “of course you will”, but I still feel threatened.

Later, I meet my mates and tell them what happened. We hang out as usual. On the outside I’m like normal. **On the inside I’m trembling**, I’m really scared. As much as we laughed about it, the whole time I kept thinking about what had happened; it was one of the most intimidating things that’s ever happened to me.

When I get home I think what have I done to deserve this? I’ve done nothing wrong to anyone. I feel cold, but still sweating at the same time. My heart is racing and I keep thinking something is going to happen. I keep lashing out at people for no reason. I’m shouting at my dad. **I’m so paranoid.**





A few days later, I visit a dead relative at the graveyard. An old woman comes over to speak to me and ask why I'm upset.

She goes "alright you babber". That makes me feel at home.

She moved away from Bristol with her family. But she can tell I have an accent. She shares that she lost her husband, that she was there to visit him. That's where the conversation really gets started. She has two daughters and loads of grandchildren.

**"As much as the world throws at you, you just have to embrace it.** Trust me boy I've been in your position before. It's no place to be in. I honestly don't know what it's like to be in your generation, but I know it's not good".

"When I lost my Phil I treated no-one like I should've done. But it's just part of a process".

The only reason I felt so intimidated in the fight is I had bottled up so many emotions. I began to realise that as sad as death is, you can't spend your whole life grieving one person's death. Now I begin to realise I'll never see her again.



I never showed emotion when she died. You don't need to show your emotion to be grieving. There's a reason behind all behaviour.

**Everyone has their own backstory going on in their head. Some people show it and some people don't. You can never pre-read someone, even yourself.**





T & SID

SERENA'S  
STORY



I had a long day at school today, **I just want to go home and eat.** I wonder what **T** has made for dinner cause I'm starving.

I enter the house to a warm, welcoming smell: curry chicken, white rice, with steamed veg, yum my favorite. I threw my black and red Nike bag onto the cream sofa and ran to the kitchen.

The invitation of the **sage green kitchen** brought me to my older brother. He was dicing an onion whilst smoking a spliff but that didn't bother me. He looks up at me with his big hazel eyes, slightly tanned skin and coffee colored hair,

"You alright Sid, how was school?"

I look down at my creased leather black shoes and then back up to T.

"School was a vibe until I had an argument with my maths teacher, she destroyed my day"

"You're so dramatic about 'destroyed'. I remember them days. You need to start taking things seriously, you will be doing GCSEs in a couple years", says T.

*Side eye.*

"Yeah yeah, couple years"



It goes through one ear and comes out the other. I look up at T with a cheeky smile.

“Oi T, wanna play just dance on Xbox?”

“Not today sis I’m busy”

My cheeky smile turns into a frown, I speak under my breath in a childlike manner.

“You’re always busy”.

‘Uhh’, the 5-year age gap, an emotional roller coaster.


On a gloomy winter night Dad forces T to babysit me. Personally I don’t think I need to be baby sat, “I am grown”. T didn’t seem happy about babysitting me either, I heard him and dad bickering in the kitchen.

I walked down the soiled staircase; I looked through the colorless window. T was screaming and aggressively shouting:

“Why the fuck do I have to baby sit? I had plans tonight!”

He starts to punch the oaken door till red seeps out of his knuckles. And he calls me ‘dramatic’. Honestly, he’s acting like a crazy person. Under my breath I say, “it’s not that deep”.





I enter Dad's bland official office. I hesitate to bother him; he seems engraved with his work. He removes his glasses and looks up at me from his disorganised desk.

“What's up Sid”

I look down at my salmon pink sliders, a burst of energy hits me, I start to fiddle with the paper hanging from the desk. My voice goes higher than I meant. I'm trying to seem happy.

“Why is T acting like this, don't you think it's slightly over the top?”

Dad puts his glasses back on and continues with his work.

“You know what T's, like he'll be back to normal soon...  
**boys will be boys**”

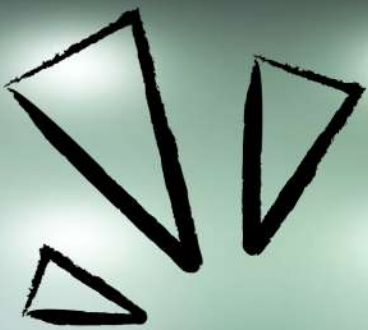
I shrug my shoulders. Under my breath I say “okay”.

I hear shallow footsteps climbing up the creaky staircase.

My skin starts to tighten... is that T? I was slightly anxious... he was vexed not so long ago. I wonder if he'll take it out on me.

I mean that's not like T, but he wasn't himself, it was almost as if he was another person. But like dad said, “boys will be boys”. My bedroom door flung open; my heart jumped out of my chest, it was T.





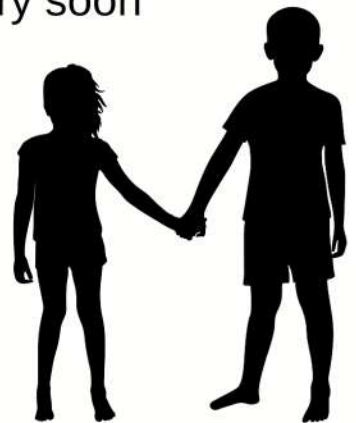
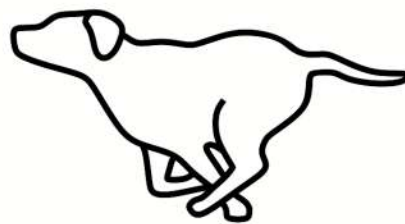
He sprang in with a smile on his face and a spliff in his hand.

“Are coming with me to walk the dog or what?”

I looked at him in disbelief. He was infuriated, now he's fine. Dad was right, “he'll be back to normal soon”. T grabbed the camo dog lead and gathered a few treats and poo bags.

“Come on Sid let's go”

My heart was pounding, I felt overwhelmed and confused. I was still caught up on T's reaction, but the worry soon wore off.



We turned the corner to Little Stoke Park. Ubu was pulling on the lead as per usual. As we took the next left, T took Ubu off her lead and her tail started to wag as she shoot off into the darkness. T and I laughed.



As we walked through the darkness, T stares at me for an uncomfortable amount of time. I screwed my face at him.

"What you are looking at bruv?"

He laughs.

"You look like dad", he says.

"No I don't, you do"

T grabs me by the scruff of my neck. **"I love you Sid, you know that"**.

I look him up and down.

"Are you alright?"

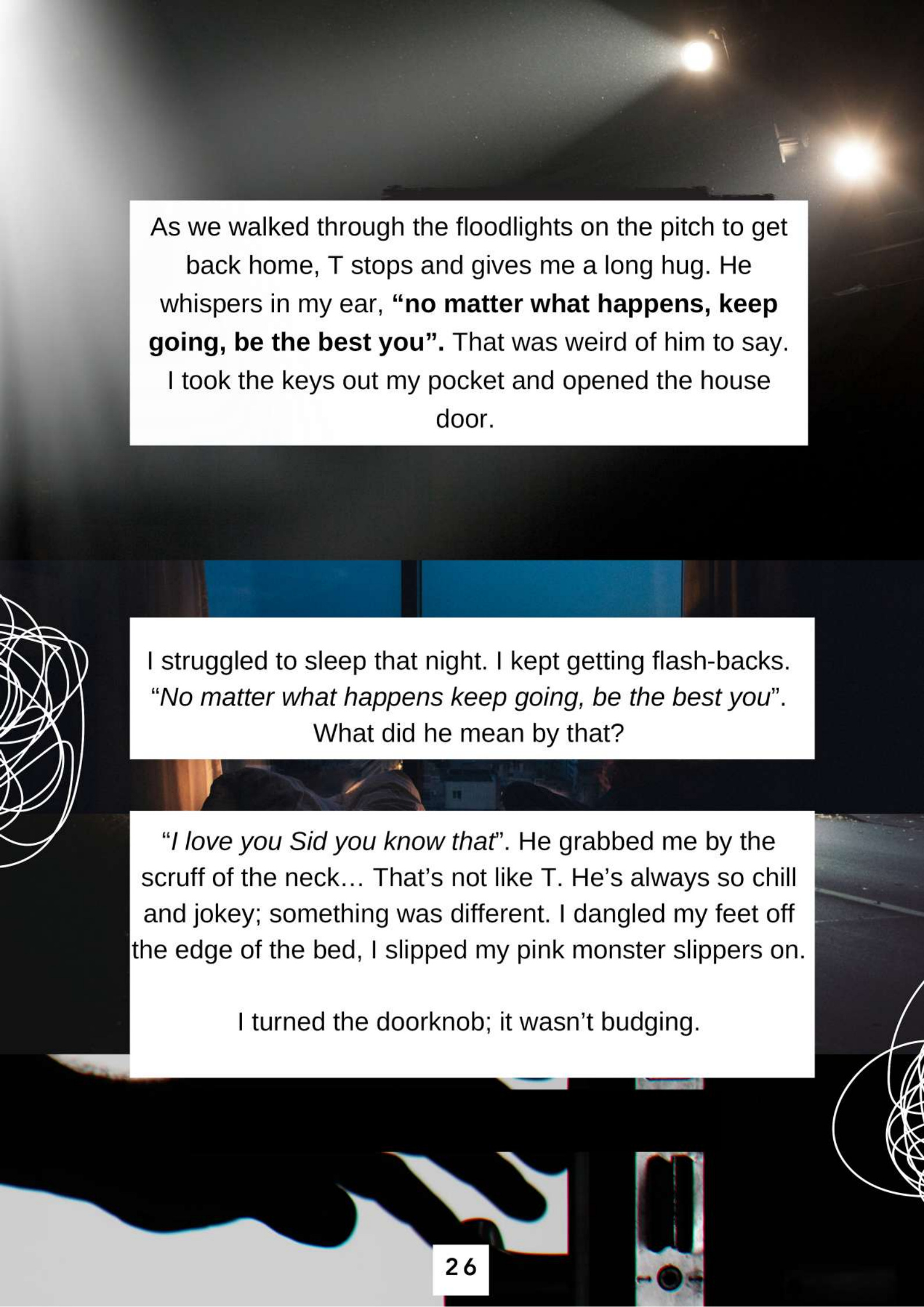
I don't think T has ever told me that he loves me. I was a bit confused.

"What are you not going to say it back?"

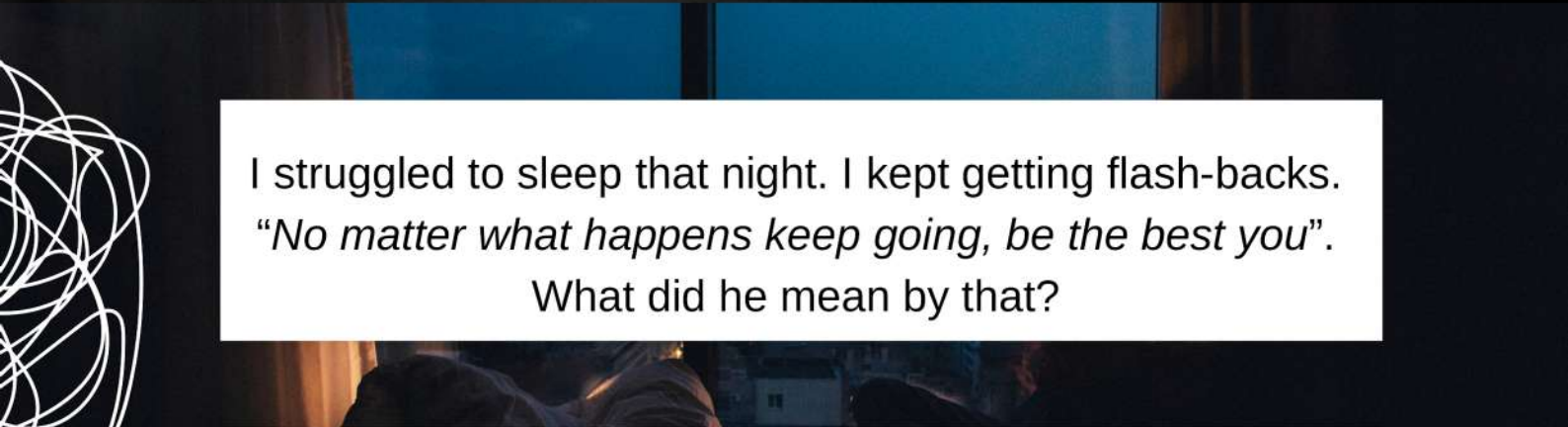
I side eyed him... Under my frosty breath I murmured  
"love you too".

T smiled. "That's better".

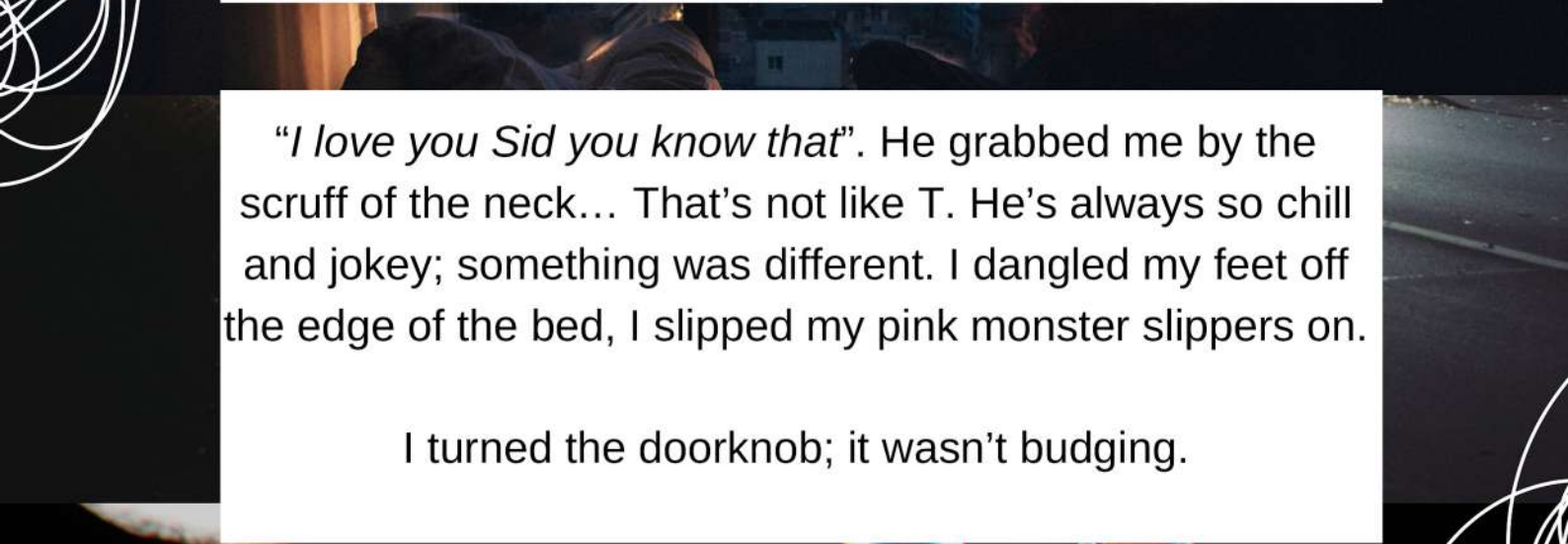




As we walked through the floodlights on the pitch to get back home, T stops and gives me a long hug. He whispers in my ear, **“no matter what happens, keep going, be the best you”**. That was weird of him to say. I took the keys out my pocket and opened the house door.



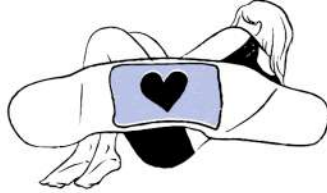
I struggled to sleep that night. I kept getting flash-backs. *“No matter what happens keep going, be the best you”*. What did he mean by that?



*“I love you Sid you know that”*. He grabbed me by the scruff of the neck... That's not like T. He's always so chill and jokey; something was different. I dangled my feet off the edge of the bed, I slipped my pink monster slippers on.

I turned the doorknob; it wasn't budging.





I had to apply force. The cold air from the corridor pushed against me, **it felt like it was trying to stop me.**

I stood outside Ts bedroom door. Loud music was playing and it smelt like weed. I knocked on the door.

"T are you awake? Can we speak?"

I looked down at my feet waiting for the 'go away'. I knocked the door one more time with more force.

"T!"

No answer.

"I'm coming in"

It felt like the door was fighting me. I used force, the door flung open.

**It was T. He was lifeless.** His feet dangled above the floor. I screamed. I tried to pick him up, but he was gone.





**It's been 3 months since T left.** In my head it feels like it happened yesterday. It broke my father. I started to live with my mum. I was broken and the days went slow but the weeks passed fast.

I spent most of my time in bed staring into space. I didn't sleep, I just stared. Every time I closed my eyes I seen him there, dangling. My mum opened the door slowly.

"Sid I've made you breakfast"

I covered my face with the sheets. "I'm not hungry".

Mum puts my tea and breakfast on the pink desk, she sits on the edge of the bed.

"Sid you need to pick yourself up. T wouldn't want this"

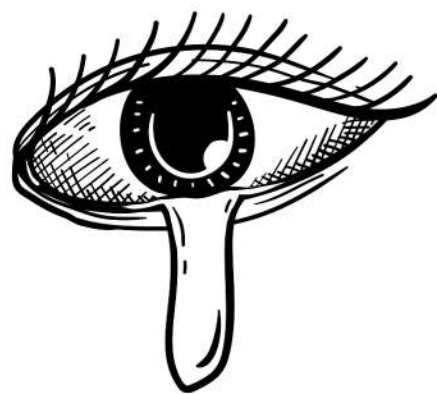
I snapped at her.

"How do you know? **HE'S SELFISH AND DEAD**".


The word 'dead' made me feel sick... My eyes watered, but I held the tears back.

"Why don't you take yourself for a walk Sid, it might make you feel better"

I stayed silent. I waited for my mum to leave the room. I **grabbed the pink bin and started to be sick.** Maybe a walk would make me feel better.







It was so hard to get out of my bed, it felt as if I was sucked in, like I was only safe in this one space. I dragged on a pair of joggers and my oversized light pink hoodie. I slipped on my crocs. I opened the door and the sun beamed down on me. The roads were busy, children laughed and smiled as they walked to school. **All I felt was anger. I wanted to be a bad person. I wanted people to feel how I felt.**

I walked past my school. I hadn't been in months and I didn't plan to go back. I just wanted to be alone. I didn't need anyone to feel sorry for me or to show me fake love and support.

In the distance I saw a boy with straight back cornrows and a black tracksuit, it was **Alonzo**. He was on a bike stood outside the gates of our old school. Alonzo used to go to my school but he got kicked out for taking a knife in.


We didn't really speak; I would say he was an acquaintance. He seemed too always be up to no good.

I wanted to avoid a conversation... I didn't feel like speaking. I looked down at my feet. I walked past him and then I hear:

"Yo is that Sid?"







I look up and roll my eyes and turn around. He cycled over to me. I stood there waiting for him to come over. I was overthinking about what I would say. **I hadn't had an interaction with another person since T died.**

Alonzo leaped off the bike and gave me a hug. I had my arms crossed and I looked down at the holes on my black crocs.

"Long time no see. I heard about your older brother, I'm really sorry for your loss"

I was quiet. I didn't know what to say, it took me a while to respond.

"How are you Lonzo? Have you started your new school yet?"

He had his hands down his pants. "Man's not going to school no more I work now".

I pulled a confused face "What job, you're fourteen".

He smiles. **"Trapping init"**

I chuckled; I hadn't laughed in a while. Lonzo giggled. "What you doing now Sid?"

"Nothing"

"Wanna hang out?"

I looked around. **"Well I have nothing better to do".**



Another 3 months passed.

Me and Alonzo became best friends; we did everything together. He even introduced me to his friends. **It felt like a second family that accepted me.** Lonzo taught me how to make money. We spent most of our days riding about moving and selling. I was coming home every day at 1am with £300 in my pocket. **I was slowly becoming a better version of myself.**

My mum knew what I was doing but she couldn't stop me. I was on top, I was able to afford anything I wanted.

It broke her but she knew it was a distraction. A distraction from the pain and trauma. We argued a lot.

We were always very close but when T died things changed.

It's 4am... the flash-backs returned. I could see him...

***"You know I love you Sid"*** played on repeat. I could only remember the lifeless T. As days went by, I couldn't remember his face or what he sounded like. The only image left was him hanging. Hours went by. It was time to make money.

I meet Lonzo outside of the block. I wasn't sure what to expect for today. Only the olders are allowed in this specific block. Lonzo said "Big Tony has a job for us". My heart pounded...





“Who’s Big Tony?”

Lonzo laughed. “You don’t know who Big Tony is? We sell ‘food’ for him”. I looked to my feet, “oh”.

Lonzo knocked on the flat door. Someone immediately opens it. The smell of weed hit me and it triggered something. My older brother was dicing an onion whilst smoking a spliff. I shook the memory out of my head.

**The flat was dirty and dark.** It felt like it was suffocating me.

**A tall man with arms longer than branches and gold chains and rings walks over to me** and Lonzo. He doesn’t introduce himself, he just says, “I have a task for both of you.” He grabs two school uniforms, one male and female. He looks at us both with no facial expression.

“Put these on now”

**I felt sick.** I didn’t know what was going on, I just agreed.

“Why are we putting on school uniforms?”

Lonzo looks up at me in a panic. Under his breath he says “don’t ask any questions, that’s Big tony”.

Tony hands us both separate bags; one sage green Nike bag and one black Adidas bag. He then hands us both train tickets that were heading to Leeds. He gives us each a small black phone.



"Don't open the bag no matter what and when the phone rings, you pick up. **I need you both to head down to Leeds**"

Lonzo says "yes Big Ton"

I look at Lonzo in disbelief. "Excuse me tony but what about my mother, I can't just go to Leeds".

Tony laughs. "**Fuck your mum**". A shiver went down my spine.

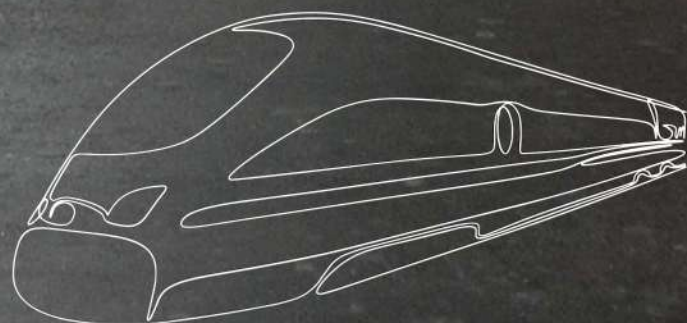
I had never been on a train before. **It was peaceful and calm**, considering the circumstances. I looked over to Lonzo, he was sat a few aisles behind me. He looked distressed and uncomfortable. I couldn't feel anything. I wasn't worried I just felt normal. The train moved so fast but took so long.

"Next station stopping at Wakefield"

Just one more stop. The train journey was so peaceful that I nodded off. As the train stopped, six police officers came on. They approach Lonzo... The police officer looks down at him.

"This is the police. You are under arrest on suspicion of transporting drugs. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say may be used against you in a court of law..."

**RAI**







**I felt terrified...** I started shaking, I felt sick. I tried my best not to look back, I could hear Lonzo crying. I started to sweat. I couldn't breathe.

**I wasn't becoming a better version of myself**, I was the worst version. I couldn't find a way to process the pain, so I let it consume me. I spent so much time thinking I was getting better, but I was so much worse. What would T think? His wise words played like a tune stuck in my head "*no matter what happens keep going, be the best you*". I wasn't my better self.

Another two months went by.

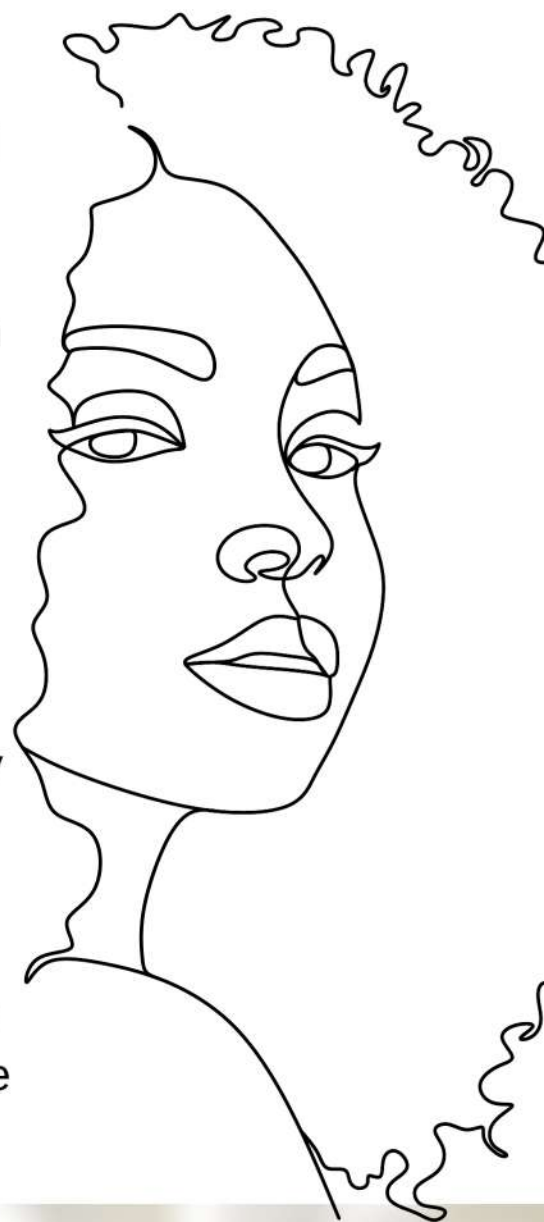


It has been eight months since T died. And two since Lonzo was arrested. I start bereavement counseling today, but I don't want help. I had my first session online with a woman called **Mary**. She seemed cool, but talking wasn't something that I was ready for. It was like the words were choking me as if they were stuck down the back of my throat.



Mary understood. She asked me if I did any sport growing up. I said, "**boxing** but I haven't done it in years now".

"I have a place just for you. Meet me at this location next week Thursday, 1 o'clock", she said in a bubbly happy tone. I said "okay."





Thursday, 1 o'clock.

Mary was stood outside a boxing gym; she was a lot younger than I thought she would be. She had long brown hair and wore a bright pink jumper with a black lanyard around her neck.

She greeted me with "you must be Sidney".

I replied "**Sid**".

Mary smiled.

"Nice to meet you Sid"

She was so cheerful and alive, it kind of rubbed onto me. The gym looked **secure and safe** from the outside. It had alluring colors on the outside: royal blue and white. Mary looked at me and smiled as she opened the door to the gym.

"I have someone for you to meet"

I look up from my feet. The gym smelt of disinfectant and sweat but it had a homey feel to it. All of the coaches introduced themselves as they walked past. **It felt easy to smile back at them.** A man with a receding hairline, black Nike shorts and a blue vest came up to me.

"You alright kid"

I took a while to reply under my breath "I'm fine". He introduces himself:

"My name's Anthony but you can call me Ant, I heard that you use to box"


I looked down at my bitten nails "**yes, use to.**"



# KRYSTEE'S STORY







"I'm telling you bro, it was a real ghost!"


"I even have proof" the young boy smirked, his pride practically seeping through the pores on his face. Before waiting for anyone's response, **Kody** picked up the video recorder that was already prepared and ready next to him.

"How long is this gonna take?"

The oldest of the group, **Meg**, who was a complete sceptic and didn't like the idea of ghosts at all. She had brown hair and hazel eyes, she was quite tall too.

"Jeez Meg you seem proper excited about this you know?"

Her only response being a scoff and an eyeroll.



The cafeteria was jam packed, barely even room to breathe, so most of the group wanted to leave as soon as possible, each of them slowly getting more and more irritated every minute. They had a long grey table in the back left, right next to the fire door. There were four blue, round seats on either side. With just one glance it was clear that everyone had their own place at Winchester High, except these lot. They looked odd sat together and just straight up wrong, different ages and styles. You'd think "how do they pull it off?". Everyone thinks that at first.

With a **loud bang** (that caused silence in the room for a solid 5 seconds), Kody dropped a video recorder onto the table.







"Are you guys being serious? Look at it!"

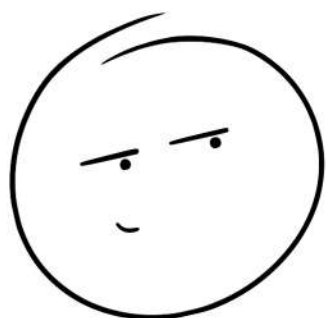


With a long, dragged-out sigh, a blonde girl with the most stunning blue eyes picked up the camera, waving everyone in to see.



"I'm not looking at that, **Chloe**." Meg picked up her bag and started packing her stuff away "I can't believe you guys are buying this stuff".

"What are you too scared?" The blonde girl crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow, a smirk playing on her lips.



"What? No! i just-" She was cut off.



"CHICKEN"

"AM NOT"

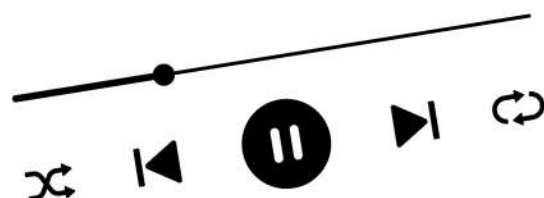
"ARE TO"




"AM NO- oh for crying out loud fine! I'll look at the stupid video"

Kody and Chloe shared a look of triumph which made Meg regret what she said.

As everyone crowded around the camera, Chloe pressed play.







The camera showed a **creepy old house**, two windows boarded up, one missing all together. The door looked as if it was about to come off its hinges and all the walls were rotten. It had two floors by the looks of it and it was surrounded by a metal fence.

The camera was turned around and there Kody was, looking excited. "I've done it guys, I found a way in!"

There was a load of shuffling and grunts until the camera was finally still again. A loud creak was heard as the door opened. Throughout the video, the recording slowly deteriorated, the lens getting blurrier and shaky. At a few points in the video, the sound even broke, a low humming of static running in.

**"See I told you guys!"**

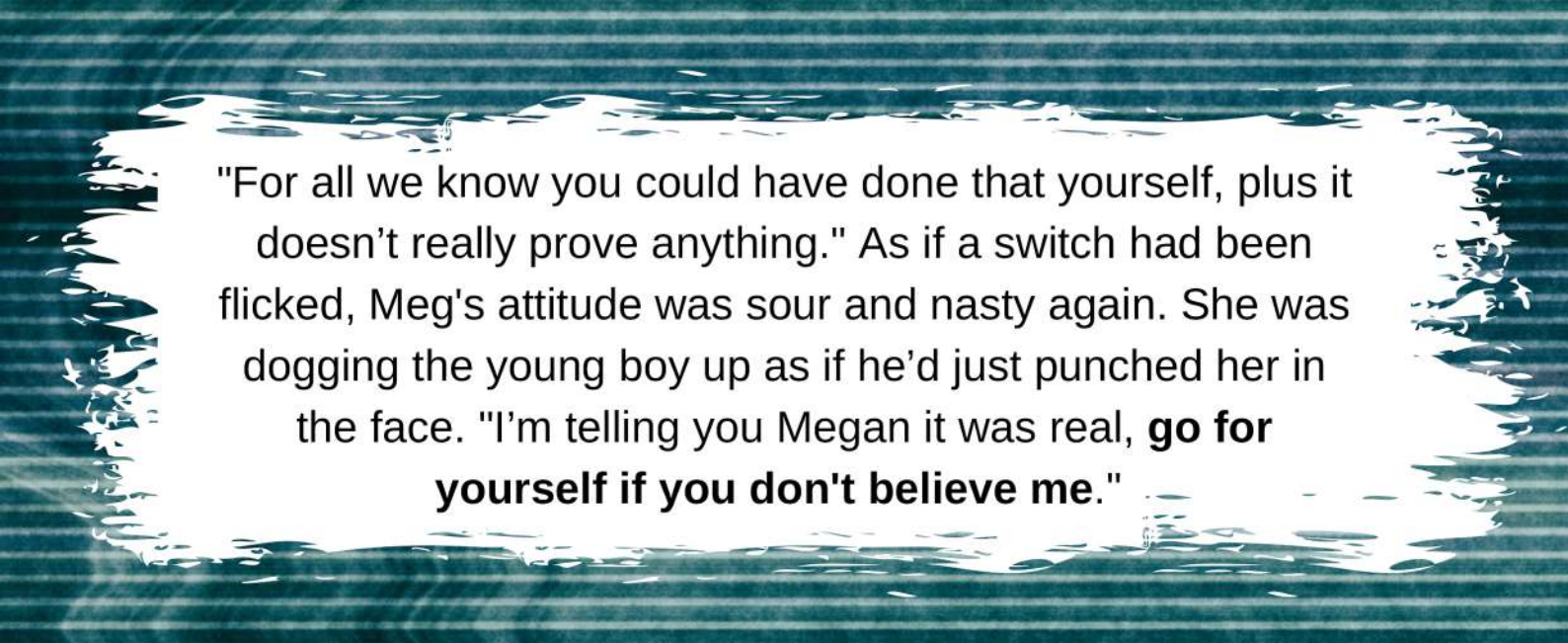
Everyone's attention was taken from the video, which was playing its last few seconds, to Kody. There was a clean split between the group, those who believed it and those who didn't.

"What. Was. That. Did you seriously think we'd believe that? Nothing even happened"

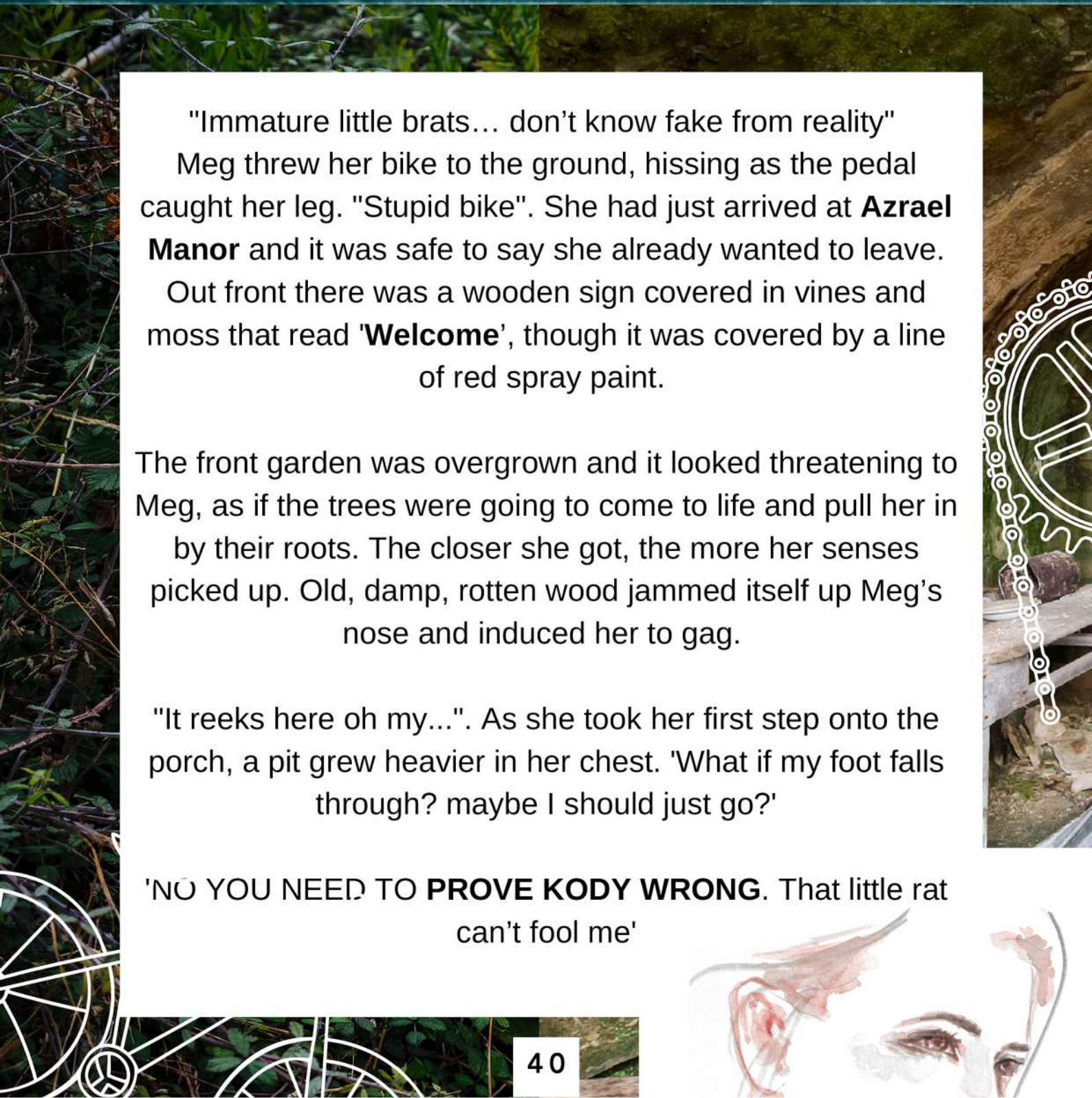
Meg could barely speak between her laughs. "I mean c'mon Kody, you should know we're smarter than that... well everyone but **Liz**".

In sync, the team all looked towards the girl, who both looked concerned and a little shaken up. "What do you mean?! Did you not see the camera acting up?" The attention was now off of Liz and back on Kody (Obviously).





"For all we know you could have done that yourself, plus it doesn't really prove anything." As if a switch had been flicked, Meg's attitude was sour and nasty again. She was dogging the young boy up as if he'd just punched her in the face. "I'm telling you Megan it was real, **go for yourself if you don't believe me.**"



"Immature little brats... don't know fake from reality"

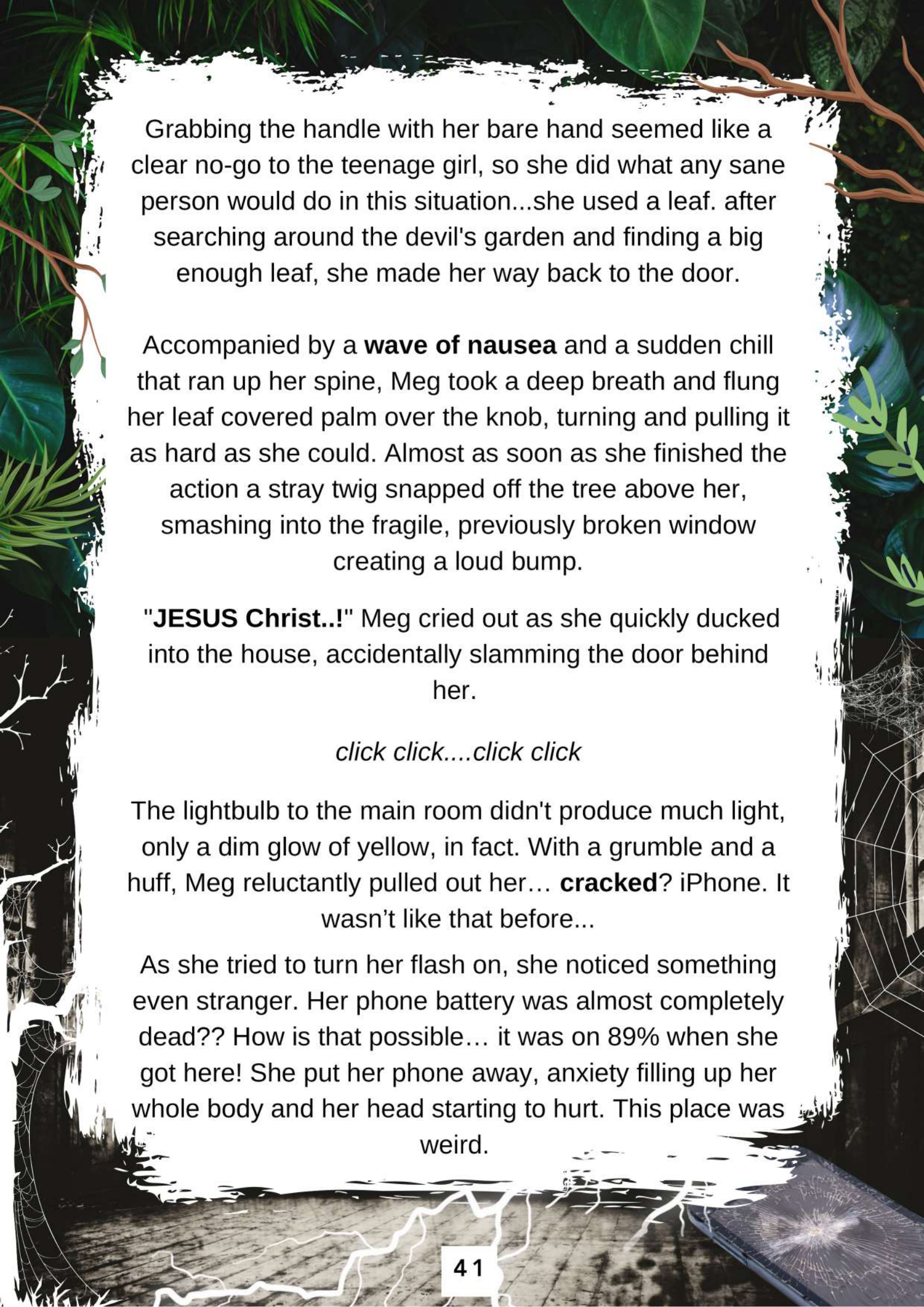
Meg threw her bike to the ground, hissing as the pedal caught her leg. "Stupid bike". She had just arrived at **Azrael Manor** and it was safe to say she already wanted to leave. Out front there was a wooden sign covered in vines and moss that read '**Welcome**', though it was covered by a line of red spray paint.

The front garden was overgrown and it looked threatening to Meg, as if the trees were going to come to life and pull her in by their roots. The closer she got, the more her senses picked up. Old, damp, rotten wood jammed itself up Meg's nose and induced her to gag.

"It reeks here oh my...". As she took her first step onto the porch, a pit grew heavier in her chest. 'What if my foot falls through? maybe I should just go?'

'NO YOU NEED TO **PROVE KODY WRONG**. That little rat can't fool me'





Grabbing the handle with her bare hand seemed like a clear no-go to the teenage girl, so she did what any sane person would do in this situation...she used a leaf. after searching around the devil's garden and finding a big enough leaf, she made her way back to the door.

Accompanied by a **wave of nausea** and a sudden chill that ran up her spine, Meg took a deep breath and flung her leaf covered palm over the knob, turning and pulling it as hard as she could. Almost as soon as she finished the action a stray twig snapped off the tree above her, smashing into the fragile, previously broken window creating a loud bump.

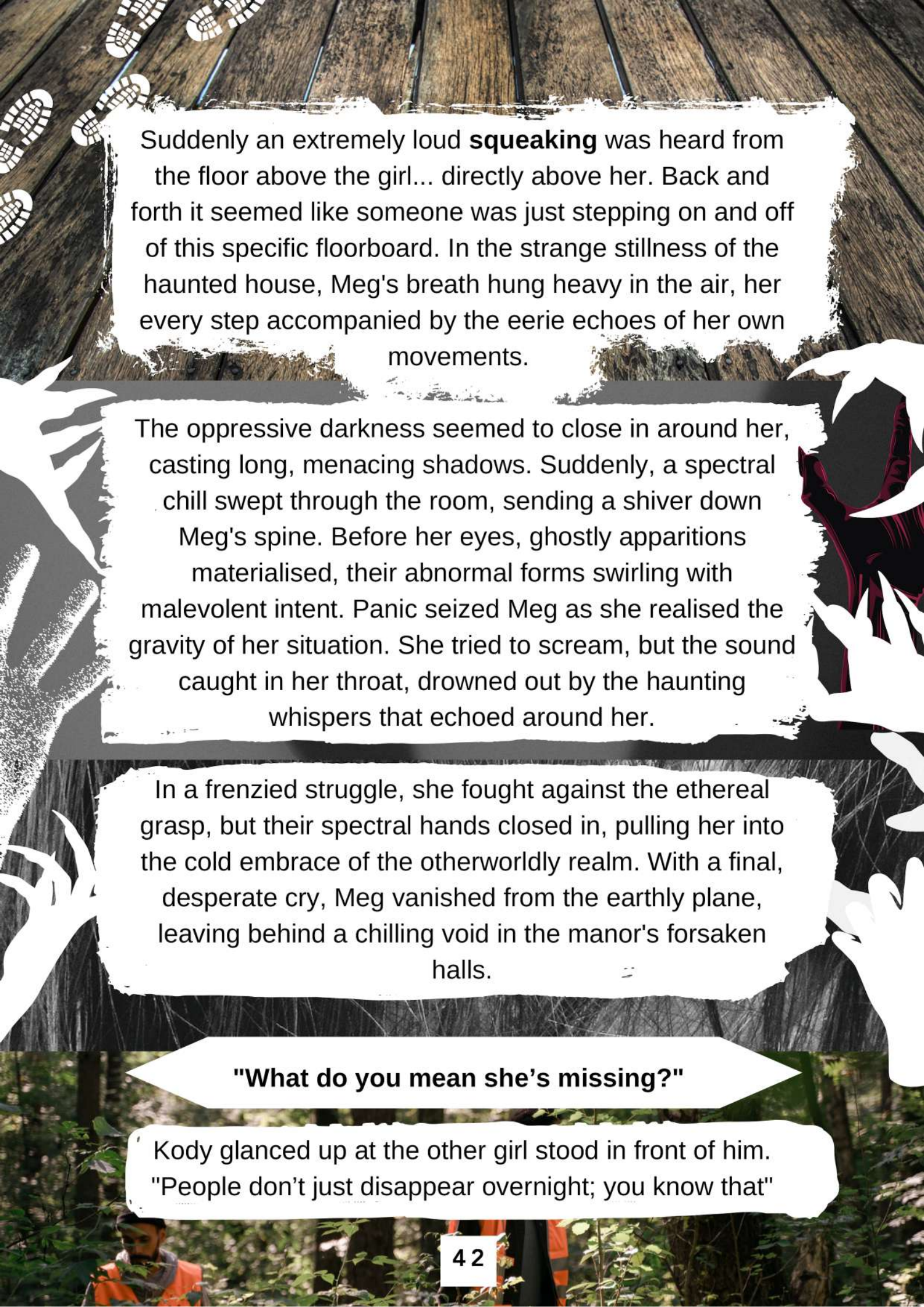
"**JESUS Christ..!**" Meg cried out as she quickly ducked into the house, accidentally slamming the door behind her.

*click click....click click*

The lightbulb to the main room didn't produce much light, only a dim glow of yellow, in fact. With a grumble and a huff, Meg reluctantly pulled out her... **cracked?** iPhone. It wasn't like that before...

As she tried to turn her flash on, she noticed something even stranger. Her phone battery was almost completely dead?? How is that possible... it was on 89% when she got here! She put her phone away, anxiety filling up her whole body and her head starting to hurt. This place was weird.





Suddenly an extremely loud **squeaking** was heard from the floor above the girl... directly above her. Back and forth it seemed like someone was just stepping on and off of this specific floorboard. In the strange stillness of the haunted house, Meg's breath hung heavy in the air, her every step accompanied by the eerie echoes of her own movements.

The oppressive darkness seemed to close in around her, casting long, menacing shadows. Suddenly, a spectral chill swept through the room, sending a shiver down Meg's spine. Before her eyes, ghostly apparitions materialised, their abnormal forms swirling with malevolent intent. Panic seized Meg as she realised the gravity of her situation. She tried to scream, but the sound caught in her throat, drowned out by the haunting whispers that echoed around her.

In a frenzied struggle, she fought against the ethereal grasp, but their spectral hands closed in, pulling her into the cold embrace of the otherworldly realm. With a final, desperate cry, Meg vanished from the earthly plane, leaving behind a chilling void in the manor's forsaken halls.

**"What do you mean she's missing?"**

Kody glanced up at the other girl stood in front of him. "People don't just disappear overnight; you know that"





"Well she is, look it's all over the news..."

Chloe pulled out her phone and pulled up a news article that read:

**15 YEAR OLD - MEGAN SMITH - VANISHED. IF ANYONE HAS SEEN HER PLEASE RING THIS NUMBER**

**XXXX-XXXX-XXXX**

"Well where do you think she might have gone? Because I personally don't believe it. I mean really? She never does anything"

"She did mention about proving you wrong about that silly haunted house video you made, didn't she?"

As if someone had just shown the boy the most gruesome crime scene of his life, **all the colour drained from his face**. His mind was suddenly racing and the severity of the situation had increased massively. If Chloe was correct and Meg had in fact gone to prove him wrong, then it was his fault if anything happened to her.


"Well if we know where she's gone why haven't you told anyone yet? She could be stuck! Or even hurt!"

"Wait.. Kody I h-"

"No time to talk!! We have to tell someone"







Kody ran off, leaving the majority of his stuff at the table. There was no time to grab it; he was in a huge rush; he had to tell someone what he knew.

"Mr. Anderson! I'm really worried about Meg...I think something happened to her at the **old haunted house**." The poor boy didn't really know who to tell so he ended up pulling aside the first adult he saw. They were both sat in the nearest classroom, at a large table placed in the middle of the room.


"Kody, I understand you're concerned, but a haunted house? That sounds like a tall tale. People are looking for Meg, don't worry we'll find her soon. *Thump*. Kody's heart dropped. *He doesn't believe me...*

"No, Sir, she told me she was going! I know that's where she's gone I just know it! I bet the ghosts got her and that's why she hasn't came back yet!" He was even starting to sound stupid to himself now.

"Kody, I appreciate your **vivid imagination**, but let's be realistic. Haunted houses... I mean REAL haunted houses with ghosts? That's not something I can take seriously."

"Please, Mr. Anderson, you have to believe me. Can't we at least check it out? I promise you'll find something!"





"Kody, I'll talk to Meg's parents and the authorities. They're better equipped to handle this. Just try to focus on your studies for now."

"But..."

"It's for the best, Kody. Trust me. We'll do everything we can to find Meg."

With a frustrated sigh, the teenage boy turned and stormed out of the room, ignoring the calls from his teacher. He started to plan out his next move as a thousand thoughts ran through his head. *How can I get people to believe me? what can i d-*

His thoughts were cut short as he bumped into someone that seemed to also be rushing, but in the opposite direction.

"Sorry I wasn't looking where I was goi-"

"KODY!"

It was **Chloe**.

"Thank god I found you finally! Look, no one is gonna believe us, the story is crazy... But I've done some research and if Azrael Manor truly is haunted and Meg is there then I've found a way to find out."



"And how's that, hm?"

Chloe's face seemed to twist slightly, as if she was unsure of her next words.

"I know it seems like a reach, but I've found a ritual we can do. Me, you and Liz we only need three people. I have a feeling it'll work."

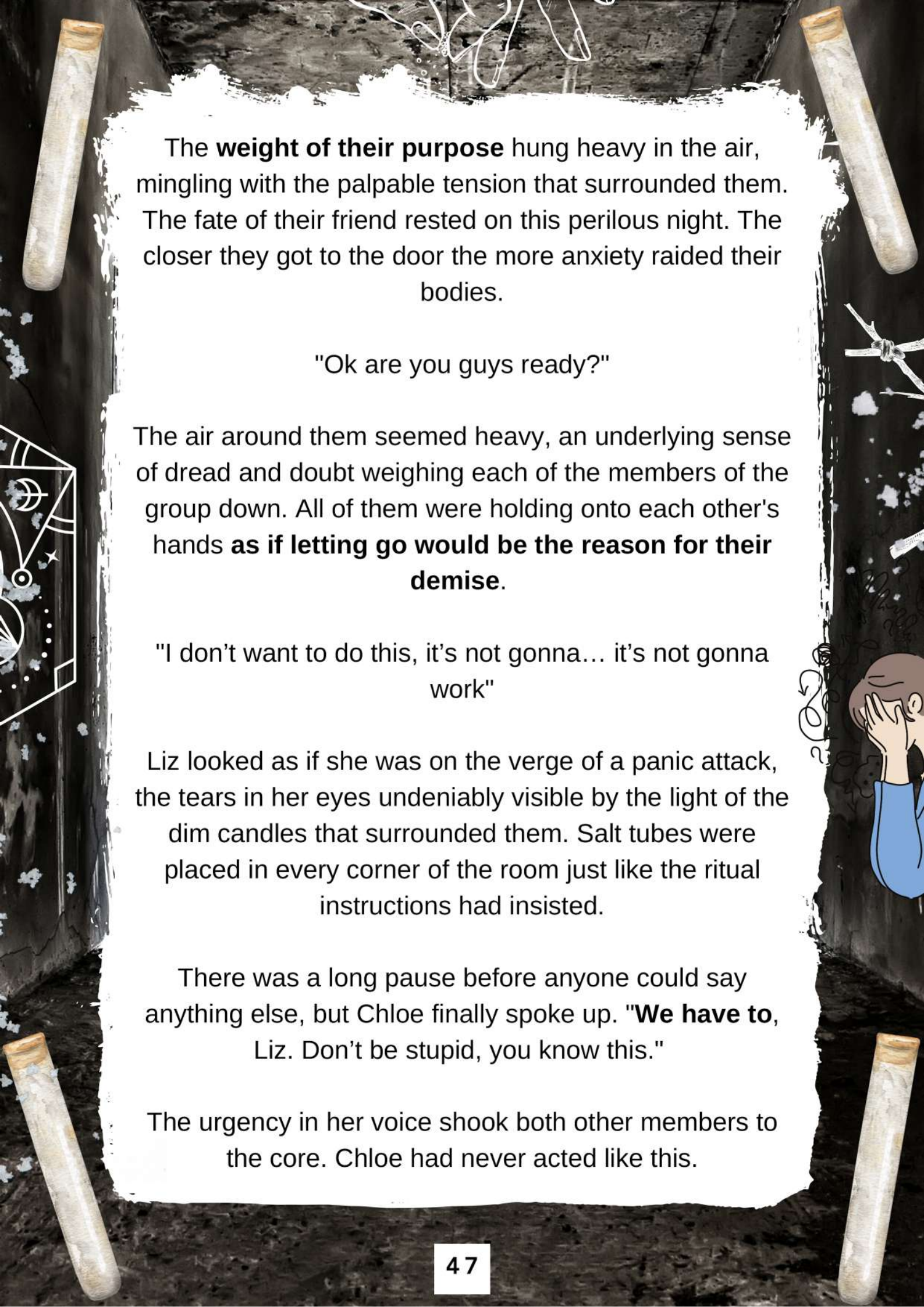
This whole idea didn't seem to sit right with Kody but he knew that if he didn't do this, there was a chance no one would find out the truth of what happened.

"I'm in... let's go find Liz and prepare"

As the midnight hour struck, Kody, Chloe, and Liz cautiously approached the looming silhouette of Azrael Manor. The pale glow of the moon illuminated the **decrepit building**, casting eerie shadows that danced along its weathered walls.

The air grew colder, carrying a sense of foreboding that sent shivers down their spines. Armed with determination and a flicker of hope, their hearts pounded in unison. With every **creak** of the worn steps beneath them, they reminded themselves of their mission: to perform a ritual that might hold the key to saving their dear friend from the clutches of the malevolent spirits that dwelled within.





The **weight of their purpose** hung heavy in the air, mingling with the palpable tension that surrounded them. The fate of their friend rested on this perilous night. The closer they got to the door the more anxiety raided their bodies.

"Ok are you guys ready?"

The air around them seemed heavy, an underlying sense of dread and doubt weighing each of the members of the group down. All of them were holding onto each other's hands **as if letting go would be the reason for their demise.**

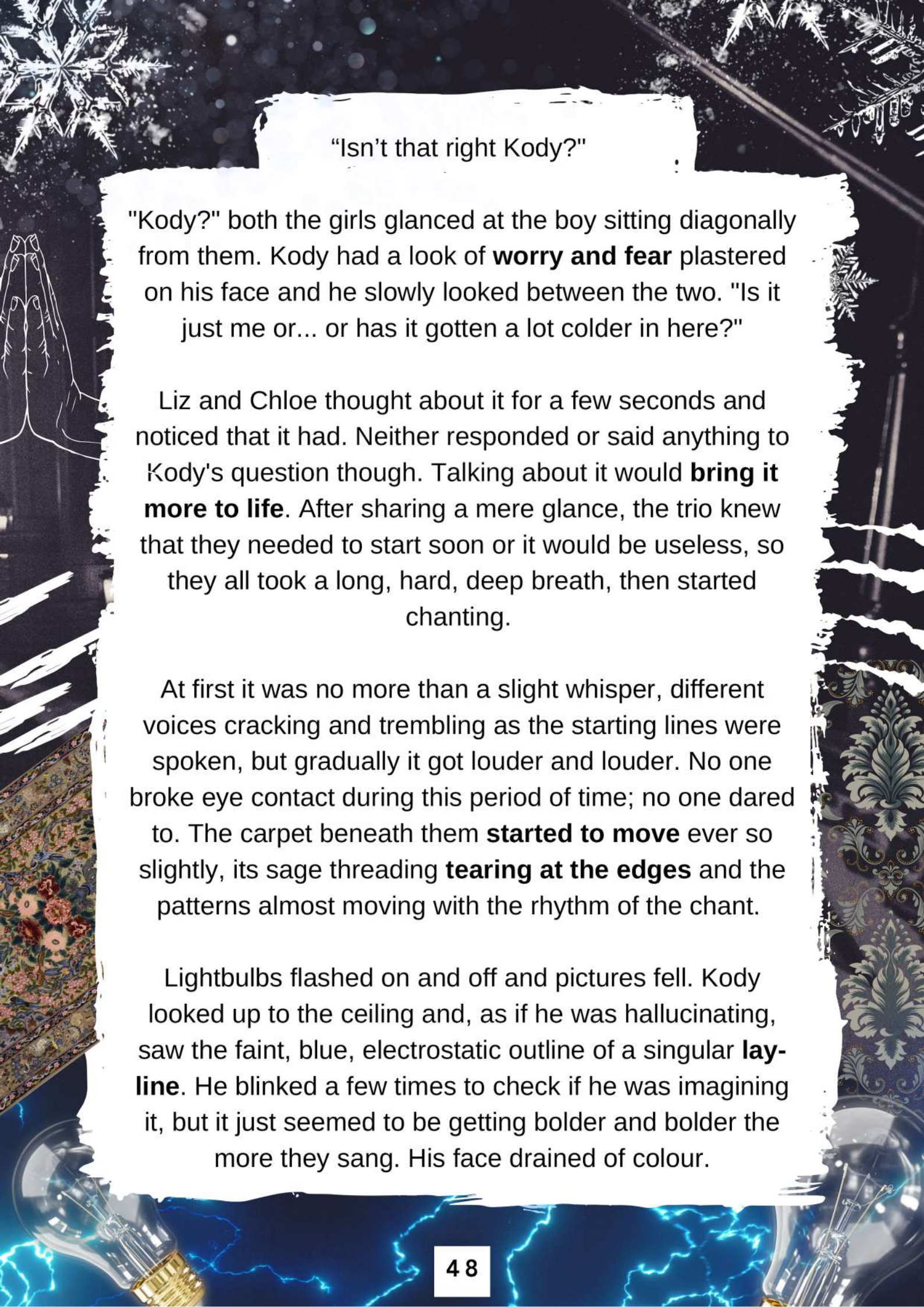
"I don't want to do this, it's not gonna... it's not gonna work"

Liz looked as if she was on the verge of a panic attack, the tears in her eyes undeniably visible by the light of the dim candles that surrounded them. Salt tubes were placed in every corner of the room just like the ritual instructions had insisted.

There was a long pause before anyone could say anything else, but Chloe finally spoke up. "**We have to**, Liz. Don't be stupid, you know this."

The urgency in her voice shook both other members to the core. Chloe had never acted like this.





"Isn't that right Kody?"

"Kody?" both the girls glanced at the boy sitting diagonally from them. Kody had a look of **worry and fear** plastered on his face and he slowly looked between the two. "Is it just me or... or has it gotten a lot colder in here?"

Liz and Chloe thought about it for a few seconds and noticed that it had. Neither responded or said anything to Kody's question though. Talking about it would **bring it more to life**. After sharing a mere glance, the trio knew that they needed to start soon or it would be useless, so they all took a long, hard, deep breath, then started chanting.

At first it was no more than a slight whisper, different voices cracking and trembling as the starting lines were spoken, but gradually it got louder and louder. No one broke eye contact during this period of time; no one dared to. The carpet beneath them **started to move** ever so slightly, its sage threading **tearing at the edges** and the patterns almost moving with the rhythm of the chant.

Lightbulbs flashed on and off and pictures fell. Kody looked up to the ceiling and, as if he was hallucinating, saw the faint, blue, electrostatic outline of a singular **lay-line**. He blinked a few times to check if he was imagining it, but it just seemed to be getting bolder and bolder the more they sang. His face drained of colour.





"This isn't working, we look like i-"

"KEEP CHANTING." *Why could no one else see this? It's right there why can't they see it?*

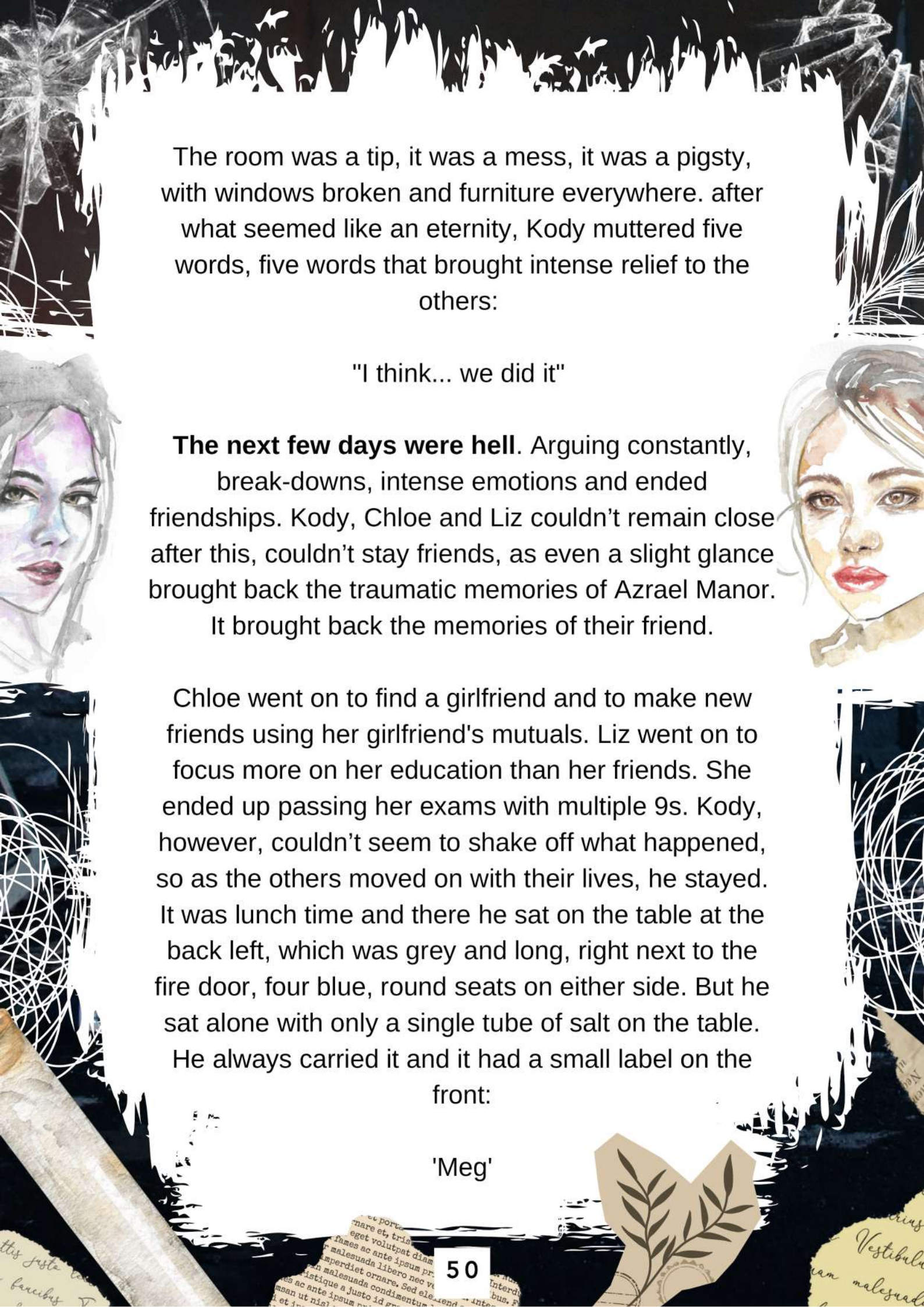
As they continued speaking the same three lines over and over, things became clearer and clearer.

Faint **entities** popped up around the room almost taunting the poor boy. Subconsciously he was growing louder and more aggressive with his words, the others seeming to follow his lead.

Bulbs blew, mirrors cracked, chairs tipped. The whole room seemed **destroyed**. Liz had closed her eyes, trying to remove herself from the narrative, to leave the space they were in and to add herself into a better one. Everything was getting louder and louder and crazier. Kody saw anomalies here there, everywhere across the room, letting out ear-drum-popping, blood curdling screams and intense high-pitched shouts. Kody's eyes widened as he stared into the sky, landing on an individual spirit with **brown hair and hazel eyes**. But it seemed to disappear quicker than it showed up.

Just as they were about to stop the ritual everything went quiet. Only the sounds of each other's heavy, shaker breaths seemed to echo through to room, no one dared to speak.





The room was a tip, it was a mess, it was a pigsty, with windows broken and furniture everywhere. after what seemed like an eternity, Kody muttered five words, five words that brought intense relief to the others:

"I think... we did it"

**The next few days were hell.** Arguing constantly, break-downs, intense emotions and ended friendships. Kody, Chloe and Liz couldn't remain close after this, couldn't stay friends, as even a slight glance brought back the traumatic memories of Azrael Manor. It brought back the memories of their friend.

Chloe went on to find a girlfriend and to make new friends using her girlfriend's mutuals. Liz went on to focus more on her education than her friends. She ended up passing her exams with multiple 9s. Kody, however, couldn't seem to shake off what happened, so as the others moved on with their lives, he stayed. It was lunch time and there he sat on the table at the back left, which was grey and long, right next to the fire door, four blue, round seats on either side. But he sat alone with only a single tube of salt on the table. He always carried it and it had a small label on the front:

'Meg'



TAKE TWO MINUTES TO FILL IN  
OUR SURVEY:



GET IN TOUCH:  
[DANIEL@LEADERS-UNLOCKED.ORG](mailto:DANIEL@LEADERS-UNLOCKED.ORG)  
[WWW.LEADERS-UNLOCKED.ORG](http://WWW.LEADERS-UNLOCKED.ORG)



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