

The Diary of
Dakota Hammell

Kody Boye

The Diary of Dakota Hammel
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Someday
Someday
You will be loved.

For memory, perseverance, and the bullheaded need to carry on.

I finally conquered you.

–Day 1–

My life used to be normal. Like every other kid, I used to get up in the morning, go to school, come home and do homework. Occasionally, something new and exciting would happen—I'd get an A on a biology test I thought I'd flunked, or I'd get hit on by someone who the rest of my sophomore class had deemed 'exponentially attractive,' but miraculous things usually don't happen to people, especially not to me.

I ran away from home when I was sixteen. Why isn't exactly important, at least not now; and even if it were, I wouldn't be talking about it right off the bat. For now, though, I'll simply explain it like this: Things had been going well up until recently. Sure, I had my ups and downs. I've stood on enough street corners to know how little it takes to get ten dollars, but how much it takes to get to that point, and I've crawled into enough strange cars with enough strange men to know that I could just as easily not wake up the next morning when I'm offered a drink. There's not much else you can do about it when you're hungry and don't want to risk getting sent back home just because you walk into a homeless shelter. My dad made sure of that.

When you're cold, alone, and not sure what else to do, you learn to use what you have to your advantage. It just so happened being sixteen and underage was a bigger advantage than I ever thought it could be.

I know how easy it is for your life to change. It happened to me the night I was raped.

I'm not going to go into that either, at least not now. I'm trying to gauge my current situation to see just how much I should reveal and how much I shouldn't. With that said, you're probably wondering just *why* I'm writing about this when I don't have to.

Long story short: I recently met a psychologist named John. He found me sitting in the alley with half my face swollen up and my right eye so badly bruised that I couldn't even open it. Even now, as I'm writing this, I'm trying not to get too long-winded. It hurts to move, let alone write. John said I could wait until the morning to write something, or just tell him a little about myself, but I'm strong. I can do this.

John said that for every journal entry I write, I can stay at his house for one day.

My name is Dakota Hammell. I'm 5'5", 120 pounds, have short blonde hair and a tendency to speak my mind when I'm not supposed to. I guess you could say that's the reason I got beat up, but I'm not going to go into that.

I guess this is it then.

The start of something new.

–Day 2–

John's in the kitchen making dinner. I'm feeling a little better, but not a whole lot. As of writing this, I'm swimming through a haze of drug-induced painkillers, but it isn't a bad feeling. Hopefully this entry will make at least a little sense. If not, oh well—I can't help it.

When I showed John the journal last night, he was surprised at how well I could write. I watched him sit in his recliner while he read my entry, glasses set at the end of his nose and a cigarette dangling from his lips. He looked like a psychologist you'd see on TV—poised, dignified, aristocratic. Then again, you'd most likely never see a psychologist dressed in an undershirt and a pair of boxer shorts on TV, but that doesn't much matter. All that mattered was that after he got done with it, he nodded and said that I'd done well, that he was impressed with my writing and that I should keep going at the pace I was. I kind of got the impression that he'd still have let me stay in his house even if I didn't write my entries (at least, not yet,) but whatever. I guess my English teachers were right about one thing—I was a good writer. At least I have one thing to my name.

I'm not sure what else to say. John offered to let me sleep in his guest room the other night, but after I laid down on the couch, I wasn't feeling up to getting up. He's set me up with a comforter and one of those fancy pillows you get when you buy the bedding packs, and I've got the TV all to myself. He says he's going to take me to the doctor tomorrow to get a checkup and to get tested for STDs. He guessed my question, and apparently knew I was going to say something, because when I opened my mouth right after he told me, he said that I was 'his stepson.' I feel a bit uncomfortable with being labeled as his kid, if only by marriage, and going to the doctor under the stipulation that I was beaten and raped, but oh well—I'd be going to the doctor for the same reason anyway, sans being his stepson.

I think he just finished dinner. He's calling me. I'm not sure whether I'm supposed to get up or not, but this is better than nowhere to stop.

–Day 3–

I just went to the doctor.

The jury is in.

I have the following wrong with me: Two broken ribs, several hematoma on my face (including in my swollen-over eye,) a sprained ankle and, most embarrassingly and obvious of all, an anal fissure. I expected something had happened during the rape, mostly because of the overwhelming pain I'd been experiencing without the painkillers, but I wasn't sure that it would be *that* bad. Thankfully the doctor reassured us that everything would be fine and that all I needed was bed rest and warm baths, but it didn't make the experience any less embarrassing.

On the way home in John's car, I confessed my feelings to him. When I finished, he asked me a question I didn't expect.

“Are you embarrassed because you think you should be, or because you are?”

At first, I didn't know how to respond. I was so blindsided by the comment that I could hardly even think. John, per his usual self, had continued driving without a word, while I simply sat there with my hands in my lap and my heart hanging halfway down my sleeve. When he came to a stoplight, he slowed to a halt and turned to face me, his kind eyes the calmest I'd seen them in a long time.

“Well?” he'd asked.

I don't know, I'd responded.

I never did answer his question—at least, not directly, or to his face. Now that I think about it though, I'm not necessarily sure why I was embarrassed in the first place. Maybe I was embarrassed because society deems people who are the victim of such crimes as dirty, unwanted creatures, things that crawl around in the mud and turn their heads up to look at you with sour eyes; or maybe it's because the personal belief that once you are raped, you are nothing is so strong, it often overwhelms you to be in another person's presence. I don't feel either of those things—I could care less about what society thinks and I've felt like I was nothing since the day my dad pushed me out of the house. To that, though, I can't say why I'm embarrassed. That's easily the simplest answer I can muster up without dawdling over it for an indefinite amount of time.

Anyway, I'll get past that any keep going.

After we got home, John helped me get situated on the couch before he disappeared into the nearby hallway. He was gone for a long time before he came back out and gestured me to stand. I'm not unable to walk, but it's something I'm still struggling with, particularly with my fissure and my broken ribs in combination, not to mention my ankle. John quickly noticed my struggle and laced his arm around my back, then guided me into the bedroom.

When I stepped inside, I nearly gasped. The sight of the freshly made-up bed, the rollaway TV, the open-threshold bathroom and the portable fridge nearly forced tears in my eyes.

“It's yours for as long as you're here,” John had said, then helped me into bed.

I'm here now, lying in my new bed while writing this journal entry. It's still a bit hard to believe, going from sleeping on the ground to reclining on a nice, soft mattress. I have the TV playing in front of me while John prepares lunch for the two of us in the kitchen. I'm supposed to take my painkillers with something in my stomach, so until then, I guess I'll just lay here and watch TV.

At least now I know this isn't a temporary proposition.

–Day 4–

I had nightmares last night. I can't really remember what they were about, mostly because they were the kind that you can't recall a few minutes after you wake up, but I *do* know that they didn't have anything to do with getting raped or beaten up. That was what surprised me most about the whole episode—none of the dreams revolved around my life or anything that happened to me recently.

When I talked to John about it, he said they were 'stress dreams,' then asked me about my sleeping schedule. I confessed that I'd been having trouble sleeping the past few nights, to which he nodded and said that he'd noticed, particularly because of the color of my one eye the past few mornings. I wouldn't have noticed anything because I haven't bothered looking in a mirror since I got here, so when I asked if he had any suggestions about helping me sleep better, he merely shrugged.

"Not much I can do," he'd said. "Gotta deal with it on your own."

He wouldn't prescribe me sleeping pills, nor would he go and buy me some from the store. His reasoning? *They wouldn't help with your nightmares anyway.* Of course, when I said that at least they'd help me *get* to sleep, he said that running away from the problem wasn't any way to deal with it—at least, not in this instance. The way he said it implied that running away was, in fact, a way to deal with a problem sometimes.

I'm not sure what else I should write about. I started a bit earlier in the day because I woke up so early, and John's been at work all day and won't be back for at least another hour, so I'll probably just watch TV until I hear the front door open.

Hopefully I won't have any more nightmares tonight.

–Day 5–

I had another nightmare.

It was about my mother.

My mother's been dead since I was eleven.

Even now, hours after I woke up, I'm struggling to put together her picture in my head. It was so vivid in my dream, so vivid that, in fact, she didn't seem dead. That was probably the most startling thing about her—she looked so young, so alive, so *real*. She looked not a day past dead in her long, flowing nightgown and with her beautiful, blonde hair spilling down one shoulder. Dad used to say I looked so much like her before he started drinking. Her soft brown eyes, the speckling of freckles across her cheeks and around her eyes, her soft chin and her soft skin—she seemed so real, so alive, so vividly here.

Maybe that was the other part of the dream that scared me. She was standing in the doorway, hands braced against the doorjamb, a picture perfect image of my childhood wrapped within a single moment.

I haven't talked to John about it. He's sitting in the chair in the corner of the room now, reading from a big binder that he always takes to and from work. I haven't really bothered to talk to him at all since he announced his presence and said he was going to sit with me while he read over some stuff. I guess it doesn't really matter, considering he's going to read this later, but I'd probably feel better if I could talk to someone.

That's the funny thing about this whole situation. It scares me how easy it is to talk to him, but it scares me even more that I actually *want* to talk to him. I know you'll be reading this, John, and it isn't anything against you, but I've never had someone who's cared about me as much as you do since—well, since forever.

Sorry I trailed off there. I had an epiphany.

I guess maybe that's a good thing, right? To know that I have someone to talk to and someone who understands me, if only slightly?

I think that's a good thing.

Actually—

I know it is.

–Day 6–

I talked to John this morning. He said everything was just fine.

When I first sat down at the table this morning, I didn't expect to hear *that*. At first, it took me a moment to try to understand what he was saying, then I saw my journal sitting on the kitchen counter and sighed.

“Everything you're going through is normal,” John had said. “You're breaking through a barrier that you had to put up to protect yourself.”

Normal wouldn't be the exact word I'd use, but I could understand his point—as in, the point of having to consciously and subconsciously strip layers of protection away from yourself in order to open your heart to another person. When I'd first been propositioned in that alley almost a week ago, I could hardly believe someone would try to get a hookup with someone who looked beaten to within an inch of his life. Now, though, I can easily see how willing I'd been to turn someone away just because they offered help.

John is, as he usually is after he gets home, in the kitchen. He says he's going to cook something more than just hamburger helper or spaghetti tonight, seeing as how it's Friday night, and that he wants the two of us to sit down and watch a movie or something—TV at the least. I'm fine with that. I've since navigated out of the bedroom and onto the couch on my own with the help of a cane he offered me. My ankle isn't as bad as it was earlier in the week, but it still hurts. I'm just glad it isn't broken. I don't like the idea of not being able to walk around. It keeps you from being able to run when you need to.

I'm trying to figure out what else I should write about. Other than talking to John about my feelings about being here this morning, not much has happened. He was at work all day, I laid in bed watching TV, took a bath, some medication, ate a sandwich or two—that was pretty much it. I should say that I'm looking forward to watching TV with John and what he's cooking for dinner tonight. Whatever it is, it smells good. My stomach's already rumbling.

–Day 7–

John said he wants to get to know me a little better, so he wants me to write about my childhood. He said that it doesn't matter what kind of story it is, good or bad, but he would prefer to hear something good, particularly because he doesn't want to upset me in any way. Even though I already told him that I would be fine with writing about whatever he wanted me to, he said to write about something good, something that made me comfortable and wouldn't push any sore spots. With that in mind, I guess I'll start.

My parents took me to the beach when I was little. I had to have been only five or six, just barely old enough to experience something enough to possibly remember it. Back then, the family was still together, wholesome in comparison to how life was after mom died. I remember waking up one morning to the sound of my parents in the kitchen. Dad was still young back then, before the alcohol and anger set in, with silky black hair tinged with a handsome streak of grey. He used to drink coffee in the morning before he switched to alcohol—always dark, no sugar. My mother was still as gorgeous as always, even more so compared to how she'd looked when she was standing in the doorway in my dream. She didn't like caffeine, so her mornings were usually spent in harsh disarray, her hair in knots before her usual shower. That particular morning, they'd been talking about something casual, though my dad seemed to have been the only one keeping the conversation. My mother, eyes bleary and makeup still unapplied, hadn't realized I had woken up, so it was no surprise when dad swung me into his arms upon noticing my presence in the foot of the kitchen.

The first words out of his mouth to me were, “You wanna go to the beach?”

An hour later, we were rolling down the road in the family car with a freshly-loaded cooler in the back seat.

If I were to take a picture of the area we lived in and the resulting drive to one of the most important places in my young life, it would look like this: A two-story house in a small, suburban neighborhood seated at the edge of a sprawling metropolis. Thirteen years ago, it would have been one of the greatest places in town to live in. At the time I left though, the city was having such a hard time with the invasive coniferous plant population that no one wanted to live there. Much of the once-beautiful maple trees that used to cover the neighborhoods now bore the fruits of human ignorance. At the age of seven, I once pointed to a tree in our front yard and asked why there was another tree growing out of it. My mother said not to worry, that the ‘tree’ I thought was growing out of another tree was simply a branch and there was nothing wrong. Why she told me such a thing, I don't know, but I can only imagine she wanted me to believe that there was nothing wrong with the tree, that all was well and that whatever strange anomaly it bore was nothing more than normal. I, however, knew better. Within the next three years, the pine tree growing out of its maple host uprooted the entire structure and my father had to call a factory to take it in. The once-perfect living area eventually faded into obscurity and settled neatly into its new place as the backbone to the big highway which led to the beach. Once you got on that road, it didn't take much more than a look outside to judge how long it would take to get to the beach. On those rides, I was always quick to point out that we would soon be at the beach on those seemingly-endless trips.

We're almost there! I would happily cry.

“We know,” my parents would both say, often at the same time.

We would all laugh and things would be well, happy times that happened before the bad times came.

The first day I went to the beach, I was the happiest little kid alive. Little did I know it would be the last time I would ever see it again.

I know what you're thinking, John—I used to live on the coast. I'd be wrong to say that I didn't, but the 'beach' we went to was never really a 'beach' beach—it was a small pond turned into an attraction so homeowners would buy the properties in the neighborhood I used to live in. It worked, for a time, but after 'it' happened, no one ever went back. No. There was no going back to a place filled with such hate and misery.

To put it simply, the trip to the beach itself went just fine—I swam in the shallows, my dad stood just a few short feet away, and my mom alternated between reading a book and taking pictures of me and my dad. There was nothing immensely impacting about the visit that could have traumatized me in any way at the time, as I was just a little kid and would not have known any better. The actual unease would come years later, after I entered my teens and learned about what had really been happening at the beach all those years ago.

Once, during my joyous rampage through the shallows, I tripped and almost fell face-first into the water.

When I opened my eyes, a face looked up at me.

I screamed, hurled myself from the water, and ran to the shore, all the while crying that someone in the water was looking at me.

My dad told me there was nothing to worry about.

My mom said I was just seeing things.

Weeks later, after I'd forgotten the event and told my parents I wanted to go back, they said we couldn't, that they'd drained the lake because something had happened to the water.

The truth behind the story?

Someone really *had* looked up at me from the shallows, but that someone wasn't alive. That someone was dead.

There's not really much more to say, other than that someone had been killing people and dumping them into the lake. Sure—I could go on a lengthy tangent to say how it could have affected me and how it could still be affecting me, but there wouldn't really be any point. It might serve its purpose, sure, but it almost might not do anything more than just make me feel stupid for writing it.

I know you wanted me to write about something good, John. I'm sorry I ended up writing about this, but I think it's at least in part good. It helped me remember that there was, in fact, good times in my childhood, and I *had* experienced my share of happy moments, regardless of the things that were destined to come.

I don't know what else to say. I've written almost two pages. Hopefully you won't be disappointed.

–Day 8–

I'm in a bit of a disorganized mood. I woke up this morning with my head by the footrest and my ribs in screaming pain, so it's not hard to say that today hasn't gone very well. John told me that he came in once during the night because he'd heard me struggling, then tried to calm me down so I wouldn't end up hurting myself. I vaguely recall waking up, panicking, then hitting him in the face before passing out. His black eye this morning proved it.

It's about three-thirty PM right now. John's been at work since eleven and I've been up since ten-something. I don't remember when exactly, but it doesn't particularly matter. Right as I got out of the shower and wandered into the living room this morning, John had been scrambling to get out the door. He'd said hello, told me about what happened last night, pushed his other arm into the loose sleeve of his jacket and picked up his suitcase before he walked out of the door, yelling that he'd made me lunch as he ran down the driveway.

Lunch was, and technically still is, two mayonnaise-tomato sandwiches and the remnants of the vegetable salad he made the other day (the night he said he was going to 'make something special.' We ended up watching some Lifetime movie about a boy and his dog.)

I don't think John's read my journal entry from last night yet. If he has, he didn't mention it, but I'm guessing he didn't from the way he didn't bother to mention anything about my journal when he walked out the door this morning. It's usually the first thing he comments on when I walk out of the bedroom and sit down at the kitchen table, but not today. Then again, that could just be because he was in such a big hurry to get to work, but I don't know.

The whole journal thing is starting to make me feel a little weird. When I stopped writing last night, I felt like I was just dumping my problems on someone who didn't really need to hear them, at least in the sense that they didn't initially want to hear them, but ended up *having* to hear them because the person (being me) forced them (being John) to listen. This'll probably come up shortly after John reads this, because I know he'll have something to say about it, but before it does, I want to say something right now—I know I'm not forcing any of this on you, John. If you didn't want to hear about what I'm going through, you wouldn't ask to read my journal. Hell, I wouldn't even be here if you didn't care to read about my life, but I guess that's how the world works. If you want to learn about something, you have to read about it. If you don't want to learn about something, you don't read about it—you just let it go. I guess that's why I feel a bit weird talking to a journal, even though you're usually always reading it and giving me nearly-constant feedback. I feel like I'm dumping stuff on you that you don't need to hear.

I liked the prompt you gave me yesterday. I know you haven't mentioned anything about it yet, but it really gave me a sense of direction when it came to yesterday's journal entry. I know a prompt a day might be a little much, but maybe a prompt a week or something would be good. It gives me a security net, but pushes me to climb the rungs when I'm forced to. Not that I'm necessarily being forced into anything, but you get my point.

Sorry my journal entries are getting longer. It doesn't seem like I have a lot to write about. It seems like I'm mostly rambling.

–Day 9–

I dreamed about a pelican flying across the sky. The sun was setting and it looked like a supernova was exploding in the distance. The outer rim of the sun was a shade of pink and the inside looked like hot, melting wax. At the end of this day in my dream, just as the sky above was turning a shade of purple and the stars were beginning to twinkle to life, the clumsy pelican desperately flapped its wings, awkward in its attempts to carry its huge weight across the sky. It was no real bird, that much was for sure. Its wings were too ornate, with their intricate, swanlike flourish at the end, and its body looked like the cockpit of a small private plane than anything else. Whoever I was dreaming about was walking with his grandmother. He asked her if she saw it and she said yes, then he called to his family, to which they looked up and awed over the clumsy creature floating across the sky.

I don't know what the significance of the dream was, but I thought I should mention it, just because it was such a beautiful, awkward thing.

John read my journal entries last night. He got caught up with work the past two days and wasn't able to read them, but this morning, after I got up and sat down at the table, we talked about stuff—the dream, me hitting him, my unease about writing to a journal. He apologized for not keeping up-to-date and said that it probably would've helped if he'd read it before he tried to calm me down. After a moment of hesitant laughter, he reached across the table and gave my shoulder a brief squeeze, then returned his hand to his side.

"It's weird," he'd said, then looked down at his hands. "Writing about what's going on, I mean."

I wasn't sure what to say, so I simply waited for John to continue. When he didn't, I let out a long exhale and closed my eyes, grimacing when my ribs flared up in response to the action. John's first reaction was to ask if I wanted some medicine, to which I replied yes, but he didn't speak further on the topic of my unease while he combed through the cabinets. It seemed like he was deliberately taking his time with looking. Why, I'm not sure, but when he came back with the painkillers and a glass of water in hand, he reseated himself, took a deep breath of his own, then looked me in the eyes.

"I used to have the same problem. You know what I did? I told myself that no one had to see it except me. I know I've been asking to see your journal, but if at any time you don't want me to see it, just tell me. I'll respect your privacy."

But what about me staying here? I'd asked.

"I trust you. I know you'll keep writing."

It seems almost impossible to think that you can become so close, so *comfortable* with someone in such a short amount of time that you'd be willing to give them everything—your life, your home, your deepest, darkest secrets. I used to never be this unguarded. Now, though, I'm not particularly sure. I mean, I'm completely comfortable with John, otherwise I wouldn't have been here for as long as I have, but I'm a bit uncomfortable with how low I've let my barriers fall. I'll probably get another talk about this, John, so hopefully you have something to tell me. I just hope it isn't any of that 'people are good by nature' bullshit, because if people really were 'good by nature,' I wouldn't have been homeless for as long as I was.

–Day 10–

“People aren’t good by nature,” John said. “They’re good by nurture.”

When he initially said that, I wasn’t sure what to think. Now I think I’m getting it.

He read my journal earlier this evening after getting home from work. At first, I wasn’t sure if he was going to, because he looked like he’d had a bad day. His eyes were bloodshot and he had bags under them. When I asked him what was wrong, he simply shrugged my comment off and ran his hand through his hair. He stood in the doorway for a moment, suitcase still in hand, then closed the door before crossing the room and settling into his recliner to read my journal. It took him a while to get through the entry, mostly because he kept pausing to rub his eyes and temple, but when he finished, he nodded and walked into the kitchen. It wasn’t until after dinner was done that he sat down at the table and said the words I opened this entry with.

“People aren’t good by nature. They’re good by nurture.”

He explained that it wasn’t in our nature to be good to one another, that if that had been the case, the human race wouldn’t have survived for as long as it had. He said that had we always been nice, and had we always chose to accept one another, we would have never gotten anywhere. I was quick to repute, asking why blood had to be shed in order for someone to get anywhere, then he said a few simple words that changed my entire perspective on my opinion.

Those words were simple.

Those words were: “You’re here, aren’t you?”

Even now, a few hours after hearing those words, I’m still shaken. The moment he’d said it, every part of my body had started hurting—my ribs, my ankle, my eye, most of my face. I hadn’t fallen, I hadn’t tripped, I hadn’t had a train run into me and I hadn’t had something fall from the sky. The only thing I’d been hit with was a realization.

“You’re here because you got beat up,” John had said, “because if you wouldn’t have been an inch away from death, I would have never stopped to ask if you needed help.”

He said that the majority of the homeless never leave an impact in your mind because they all look the same—dry, washed up, sad with maybe a long, grey beard and dirty clothing. He said that society has become so accustomed to seeing such people that we don’t think twice when we see them, that they’re simply invisible blips on the map of overall success. Some succeed, some fail, but we’re always a part of that map. He said that the one thing that will get someone’s attention, regardless of time or place, is blood.

“You were bleeding. You were hurt. You looked like you were about to die.”

So he helped me. That’s why I’m here. Because I was almost dead.

–Day 11–

John's not going to be here for the next three days. He said he has to go on a business trip and that I'll be here alone. When I asked if he was all right with me staying here, he said that yes, it was fine, that just because he's going on a business trip doesn't mean he's going to kick me out of the house.

“Keep writing,” he said, “because I'll be looking forward to your entries when I get back.”

I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do while he's gone, but I'm sure I'll figure something out. He's got a library full of books and a catalogue's worth of DVDs on a shelf under the entertainment center. He also said he's got some free movie-on-demand thing that he can show me how to use before the night is over.

At least I won't be bored while he's gone.

At least, I hope not.

–Day 12–

I spent the better part of the morning wandering around the house. It's hard to believe that I've been here for almost two weeks and still haven't seen most of it, but I guess I can't blame myself, seeing as how I haven't been able to walk very well. It seems like my ankle's almost healed and my ribs are hurting less and less every day, so I decided to use my newfound strength to explore my surroundings.

I'll get this out of the way right now, John—I went in your office. I won't lie and say I didn't touch anything, because I did, but I didn't take anything. I'm not much of a thief anyway, seeing as how I have a guilty conscience, and even if I was, I don't think I'd take anything from your office. Not that I'm saying I'd know if I would or not, because I can't know because I'm not a klepto, but I didn't take anything.

For personal recollection's sake, I'll start at the beginning: At about nine-thirty this morning, I wandered into the kitchen and went through the cupboards. Cans, medicine and other essentials filled most of them, but I found some pots and pans on the lower shelves (which killed me to bend over to open. That moment pretty much killed any relief I'd had in my chest.) They'll come in handy if I want to try and cook anything while John's gone, but I doubt I'll be doing it, seeing as how I'm still in my awkward injury phase. The discovery of the pots and pans isn't really essential though, so I'll keep going, less I bore myself and John. I wandered through the kitchen for a little while afterward, looking at knickknacks and other personal objects, before leaving the kitchen to walk down the long hall that my room is in. The door after my room (the second in the hall) holds a guest bedroom. I didn't bother to go in there because there didn't seem to be anything of interest, and mostly because I knew from the lack of presence that no one usually slept in there. I then proceeded to walk down the hall to the third and fourth door, the third of which John sleeps in, the fourth of which is the office, positioned directly at the end of the hall.

I'll tell you, John—when I first looked at the doorway, I felt like a kid going to Narnia. When I opened it, I felt the exact same way.

There's a giant desk in John's room. Atop it are a varying assortment of objects, the most prominent in particular being the Chinese dragon that spans the entire front edge of it. I was immediately gravitated toward it the moment I set foot in the room. I ran my hand over its intricate head, its scaly back, its rough legs and its sharp claws. His red scales and his hypnotic, golden eyes were so beautiful that I could have spent the next hour awing over him, but I eventually pulled myself away and looked around the rest of the office. I briefly saw the library when I watched him open the door one night while going to bed, but until this morning, I hadn't realized that the whole western wall was one complete shelf. Most of it is covered in psych books, but the bottom half holds a world of fiction, completely alphabetized by author and, in some cases, by the individual date of each edition's release. I found it funny that the first book that I laid eyes on was the Narnia collection, seeing as how I'd felt just like those kids when they opened the wardrobe upon stepping up to the office door, but I didn't dwell on it. I seated myself in the office chair and spun around the room, taking in everything—the wood paneling, the shelf on the wall opposite the books which holds rows upon rows of intricate sculptures and pictures, the cupboards just below that shelf, which I didn't dare open. Just sitting in there made me feel so important, so special, so *honorable*. To think that a man of such stature would open his home

to me, a runaway, and trust me with his personal belongings was such an amazing feeling. There's been few times in my life that I've felt truly special. Right now is one of them. Hopefully I didn't overstep my boundaries. If I did, I'm sorry.

–Day 13–

Day 2 of John being gone. I can already feel the pressure of being here all alone. I'm not used to not hearing him in the morning, getting up to take a shower or cursing the coffee maker. I'm not used to hearing his footsteps in the hallway. I'm not even used to the door not being cracked open every morning before he leaves so he can check on me.

It's scary.

To be honest, I'm not sure how I feel about this. I never used to be so dependent on someone. Before, I used to just sit under a bridge and stick my thumb up in the air to make my way around or stand on a street corner to make a few extra bucks. It's so—different, having someone who cares about you and is willing to help you do whatever you need to do. In a way, I like it, but in another I'm wondering if I'm just using it to my advantage because I've always had to do everything for myself. I don't think I am, but it's not hard to wonder, especially when I'm still worried about my guard falling down and personal feelings getting in the way of better personal judgment.

(To John—sorry about this again. I'm just being honest.)

John's only going to be gone for one more day. Come Saturday, he'll be back in the house and here for a three-day weekend. Maybe I'll ask him to take me somewhere, maybe a movie or a bookstore. A movie might be easier, since I'm still having trouble walking, and at least in a darkened theater no one will be able to see just what my face looks like.

It'll heal.

For now, though, I'd just rather no one see me if they didn't have to.

–Day 14–

John's going to be home tomorrow. I can't even begin to describe how happy that makes me feel, especially since I just spent the last few hours combing the house for Tylenol. I discovered I was out this morning and panicked because my face was throbbing. It only made it worse when I had to scour the house for it. Thankfully I found some in John's room, but now I'm sore everywhere and feeling miserable as hell.

Thankfully he's going to be home tomorrow.

I hate having to depend on him for everything. The past three days have been a wreck, both physically and emotionally. It's even worse that I have to admit it because John's going to be reading it here shortly. I don't want him to feel like he has to do everything for me, but right now, that's pretty much the circumstance I'm in. I had to have him help me use the bathroom when I first got here, I had to have him help me shower, he has to cook for me and, up until recently, he had to bring me my drugs. The fact that I've been walking around is a miracle unto itself.

I don't know.

Before, all I had to do was stick my thumb in the air if I had to get somewhere or stand on the side of the street to make a few extra bucks. Considering I lived off fast food for nearly three years, I'm surprised I'm not heavier than I am. Then again, I've always been rail thin. Dad used to joke that I'd grow up to be just like Mom when I was younger—rail-thin and with a pretty face. He got the rail-thin part right, and even though I didn't grow up to have a 'pretty face,' I must have grown up to have *something*, considering it was so easy to get a hookup.

He'll be home tomorrow. I won't have to worry about anything then.

–Day 15–

John's home. He pulled into the driveway about three hours ago and has been lazing about the house ever since. He hasn't read my journal yet, but I don't expect him to, especially after seeing the look on his face. The first thing he did when he came in was collapse on the couch beside me, but he said he was all right, regardless of the fact that he looked exhausted and that he could hardly keep his eyes open.

"The pollen up there is bad," he'd said, upon noticing me staring at his bloodshot eyes. "Don't worry—I'll be fine."

Three hours later, he's sitting in a recliner with a binder in his lap and a cup of coffee at his side.

Coffee at five in the evening—that's unheard of. Then again, I don't really blame him, considering the way his face looks.

(Nothing of real importance, but he just looked up at me after I finished writing that sentence. A bit awkward, but funny at the same time.)

He says he's going to have me put some cold compresses on my face, particularly over my eye. He thought the swelling would have gone down over the weekend and just told me that the doctor wanted me to come back in if my eye didn't get better within the next two weeks. Well, it's been twelve days, which means that by tomorrow morning, I'll most likely be sitting in a doctor's office waiting for Dr. Bishop to look at my face.

Oh well.

I just want my face to heal up and the bruising to go away.

–Day 16–

Dr. Bishop prescribed cold compresses three times a day and Tylenol until the swelling goes down.

“It shouldn’t take too much longer. It’s already healing.”

True—the purple part of the bruise has nearly dissipated and the skin is mostly just red and puffy, but I still can’t open my eye. Dr. Bishop forced it open at the clinic and I could still see out of it (though not very well, given the fact that he had to physically pry my top lid open,) so I shouldn’t have any problem with that regard.

Afterward, John took us for ice cream. It was a guilty pleasure of his, he said, and while we were sitting in the parking lot, he with his vanilla, I with my chocolate, he looked over at me and offered a small, unprovoked smile. When I asked what that was for, he simply shook his head and picked a piece of cookie out of his shake with his spoon.

John, I’d said.

“What?” he’d replied.

What was that for?

“Does it have to be for anything?”

Up until then, I’d always thought that there had to be a reason to smile. Smiling is what you do when you’re happy, or when you see someone you love or when you laugh at something you think is funny. I’ve never known anyone to smile out of natural impulse, especially unprovoked, so when John looked over at me and smiled, it scared me.

Whenever someone’s smiled at me in the past, it’s always been because they had something to gain.

I know I didn’t talk about it earlier, John, and I know that this is probably an awkward and inappropriate way to go about explaining it, but I can’t remember if anyone’s ever smiled at me like the way you did. I mean, I know my mother smiled at me at one point, and I know my dad used to do the same before he lost his mind to drugs, but I always thought that your parents smiled at you because they were supposed to, because they loved you and it was their job to make you feel wanted. Strangers smile sometimes, sure, but it’s out of awkward impulse, and sometimes someone who likes you smiles, but only because they’re unsure how to directly approach you.

Smiling has always been a strange thing for me.

I’m glad to know that when you smile at me, it isn’t for some personal gain.

It means a lot.

–Day 17–

The cold compresses are making my face hurt. This probably won't be a long entry, but I just wanted to say that after going to bed early and waking up early, I have a bit of a better understanding about why John smiled at me other the day—'for no reason at all,' like I put it.

He cares about me.

It's a simple realization, but I don't think it's a bad one. I've used the word 'care' a few times throughout the entirety of this journal, but I don't know if I've ever really meant it as more than a passing glance, a word to write down when I wasn't sure what exactly to say. It's always weird to come to a realization about something you should have known all along, but were afraid to truly understand for fear of it somehow destroying you.

I'm not sure what else to say.

John's going to be home here in a minute. He said he didn't feel like cooking, so he went to pick up hamburgers from the place around the corner.

"It's close enough to walk," he said. "I won't be long."

The car just pulled into the driveway.

I'll stop.

–Day 18–

John placed a bottle of Saint John's Wort in front of me last night. He asked if I'd ever had any problems with my mood and if at times felt anxious for no reason. "Judging from your recent journal entries," he'd said, "you might have a mood disorder."

I wasn't sure what to think. I'm still not.

John offered to take me in for psychological testing, but I'm still not sure if I want to do it. I mean, he'd be paying for it, so it wouldn't be a penny out of my pocket, but I'm not necessarily sure I like the idea of knowing if something's wrong with me if something really is.

Funny, isn't it? We're obsessed with knowing whether or not we're sick, but whenever someone poses the question and thinks you might be, you get scared. Is that because we're all secretly afraid of having something wrong with us, or is it because we'll *know* that something is wrong? I'm not sure, but both questions are running through my head at this very instance and have been since last night.

I haven't decided if I want to go in for the testing. John said it'd be a combination of Q and A and some blood work. When I asked about talking to a psychologist, he simply smiled and said, "I am a psychologist, Dakota."

It's no wonder he's always carrying that binder around. He's probably got a book on me and I've only been here for eighteen days.

Oh well.

I'll talk to John about it a little more tonight. Maybe he can ease some of my insecurities and convince me that going to the doctor won't be the worst thing in the world.

–Day 19–

I asked him to wait until the three-week mark on the psychological testing. I never was able to figure out why I'm so scared about going (whether it's me worrying if something's wrong with me or me being afraid to *definitely* know something is wrong with me,) but regardless, the extra time will help me get my head in order and help me decide what exactly I'm going to do.

Last night, after I finished writing my journal entry, I sat John down to ask him some questions about what he thought I could have. It basically went like this:

“Do you hear voices?”—No.

“Do you go from being suddenly happy to being suddenly depressed for no reason at all?”—No.

“Do you get anxious for no reason?”—I'd mentioned this before in a journal, and to him specifically, but I said no.

“Do you have any overwhelming fears that keep you up at night?”—Not particularly. I told him I worried about being here and how I might be a burden on him, but I said I never had any overwhelming fears about him kicking me out.

“Do you have trouble interacting with people?”—No. If I had trouble interacting with people, I would've never been able to hitchhike or serve as a travelling prostitute.

After he finished quizzing me on the brief, off-the-top-of-his-head conditions, he told me what they were in the order he asked them in—schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, anxiety disorder (for questions three and four,) and social anxiety disorder for the fifth. He also asked if I had issues with my body (a big red flag for body dysmorphic disorder) and if ever had problems with headaches, heart palpitations or nausea (for increased blood pressure,) but I answered no to all three. With his questions asked and my answers given, he simply stared at me for a moment, then let out a deep breath.

He asked a question I didn't expect.

“Do you think you have Autism?”

Most people think of someone suffering with Autism in one way—a stupid, mentally-impaired person who lacks conversational skills or the ability to do the most simple of tasks: in essence, a retard. Up until that point, I had had the same idea about the condition, but John explained a variation of Autism that most people aren't even aware of until later in their lives.

“It's called Aspergers,” he said. “People with the condition are known to have trouble interacting with people and to have repetitive behavioral patterns and interests.”

He said the one thing that might set me apart from the normal spectrum, if indeed I had it, would be my innate ability to write. He asked if I'd ever been taught formal writing and I said yes, in school, but no one teacher had ever taught a class on how to compose a journal or write a story. When he asked how I'd gotten so good at it, I said one thing—practice. All of my old writing is at home, hidden under the loose floorboard under the bed in a binder inside a shoebox. I'll probably never see it again. I guess it doesn't really matter. None of it was ever of any real importance to me. None of it means anything.

Nothing meant anything until now.

This book—this *journal*—means something.

–Day 20–

I ended up taking some of the Saint John's last night. After laying in bed for nearly three hours without any hope of falling asleep, I ended up crawling out of bed, going into the kitchen and popping one of the little green pills.

I was out an hour later.

They look like little seeds, the insides of the pills, plants squished to the point of dust. I'm not sure if it's meant to look reassuring, but I guess I can't help but feel that it does, at least to me. Maybe I just have a defeatist mentality. Regardless, though, I ended up falling asleep at around one in the morning.

I just woke up. My writing's probably a bit disjointed and I already know I look like a mess, but it doesn't matter. John's been at work for three hours and won't be home for lunch for at least two. He won't stay long—he never does. I think he only comes home to check on me, seeing as how he never really eats anything when he gets here. "I'll pick up a scone on the way back," he says, but never tosses a receipt in the trash when he gets home. It's a bit worrying, thinking that he foregoes eating in order to come check on me, but I guess I can't obsess over it.

I should probably stop writing.

I've got the rest of the day to think about whether or not I want to go in for psychological testing.

Let's see how this works.

–Day 21–

We just got home.

It's three in the afternoon.

I'm mentally exhausted.

For nearly four hours, I sat in a hospital alternating between both a doctor's and a psychologist's office. The doctor drew blood, asked about symptoms, drew some more blood, asked about hereditary illness in the family, questioned me about my eating habits, to which I replied I'd only just gotten on a substantially-healthy diet, that I'd only been eating well for the past three weeks.

When the man asked why I wasn't eating well before that, I shrugged and said I was homeless.

The doctor had frowned, then looked down at my arms. He seemed disappointed when he saw nothing other than fading bruises.

"Drug use?" he'd asked.

No, I'd replied. *My family kicked me out.*

He asked about the rape and if I'd been tested for STDs. I said yes. He pulled up my record and said that everything should be fine, disease-wise, then checked my face (which is still partially swollen up,) my ribs (which still hurt, but not to the point of agony) and my ankle (which has since stopped hurting entirely, though I still walk in favor of my left side.)

"Do you have any questions?" the doctor had asked.

No, I'd said. *But thank you.*

He directed me down the hall and said to wait in the chair by the door marked 'Dr. Anderson.' I thought of only two things before I left the office—a buxom-blonde with big tits and a silver fox on the six o'clock news.

I waited for at least a half-hour before the door to Dr. Anderson's office and the man himself ushered me into the room.

"Hello," he'd said. "My name is Doctor Anderson. You must be Mr. Hammell?"

Yes sir, I'd said, trying not to stare at his face. He had a scar running down from his hairline and over one eye, like he'd been in a war and had a piece of shrapnel glance off his skull, and hair so white it looked as though he'd been born from the depths of the frigid snow. He wasn't bad looking—not in the least—but he wasn't extraordinarily handsome like John. Maybe that's what happens when you have scars on your face—you instantly become less attractive, at least physically.

I was only able to pull my gaze away when he started laughing.

Sorry, I'd said.

To which he replied, "Don't worry about it. Sit down. Let's talk."

And talk we did, for nearly three hours. He asked me to tell him my story. Much of it was abbreviated—I told him little about my childhood, nothing about the experience at the lake, and nothing about my past as a prostitute. It might be wrong of me to say this, John, but I didn't tell him a whole lot of anything. I said my father kicked me out three years ago because he was going out of his mind and I'd been living on the road ever since. You know how it is, telling people about your story when you're not sure how they'll react. With you I'm an open book (which is rather ironic considering,) but with others—

I don't know. I guess I'm like a sleeve that's torn off pieces at a time, but with the threads left intact.

I should probably stop going on about sleeves and threads and open books and get to the point.

He ran a few minimal tests on me. He started with a general Q and A, much like the doctor before him had, but asked me things I hadn't expected. He asked me what my favorite color was (red) and to explain what I thought it meant (passion, like blood when it's spilling out on the highway.) He wrote this down, then asked me what my favorite animal was. It took me a while to think about it, but I finally told him the stag, a beautiful creature with a strong posture and with a head always hung high.

He asked why the stag was my favorite animal. I told him because it was the strongest image of perseverance I'd ever seen.

Doctor Anderson looked at me for a moment, as though examining my features for the slightest flaw, then asked me if I'd ever killed one of them.

No, I said. *I would never kill something just to take its life away.*

He asked if I was vegan. I said no. He nodded, shrugged, then wrote something down on his clipboard. I caught *sympathetic* and *thoughtfully caring* before he set his hands back in front of him and continued to watch me. He waited several long moments before he smiled, leaned to his right, then pulled a folder from a compartment on his desk.

"Do you know what a Rorschach test is?" he'd asked. I'd immediately nodded. "Would you like to take one?"

I asked him if I had any choice. He said that I was here for my treatment, not his, and that I could choose to do whatever I wanted to.

I told him yes.

He said he was going to show me five ink blots and to tell me what I saw in them.

I saw a castle and two knights in the first one.

I saw a heart with wings in the second.

I saw a cat sitting on a hill in the third.

I couldn't tell what was in the fourth. There was no consistency to the ink, just splashes of color in a strange, nonsensical pattern, like someone had simply tipped a vial of paint over in the attempt to make something out of nothing. I stared at it for a long time before I finally told him that I saw nothing other than ink.

"You're sure?" he asked.

I'm sure, I said.

"Look closer. See if you can see something inside it."

I looked closer, expecting to see something else. The way Anderson asked me to look at it a second time made me second-guess myself, so I tried to find anything I could that I'd possibly missed the first time around. I expected to see grey ink, or at least specs of white interlaced throughout, but I couldn't see anything.

Just as he was about to put it away, I held up my hand and told him to stop.

I leaned back in my seat.

Further away, I could see small spots of white, like bubbles floating up from the bottom of the sea. I could also tell that the ink had been applied in layers, splashed in ways still nonsensical, but resembling actual patterns.

I told him that I saw volcanic vents at the bottom of the ocean, producing bubbles instead of ash.

He nodded, smiled, then held up the fifth and last image.

I told him it was a deer.

“Everyone says that,” Anderson had laughed. “Even I see it.”

Afterward, we continued on with the Q and A, made small talk about certain things when they came up in conversation, and played a ‘what comes to mind when you hear this word’ game. We first played it with similar, then with opposites. By the time John knocked on the door, I had been in the office for a little more than three hours.

“You ready to go?” John had asked.

I nodded, stood, then shook Doctor Anderson’s hand.

He told me not to worry, that everything would be fine and that he would get the results back to me within a week or two.

To you, John—I know you won’t read this until later, and I know you’ll be disappointed with me for not sharing more than I did with him, but I want you to know that you’re the only person I trust in my life.

Thanks for helping me.

You mean more to me than you could ever imagine.

–Day 22–

I asked John if we could go somewhere when I woke up this morning. When he asked if I was feeling up to it, I said yes, but I wanted to go somewhere dark, somewhere where I wouldn't have to be seen for more than a few minutes at a time.

He asked if I wanted to go see a movie.

I said yes.

He pulled up a list on the internet and had me look through it.

We ended up going to see a film about a woman who'd lost everything.

The actress reminded me of my mother, with her golden-blond hair and her nice, soft features. I remember seeing her walk onto screen at the beginning of the movie and feeling tears rolling down my face. I didn't pat them away, because I didn't want John to look up and see what I was doing, but I did bow my head at one point to fake sneezing, then brought my shirt to my face and wiped them away.

We got home about an hour ago. We'd discussed most of the movie on the way back, but got into it a little deeper when we were sitting at the kitchen table, eating chocolate ice cream John had bought the day before. He asked me if I took anything away from it and I said no, that it was a good movie, but I couldn't relate to the woman in any way.

John asked if I knew how the woman in the film though when she lost everything.

I said no. I'd never lost my husband, my child. I'd lost my home, but it wasn't much of a loss, and I had no friends to lose in the first place. He asked if I'd lost my happiness like the woman had and I said no, that I was happier than I'd ever been in my entire life.

That made him smile.

It's nice to know that I can make people happy, if only for a moment.

–Day 23–

I asked John if I could keep taking the Wort. When he asked if I'd been having trouble sleeping, I said yes and that the medicine helped knock me out within an hour each time I took it. He then asked if I was taking it just as a sleeping medication or if I was taking it for other reasons.

I fessed up and told him that I'd been worrying about stuff while I was lying in bed.

He asked what I was specifically worrying about. I told him that I wasn't worrying about anything in particular, that something got in my head and kept me from going to sleep.

John reached forward, gripped my hand, and said that everything would be fine. He also said that I could keep taking the Wort. I just hope I don't become dependent on it.

–Day 24–

The swelling in my face is almost gone. The cold compresses have really been helping with the pain, but they've been getting rid of the discoloration most of all. As I've been healing, John's said that it looks like a lot of blood vessels were broken when I was attacked. He tried not to ask what exactly had happened, but I eventually told him that I'd had my face slammed into a wall. He apologized immediately thereafter. I told him that the only reason I didn't have a broken nose was because I was able to turn my head and raise my arm just enough to absorb most of the blow.

I'll get around to telling him about it eventually. I'm not sure if I'll actually tell him in person or write about it, but it'll most likely be the latter. After this morning, I realized that talking about it is a lot harder than I thought. It took all I could not to cry in front of John, but I eventually caved in and did so after he left for work. I know it isn't his fault (and when you do read this, it *isn't* your fault, John,) but—

I don't know. I thought maybe I would have been over it by now. It's almost been a month now and I'm still breaking down over the slightest recollection of it.

Maybe I should start talking about it, piece by piece, when John gets home at night. It doesn't have to be a lot at a time—it can be little pieces here and there without any real definite story, just enough for me to feel comfortable talking about it and not have to break down while trying to tell the whole story.

I'll write about it eventually.

I'm working up to it.

I know that, eventually, I'll get up the nerve to ask John to help me get through this. He's helped me get to the point I'm at now, which I know wouldn't have happened had he not taken me in. I owe a lot to him. I probably would have died out there on the streets. They would've come back, or I would've gotten an infection, one of the two.

If I were still on the streets, would it have been less painful to die from a beating, or from an infection? I've heard that you eventually go numb and can't feel anything both ways.

I should probably stop writing here.

I don't want to go down the path any further than I already have, at least not now.

Maybe later.

–Day 25–

John read my journal.

He gave me a hug tonight after he got home from work and said he was sorry for bringing up something I wasn't ready to face.

“I'm sorry,” he whispered, leaning in close as though other people could hear us and he only wanted me to listen. “What I said was inappropriate. It won't happen again.”

He's kept his distance for most of the night. I've been trying to get him to talk to me, but he keeps shying away, as though he's crossed some kind of invisible barrier that he wasn't supposed to step into.

I'm not mad at you, John. I'm not upset either. I was last night, but not at you—at myself. I hate the fact that I'm still so weak after all this time. I know it's hard to conquer your demons, but it's not hard to lift your sword and at least try.

–Day 26–

I don't think he's read my journal yet. That, or he hasn't said anything about it. He has, however, come back around. He asked me to go with him earlier when he said he was going to get tacos. We ended up having to detour and take the scenic route through the park, but it wasn't a bad drive. I'm always surprised when people say that they don't like driving at night. It's so peaceful, so quiet, so—so alone. It seems like whenever you're sitting in a car in the dark that you're in another place, in another time in another world. You seem one to yourself, or whoever's sitting in the seat behind you.

I asked John to pull over at one point. When he asked why, I said that I just wanted to sit in the car for a moment and enjoy the night.

He did just as I asked.

We sat there for at least ten minutes in complete silence. I remember closing my eyes, taking a deep breath, then looking over at John to find his head tilted back and his lips pursed, eyes set on the top of the tree line in front of us. The moon made the foliage shine like shards of silver embedded in the side of a mountain, miniature crescent-Luna fallen to Earth to mark the planet as its own.

It was a beautiful thing to see.

The tacos were good.

I'd forgotten how much I liked fast food.

–Day 27–

The first thing I noticed this morning was that John had read my journal. When I got up at around one in the afternoon, I stumbled into the kitchen and found it lying on the table, a completely foreign place than where I normally put it on the countertop. At first, I wasn't really bothered, particularly because I've known John to leave my journal in odd places after he's read it, even though he's usually fairly good at putting it in a place that I can find it. However, when I walked up to the kitchen table and reached out to close it, I found a sticky note stuck to the blank page just after the last entry.

“Everything's fine,” it said. “I'm sorry for being so selfish.”

It's three o'clock in the afternoon. John's not scheduled to be home for at least another two, if not three hours. “Clients,” he said when I asked the other day. “There seems to be so many people that need so much help nowadays.”

I wasn't sure how to take it when he said it. Even now, more than twenty-four hours after the words first left his mouth, I'm still not sure what to think. It seems like everyone needs some kind of help nowadays. This woman's on welfare because she can't take care of her kids, this man's on life support because he's dying—*rotting*—of AIDs from the inside out, this little girl's got Leukemia and she's going to die by her fifth birthday. Me? I'm staying with a man who was a complete stranger a little less than a month ago, eating his food, wearing his clothes and sleeping under his sheets.

Everyone needs help, I guess. Maybe that's the reality of the situation.

I don't know.

To John—I'm sorry that I overreacted to what went on the other day. I feel really shitty that I made you feel like you've done nothing wrong when in reality you've done nothing more than help me. Like I said before, give me a while—I'm coming around. At least, I think I am. I'm holding more than a few secrets, some that are slowly digging from beneath the surface, others that are festering deep inside, but they're starting to come out. They're like Egyptian beetles in that movie with that lady named Eevee and that Jack Conner guy who are killing all those mummies—they've dug their way in, but something's making them come out.

I don't know.

Maybe you're my magic potion. It's a corny analogy, I know, but it seems like you're bringing out the best and worst of me.

I guess that's not a bad thing.

In the end, all that matters is that I'm comfortable around you.

I am.

–Day 28–

John's given me a proposition that I'm finding a little hard to deal with. Though he said that I don't necessarily have to start right away, he said that the sooner I can, the better, and that if I can get a head start on my recovery, I might as well.

The proposition?

Starting November 30th, I begin my transition toward recovery—the end of my pain, the slaying of my demons, the start of my new age.

I'm not sure what I think about it. I mean, I can understand why John would want to get this started, considering that my face is almost completely healed and that I've been here for almost a month, but—

I don't know.

To be perfectly honest, I'm scared of facing it. The past few weeks have been—well, not perfect, but pretty close to it. Going to the movie with John, riding with him to get food, sitting in the park at night and watching the moon rise up over the trees—it's been perfect, to say the least, and I don't want that to go away.

Oh well.

They say all good things come to an end.

One foot in, one foot out—

I think I can do this.

–Day 29–

When I got up this morning, the first thing John said was that I didn't have to do it if I didn't want to.

“This is your life,” he'd said. “I just want what's best for you, and right now, what I think might be best for you might not be what you think is best.”

I'm not even sure what might be best for me. Right now, I'm so fucking scared of facing what happened that I feel like I should just get the hell out of here. I know better though. I know that won't do me any good, because if I leave now, with broken ribs and a sprained ankle, I'm apt to end up back here in a week, begging for John to let me back and to give me a second chance.

I'm not sure.

John—

Fuck.

I can't even think straight right now.

Give me a little. Just—

Fuck. *FUCK* it. Just *fuck* it! I can't let this thing get the best of me. I can't. I've gone through too fucking much and am too fucking strong to let some jackasses who wanted to push me around get the best of me. I. Am. *TOO. STRONG.* To. Be. Pushed. Around.

My dad did it once, the people I tried to ask for help from did it twice, and the jackasses who beat and used me in ways that another person should never be used did it over and fucking over again.

I'm done with it.

I'm starting, tomorrow.

John—I'm doing it. I'm going to fucking do it, and if not for you, then for me, because tomorrow's the start of a new day, a new week, the end of November and the beginning of the new *me*.

I'm not letting this take control of my life anymore.

Never again.

Never.

Fucking.

Again.

–Day 30–

I guess the best way to start is to tell the story of what happened leading up to the attack. I'm not sure how exactly this will go or if my writing will be as strong as it normally is, but I'm hoping I can just stick to the point and not stumble too much. I know there's going to be some scratches, some extra lines and some other issues, but oh well—we'll see how this goes.

I'm going to try my best, John. That's all I can do.

Nearly six months before the night I was attacked, I was walking along the side of the interstate with my thumb in the air and my backpack over my shoulder. Colder than I'd ever been and praying to some God that someone would stop and pick me up, I pulled my hood over my head and tightened the drawstrings that hung down near my shoulder, hoping that the fabric would somehow absorb the heat coming out of my head and keep me from freezing to death. Five degrees outside: my teeth tasted like chalk and it seemed like there was blood in my mouth every time I went to spit. My ears felt like they were about to fall off and my nose was running unlike it had ever run before. It was so cold and it hurt so bad that I thought I would start crying, regardless of the fact that I'd been walking in the frigid weather for the past three hours without even stopping for a breath. At one moment, it seemed like I wouldn't be able to hold my arm up anymore, as my shoulder started throbbing and the naked tip of my thumb seemed like it would fall off at any moment. However, just as I thought no one would stop for me—just as the vehicle that had continually passed, then fallen back into pace with me more than a dozen times slowed down—a man in a white pickup truck pulled over to the side of the road and rolled his window down.

“Hey!” he called out. “You ok, kid?”

How he knew I was a ‘kid,’ I didn't know. Not that I'm a ‘kid’ by any stretch—I'm a grown man in fifty states in the U.S.A, but when your ears are burning cold, snot is running down your nose and your eyes are redder than hell, you can look like pretty much anything. However, whether or not I was a kid didn't matter at that moment. I raised my head, shook it, then stepped forward, hoping that he wouldn't get scared and drive off. (You would be surprised how many big, grown men stopped to ask if I was all right, then would drive off when I started walking toward the truck. I guess all the hitchhiker legends scared even the burliest of guys off.)

I said, without much dignity in my voice, *I'm cold.*

To which he replied, “I can tell.”

I stood there in what he would later say was below-freezing weather, teeth chattering and nose throbbing, watching him with eyes he said were so cold that frost adorned my lashes. In this time, I took notice of not only his face, but his features—his strong nose, possibly of Italian heritage, with dark brown eyes that seemed to pierce out at me from the cold white winter and a beautiful, strong, almost-square chin. Red hair fell from beneath the hat on his head and the beard that covered his face unarguably made him warm. In doing this—taking note of his features—I watched him for five minutes, wondering just what he would do, only to break down when he leaned over into the passenger seat and opened the front door.

“Get in,” he said.

So I did.

I pulled my knuckle gloves off my hands, shrugged my soaking wet shoes onto the floor and stripped out of my drenched shirt the moment I settled into the passenger seat. While he leaned

forward to turn the heater on, hands fumbling with the dashboard and eyes darting between my face and my chest, I asked if I could take my pants off. I was freezing and couldn't bear to have them on anymore, but knew from personal experience that a lot of men, even those looking for a hookup, were uncomfortable with the idea that a cop might pull up alongside them and see a naked guy (who could very easily be underage, as he was only nineteen and could be mistaken as being younger to some) sitting in their vehicle. The man stared at me for a moment, watching me with his brown eyes, then shrugged and told me to go ahead, that I would probably 'freeze my nuts off' if I didn't.

When I was stripped down to my underwear and my clothes were on the floor, he reached into the back seat, pulled a blanket out and handed it to me. He then asked how long it had been since I'd eaten anything, to which I replied a day, before he reached into the center console and pulled out a Twinkie. "It's not much," he'd said, "but it'll do."

And do it did, at least until we pulled over to the gas station and he ran in and bought each of us a toasted submarine sandwich. He bought me ham, cheese and tomato, "the casual and fairly diverse," he said, which was fine with me because I would've eaten sushi if he'd've been so inclined. All I wanted was something warm and that would fill me up, so getting any kind of food was a relief.

When we settled in and finished eating, he told me his name was Josh and offered his hand. I told him mine was Dakota and shook his in turn, then he asked me where I was headed. "Anywhere," I said, to which he replied, "Where is anywhere?"

Knowing full and well that I could potentially play this situation into my hands based solely on his mannerisms, his attention to my body and his wandering, sidelong glances, I said the one thing that had charmed dozens of men before him into taking me wherever I wanted to go: 'Anywhere you're going.'

Three hours later, we were lying naked in a hotel room bed with a used condom on the floor.

I know what you're probably thinking—I'm gay, but I'm not: at least, I don't think I am. For the most part, I've just done what I needed to do in order to keep myself going for the last three years. I'm not gay, I'm not straight, I'm not anything as far as I know. I mean, I enjoy sex—I can tell you that much right now. The physical act of enjoying another's naked flesh against you and feeling him inside you is an amazing feeling, but it's not necessarily a psychological one, at least not for me. Whenever a guy fucks me, I get hard, and whenever he fucks me good he can throw me over the moon and back without me even knowing what the fuck is going on, but I've never remotely had a sexual interest in another man, much less another woman. I tried that once, being a callboy. It didn't work out, so if you want to refer to me as anything, you can refer to me as 'not straight.' I guess that's the best thing to say. *Not attracted to women*, written on the resume of my life.

Anyhow, getting back to the story—after Josh fucked me, we laid in bed for a long while talking about stuff: where I was from, what I was doing, why I was walking along the side of the interstate with my thumb in my air. I told him I was a runaway and that my dad had tried to kill me because I was gay (a complete lie, but it gave me an alibi,) that where I came from didn't exactly matter and that I'd been walking along the interstate because there was nowhere else to go. When I asked about him, he said he was from New Jersey and that he was heading south to see his parents. He also said that he was worried about me (particularly because of how red my hands were) and that he wanted me to go to the doctor. I instantly refused, saying that I didn't want my dad to get called in based on the fact that I was a runaway whom had likely caused the

governments thousands of dollars in rescue fees, to which he immediately sobered himself, then asked if I wanted to go south with him.

“My folks live in a beachhouse,” he said. “You can come live with me for a while. You’re what? Eighteen, nearly nineteen? I’ll say you’re my new boyfriend. They don’t need to know anything.”

No one needed to know anything, which was exactly why I agreed to go south with him, toward Florida and where the oranges grew wild.

The following morning, after he paid for the room and we grabbed breakfast in the cafeteria, we started heading down the coast toward the North Carolinian border. At about noon, we stopped at a thrift store and he bought me a few pairs of clothes, particularly board shorts and tank tops because “it was warm down there” and “he thought I looked hot in them.” Playing the game that I did, I smiled, nodded and told him thanks, but even back then, when I was charming the pants off of men and the money out of their wallets, I still felt a sense of guilt for conning them into giving me what I needed. Josh was a nice guy—a nice, misguided guy, tall at six-three and good-looking with red hair and a wild, albeit attractive scruff of beard. I climbed back in the truck and we continued down the coast, passed into North Carolina, then got as far as Atlanta before, again, we stopped.

“Why did we stop?” I asked as we pulled into another motel.

“I want to screw around,” he said.

It didn’t surprise me. Few things surprised me, considering what men asked me to do or what they asked me to let them do to me, so I simply shrugged it off and walked into the hotel with him. We fucked for about two or three hours, on and off, until the sun went down and it got dark, before we walked around the corner to pick up burgers and fries. We then returned to our room, ate and laid in bed, him with his arm around me and me feeling like I had some close connection to this guy, even though I’d only met him the day before.

While we lay there, him stroking the curve of my shoulder and me with my head against his side, I wanted to ask him if he really cared about me, if he liked me for me and not just my ass. I didn’t though. Obviously, that’s more than clear, because asking a guy who picked you up on the side of the road if he’s in love with you is corny and more than stupid, but when you’re in my situation and you’re with a guy who makes you feel like you’re not actually doing it for the money or the need, you feel the urge to ask those kinds of questions.

The next morning, we woke up, ate breakfast again in the cafeteria, then crawled into his truck and started down the road. Two hours later, we were in Florida, and an hour after that, we were pulling into his parents’ driveway. His father was out front, mowing the lawn, when we pulled in and Josh disengaged the vehicle. Josh crawled out the minute his dad killed the lawnmower and I quickly followed suit.

The first words out of Josh’s mouth?

“Dad, I want you to meet my boyfriend, Dakota.”

So began the next year of my life.

Obviously, this part of the story is long, drawn-out and extremely complex, and I think it requires more attention than one entry can detail. I spent an entire year with this guy and his family and it marked (and still marks) an incredibly important period in my life, so I want to do the story justice, because I think I owe it to him (and, most importantly, to you) to give it as much detail as I possibly can.

Wondering what happened next?

I’ll give you a hint—the story didn’t end well, at all.

–Day 31–

December 2nd. It's started to snow and this morning, while sitting at the kitchen table, John was skimming through my journal with wide eyes and an even wider mouth. Several times, he looked up to ask how long I had spent on this entry, but I shrugged and said it only took me about an hour or so to write. He also said that he hadn't read it, but from some of the things he caught, it was important progress, progress that he thought was important to the next steps of my life.

Before he left, he asked about Josh and whether or not I loved him, or still do.

I don't know.

When you 'love' someone, does that mean you have an overt amount of affection for them?

I guess I'll have to keep going with my story, but right now, I don't think it merits it. I still plan on continuing, John, but it's Monday and I'm trying to calm myself down before you get home tonight. Hopefully you'll be fine with taking the night off to spend some time with me. I always hate it when you end up coming home from work only to end up doing more of it. You work too hard to come home to just start over again.

–Day 32–

John didn't read my journal last night. He did like I asked and sat down and watched TV with me after he made and we ate dinner. I think he might be under the impression that I don't want him reading what I'm writing, especially since I'm starting to get so personal with my life, but I hope he doesn't think that just because I'm getting deeper doesn't mean I want to have my oxygen supply cut off.

Funny—it seems like I'm using allegories more and more often, especially as the days go by.

Oh well—at least it gives John (and, hopefully, my future self) something to relate to.

Last night, after we ate the beef stroganoff he made (from scratch, I should add,) we sat down in the living room and watched TV for about four hours, first a documentary about wildlife, then a crime special on the Black Dahlia. It's odd to look at something like that on TV. You know it's real, but at the same time, it's become so sensationalized that it doesn't seem that real at all, more like fantasy encapsulated in the world of reality (John said that's called 'magic realism' when I mentioned it. He obviously reads more than I do.) It makes me wonder if people like the Dahlia are kept alive simply because of the way she died and not because she was a budding young talent who was brutally murdered. I mean, yeah—it ties into the same thing, but keeping someone alive because of *how* they died is far more cruel than keeping someone alive just based on the fact that they did.

Oh, yes, this young woman died.

Really?

Yes! Don't you know? She was cut in half.

That poor, poor thing.

Same thing, same story, same reaction each and every time—once you tell a person someone was murdered, they react with shock, then when you tell them she was cut in half, they're mortified, like someone's just kicked a kitten into the wall in front of their four-year-old daughter and expected her mother not to react.

Seeing that last night, it makes me wonder if they would have had the same reaction if John hadn't have come along and I had died in that alleyway. Knowing the public though, they probably wouldn't have bat an eyelash at a homeless person being beaten to death in an alley. In today's day and age, you have to die tragically to end up on the news, or at least accidentally. A biker can fall into a culvert whilst riding his magical unicycle and get his fifteen minutes of fame, but a man who gets shot will never end up on the news.

That's the way life works, I guess.

It sucks.

If only people were more caring.

–Day 33–

I'm not sure if John's read my journal. If he has, he hasn't mentioned anything about it, though I don't think it necessarily matters right now. He may not just be saying anything for fear of upsetting me or bringing about any unnecessary feelings, or he may just not have read it at all. I wouldn't put it past him, considering how he's been returning from work the past few nights, but I guess that doesn't matter. Regardless, I guess it's time to continue, even if I don't necessarily want to revisit this time in my life.

(To John—I'm working toward it. Hopefully this backstory, if you have or when you do read it, isn't detrimental to the process.)

His father's name was Lenore. His mother's was Theresa. I only found out their last name was Camble later the evening we arrived, while we were sitting in the living room and someone came asking for the senior Mr. Camble. Even now, writing this, I'm not too sure I would've ever found out the family's last name had that man not come to the door wanting to 'cause trouble,' as Josh so kindly put it. I'd never snooped in their mail, checked their records or ever found anything that could indicate what their last name was. At the time, it didn't necessarily bother me, as I was simply playing a role in order to put myself into a better situation and not thinking much of it. It 'wasn't necessary' was always what I told myself whenever I got a wild hair and tried to find out more about them. Now, though, it makes me uneasy to think that I could have lived in that house for all that time and have never known Josh's last name.

Anyhow, I'm distracting from the point.

As I was saying, we were sitting in the living room making small talk and watching the tide roll in when a knock came at the door and the stranger asked to speak to the senior Camble. Almost immediately upon turning to look at the front door, Josh had wrapped his arm around my shoulder and pulled me close, as though the stranger posed some threat to his livelihood and the relationship he purported we had. When I asked if something was wrong, he simply shook it off and said not to worry about it, then his father went out the front door and his mother stood and made her way into the kitchen. Shortly thereafter, Josh beckoned me to my feet and we went to his room to retire.

You can probably imagine I didn't sleep very well that night. It was hard enough to go along with the whole ruse—playing 'boyfriend' and 'the new man in the family' and all—but it was even harder to think that something could possibly be wrong and you couldn't do anything about it.

Sometime between the time I first crawled into bed and the moment Josh pulled me back against his chest, I stopped caring and pushed the thoughts out of my head. I didn't fall asleep until sometime after midnight.

At six, Josh woke me up and asked if I wanted to go out on the beach. I said I was tired and didn't feel like it. He rose and told his mother that I wasn't feeling well. When she asked what was wrong, he said that we'd had a long drive up here and that he thought I may be catching a cold. However bogus the response was, it kept me in bed for another four hours before I dragged myself out of bed, into the shower and out into the living room in an open vest and a pair of board shorts.

That morning, I learned the first things about my new family—his father read the morning paper, his mother made cinnamon rolls and toast and brought them out to the men in her family

and Josh liked to lounge around without his shirt. It established a routine that I came to follow over the next six months.

I didn't ask about what had happened last night. Though Lenore seemed decent enough, even going so far as to ask if I was feeling better after Theresa asked if I wanted her to run down to the store for some medicine, I didn't necessarily trust either of them, particularly because of the family matter that hadn't personally been explained the moment I walked out the bedroom door. No apology, no insight, no excuse for having left the room to leave me and Josh to retire to bed—in some strange, maybe even sick and twisted way, I couldn't help but feel as though there was a deep, dark secret lying beneath the floorboards, festering like malignant cancer that has been undiagnosed by the world's greatest physician. That kind of thing doesn't earn you bonus points, especially when you're new to a family and they're already pushing things off the table for the cat to chew on.

As nice as they were, I couldn't trust either of Josh's parents. Oddly enough though, I felt as though I could trust Josh, even though he picked me up off the side of the road only to fuck me two times before we got to his parents' house.

It might be best to start here. I need a while to process how I should tell the next part of this story without overwhelming you beforehand.

The tests came back.

I have absolutely nothing wrong with me.

When John came home from work earlier, he walked into the kitchen with a smile on his face and a torn envelope in his hand. At the time, I couldn't help but feel a little anxious and worried. He's never as manic as he was at that moment, with his face seemingly ready to rip apart at the cheeks and cheeks so red from what was probably laughter he could have beaten a cherry tomato in a ripeness contest. At first, I wasn't sure if I should ask what was wrong (or if anything was wrong for that matter,) but before I could, he slapped the envelope down in front of me and grabbed both my shoulders in a death grip.

“Look at it!” he cried. *“Look at it!”*

Him crying with joy at the top of his lungs didn't help much either. I didn't mention that the shaking kind of hurt my ribs, though it doesn't really matter because it was only a dull pain and it lasted for a brief five seconds.

Anyhow, back to the point—after John had let go of me and began to prance about the kitchen, pulling pots and pans out of the cupboards and throwing random spice and ingredients from the displays, I pulled the letter out of the envelope and started to read over the information laid out in the graphs. In one row were my levels, while the other held the standards that a healthy nineteen-year-old like me should have. A few of my levels seemed off—iron, protein, and a few others I can't remember—but a note in the margin said that the ‘improvement in my diet’ was standardizing my body and that was why they were partially off (though thinking back on it, they were barely off in the first place.) After reading that, I quickly flipped the page, read a few brief typed sentences on different variations, then let my eyes scramble down the page, toward the rows of initially-blank lines that held both doctor Anderson's and the blood analyzers notes.

Results do not indicate abnormalities of any kind, said the analyzer's notes.

No mental disorders associated with answers, Anderson's notes began. *Gifted, intelligent, sharp. A brilliant young man whose only troubles are the ones from his past.*

Below, written in finely-flushed writing, were the words ‘Counseling recommended.’

I had just finished reading the line when I felt John's hand touch my back. I jumped so high I could have knocked both of us to the floor.

“You have absolutely nothing wrong with you,” John said, leaning forward to look at the paper over my shoulder. “You're just as normal as the rest of us.”

‘Normal’ wouldn't be the word I would use to describe myself, but I guess it doesn't matter. I'm not sick in any way, shape or form.

In response to John's words, I folded the papers, slid them into the envelope, then glanced over my shoulder as he started for the sink.

John, I'd said.

“Yeah?” he'd replied.

I said only two words: *Thank you.*

Those are two of the few words to express the way I feel.

–Day 35–

John had the day off today, so he asked me if I wanted to do something. At eight o'clock in the morning and still half-asleep, I wasn't sure what all to do other than to ask what he was doing in my room. He laughed, slashed the blanket halfway down my naked back with the palm of his hand and said that he wanted to make plans if I had any I wanted to make.

Still nearly asleep, I narrowed my eyes, pushed my elbow into the bed and propped my head on the palm of my hand.

Let's drive, I said.

So we did.

After showering and eating a scant breakfast of blueberry muffins, we hopped in the car and started into town, toward the thrift shops, antique stores and all the other wonders of the big-city world. When we got there, John pulled into a vacant parking lot and asked me where I wanted to go.

I don't know, I'd said.

"You don't know?" he'd frowned.

Not really.

"I thought you said you wanted to..." He trailed off there, then smiled before reaching up to run a hand through his hair. He then said, matter-of-factly and as though he'd just been struck with the stupid hammer, "Oh."

At first, I wasn't sure how exactly to respond. Thankfully though, he laughed shortly thereafter and continued, "You wanted to *drive*, not go anywhere."

I corrected him, saying I moreso wanted to ride along than actually drive.

"Not much of a difference," he said, switching out of park and making his way out of the parking lot. He took a moment to glance up and down the long stretch of downtown road before flipping his right turn signal on. "You want a ride, we've got one."

Nearly eight hours later, we're sitting in a hotel room, eating decent but not great hotel food and watching TV.

As I'm writing this, dressed down to a pair of pajama pants John had picked up for me at the souvenir shop (they promptly and tactfully have 'I stayed at the Roadside Escape!' written across the ass. That's sarcasm, for future reference) John has the it-outlived-the-dinosaurs television set to a cooking channel and is picking at the remnants of his burger. He's reaching for the phone and asking if I want more fries because he's ordering for more, to which I just replied *Sure*, but I'm not sure what else is going to go on after I finish writing this. I'll probably just climb up into bed with him (we got a single) and watch TV until I pass out. It seems like this is going to turn into a weekend excursion—not that that's a big deal, because I'm having the time of my life, but I didn't really expect this.

You'll read this later, John, so I just want to say it now: This is the most fun I've had in a long time. I'm glad you let your hair down and decided to do something like this. It's nice to see your more relaxed side. You needed a break anyway.

–Day 36–

We were on the road again today. Like yesterday, we rose around the crack of dawn, crawled in the car and started toward the nearest biggest city, roughly two-hundred-and-fifty miles away. John said it'd take up about three or four hours to get there, given the lengthy stretches of road we'd have to take and the amount of traffic in some of the smaller towns, but we arrived in the city at about eleven-thirty AM, booked into a hotel, then started wandering around the city.

“Where to?” he'd asked.

I didn't know ‘where’ we could actually ‘go to,’ so I simply shrugged and continued to lead the way, stopping at streets, pushing pedestrian crossing buttons and leading him around corners. At one point I thought we might have to double-around for fear of not being able to walk back to the motel, but John only shrugged and said to keep going.

“Might as well enjoy the walk,” he'd said.

After about a half-hour of wandering the city, we came across the official state aquarium. Almost immediately, John asked if I want to go.

I've never been, I'd said.

“All the more reason to go,” he'd replied, patting my shoulder and leading me across the street.

It cost a measly amount to get in, which surprised me, considering most aquarium ads I'd ever seen showcased entry ticket prices of at least twenty dollars. John later said that they were having a public event and had halved the ticket prices, hence the reason for the whole experience only being fourteen dollars.

That's a lot cheaper than I thought it would be, I had told him.

“Don't start worrying about money,” he'd said, then added, “I make more than enough to cover myself three-times over.”

I've never been one to speculate on how much he made. Then again, John doesn't exactly live a marvelous lifestyle, so I've never been one to wonder how much silver lined his pockets. His house is a one-story, three-bedroom building with three bathrooms (the second of which isn't held by the other guest bedroom,) an office, a decent-sized living room and a small kitchen. He drives a car that looks to have walked out of the seventies and doesn't have a significant other, children or even a pet goldfish. It's just him—

Well, correction: us, now that I'm here. I've never asked, but I'm sure he owns it, which cuts out the majority of the house payments, and the electricity is barely on—his living room is practically its own window and at night he lights candles.

I guess it doesn't particularly matter. I went off on a tangent.

Anyhow, we started into the aquarium and first looked at fish that could have been seen in a pet store—goldfish, snails, angel fish and a variety of other things. There were clown fish in some of the exhibits (or at least fish that looked like clownfish. An exhibit said otherwise, as they were mimickers,) but I'd seen them before. I was starting to get disappointed before we rounded the corner and came to a tunnel that said, ‘The Atlantic Ocean.’

“This'll be where it gets good,” John had commented at that very moment, then started forward without me.

I stared at the sign for about a minute before I followed suit.

Almost immediately, I saw a shark skirting away from the tunnel. Being underwater was the worst part of it.

What if the tunnel breaks? I'd asked.

"It won't break," John laughed. "Besides—if it does, we'll just run out that way." Then he pointed to the entrance and I nodded, even though I couldn't help but imagine getting chomped by a shark while trying to run out of the aquarium. "You're not scared of them, are you?"

What?

"Sharks?"

I'd said no. 'Admire' is the more correct word, and by admire, I mean 'from a distance,' not up close, which made the experience all the more surreal when the creature doubled back around and came back to view the people entering the aquarium.

"It's a White Tip," John had said, looking up at the creature's dorsal fin, as if to confirm his point. "It says here that a ship called the *Nova Scotia* was sunk by a German submarine off of South Africa and that many of the people who died were eaten by these guys."

Which is why I 'admire' them, I'd replied. I made sure to enunciate 'admire' full and well.

"Come on," John laughed. "Let's keep going."

The most impressive part of the whole display was the sharks—I won't deny that at all. We gradually advanced through the various oceans and through parts of South America and Africa until we finally exited out the other side. About that time, it was one-thirty and both of our stomachs were rumbling, so we stopped to eat at the restaurant housed inside the aquarium and ate submarine sandwiches and French fries before we left the place.

From there, John asked if there was anything else I wanted to do. I said I wanted to go back to the hotel.

We're here now, as I'm writing this. John's in the shower, probably waiting to see if there's anything else I want to do while we're here. I'm not particularly sure what else there *is* to do here, so I guess I'll ask if there's anything else he thinks I should see before we come back to settle down in the motel for the night.

I'll let this journal go from here. I'll probably write more about what we did today tomorrow, but for now, I'll stop. My hand's starting to cramp and I think I just heard the shower turn off. Pretty soon here, after the weekend ends, I'll have to start writing more about what happened while I was living with Josh, but for now I'll just enjoy the weekend. Might as well.

–Day 37–

After a two-and-a-half day excursion across the state, we're finally on our way back home. As of writing this, I'm trying to keep my hand as steady as possible so I don't fuck up and have to start over, which is no easy feat considering the road we're on is torn to hell and the cliff to the side looks like it could fall over at any minute. I keep having to look down at my journal to distract myself from the rocks, but even that isn't helping.

John just laughed at me.

“You afraid of heights?”

No, I just replied, shaking my head. *It's the rocks.*

He said “not to worry” and that we'll “be away from them soon.” I highly fucking doubt that, but oh well. Not much else I can do except grin and bear it. I had the same problem on the way up, but I managed, somehow.

I think I'm going to stop here. The bad thing about looking down at something in a moving vehicle is that I'm likely to get carsick, though so far I've been doing pretty well. The knots in my stomach are nerves, not nausea, and my chest doesn't feel tight. I can still breathe, so that's a plus.

It's just anxiety.

I'll get over it.

–Day 38–

We're out of cliff country and sitting in the exact same hotel room we were in on the way up. I'd commented on the irony of it earlier, when we'd stepped into the room to see it set up the exact same way we left it, but John said irony was far and in between what we were now looking at.

“Irony is something that seems familiar in an awkward circumstance,” he'd said, collapsing onto the bed just like he had the last time we were here. “People mistake it for something sinister all the time.”

I guess that makes sense, all things considering. I'd once thought of John as ironic when he walked into the alley to find me nearly beaten to death, but I guess I never considered the fact that the familiarity of the whole thing was what made it seem sinister.

When John had first stepped into that alley, I thought he was a psycho who wanted to fuck my mouth. I guess things really are ironic when you think about them. A bird is born but cannot fly, thus is her irony as she can never leave her nest, while a gazelle is grazing in the grass and sees a lion but does not run, thus is her irony as the beast rips her to shreds—both ironic, in a way, but most people probably wouldn't see it as such.

I should probably stop before I get myself in over my head. I'm not even sure if I'm using the word ironic correctly, but oh well—I guess that happens sometimes. John might or might not correct me on the usage later, but that's all right. We're going to be home sometime tomorrow. I guess then I can get back to living my life, as ironic as that might seem.

–Day 39–

We got back at about eleven-thirty PM. John had to go to bed almost immediately after he scrambled for something to eat, but I'm still awake, writing a journal entry that has little bearing over anything that's happened today. We got up at around six, crawled in the car, stopped for egg and sausage sandwiches and continued on throughout the day, only stopping twice for gas and food. The day was, and still is, perfect.

Thirty-nine days ago, I could have never imagined living with a man who wanted nothing more than to help me. Now, though, I know what true kindness really means.

The past four days have been amazing—long, but amazing.

Thank you for taking me on this trip, John. I promise I'll keep writing about what happened with me and Josh tomorrow, after I've slept and have a better mind frame. I know this entry was mostly sappy and without any real meaning, and I know I tell you how much I appreciate everything you've done more than you can probably bear, but I know it means a lot to hear it.

Every time you smile, I know just how much it means.

Time to keep going, I guess.

The first time we went to the beach together, Josh locked his arm around my shoulders and led me along the shoreline. The tide was going in and out, splashing against our feet, and the seagulls overhead were cawing at us like they do in fast food restaurant parking lots when they want French fries or something similar. There were a few people around, mostly families, their children and a few odd teenagers, but other than that, the beach was completely ours.

“Are you nervous?” he’d asked.

About what? I had replied.

“About how close we look.”

Truth be told, I’d been a little more than nervous at the time. Back where I used to live, you didn’t go about with your arm around another guy’s shoulders if you knew what was good for you, so it wasn’t hard for me to immediately establish a level of consciousness about Josh’s public display of affection. When he asked that, I didn’t answer right away. That didn’t seem to bother Josh much, as he continued to lead me down the shore without much care in the world, but I knew I would have to eventually answer, so I bucked up and said, *A little*.

At that moment, Josh stopped, released his hold on me and settled down on the ground, just far enough away from the shore so the water could touch his feet. I stood there for about a minute, dumbstruck and not sure how to feel, before he gestured me to sit down beside him.

“You must’ve lived in a pretty shitty place,” he’d said.

Yeah, I’d replied. *I did*.

We sat there watching the children play, the dogs chasing after rubber balls and mothers taking pictures as fathers dove in after their sons and daughters. In the distance, a dolphin jumped, spun, then squeaked before falling back into the ocean, much to the delight of a group of teenage girls, one of which reached out to the dolphin as it approached. I have a distinct memory of wondering just how it would feel to touch one, but I didn’t voice my opinion. Instead, I simply watched, laughing when the six-foot creature bumped its head against the girl’s side and began to wade through the other children.

“I’m going in,” Josh had said, stripping his shirt over his head to reveal his hairy, muscular chest. “Come on.”

I’m fine, I’d replied.

“Come on, Dakota. Live a little!”

Up until that point, he wasn’t aware that I was afraid of sharks, though I didn’t necessarily voice my opinion until after I’d stripped my shirt off and stood ankle-deep in the water.

“You coming?” Josh had asked, laughing as he turned to face me while he continued to wade deeper in the water.

I’m afraid of sharks, Josh.

“There’s no sharks here. Besides—we’ve got a dolphin. He’ll protect us, right, squeaky?”

The dolphin squeaked in response, then butted its head into Josh’s side hard enough to knock him into the water. That was all it took for me to join the man I considered to be my boyfriend in the water, dolphin and all.

I’m not sure if this is the most appropriate thing to write about, John, but I’m getting there. The story’s unwinding, slowly but surely. This is one of the few really good things that happened

between me and Josh while I was staying with him in Florida. I'd rather cherish these memories than put them away.

Josh’s family had problems.

That’s easy to say when you’re an outsider and as such have an outside perspective, but it isn’t hard to pick out the little awkward things when you’re living with someone for such a short amount of time. Usually it’s hard to pick those things out—the way your boyfriend’s mother would tap her nails on the counter when her husband walked into the kitchen, the way the father would read the paper, stop, then sigh before folding it up after he heard someone moving around in the house. Little things like that cross your radar often when you’re first living with someone, but after a while, the pieces start falling together and the puzzle begins to start building itself on its own.

To say the least, the first month-and-a-half of living with them was wrought with tension.

Funny—I say wrought like it’s some fancy word that should be used to describe an average thing.

Let’s get on with this.

When the two-month line of my stay began to broach the calendar, I decided to hit Josh up about his parents’ problems while we were walking home from the burger joint a few blocks up the road. I’d started off simply enough—a *Hey Josh* to break the ice, then a *Can I ask you something?* to get things going. When he looked up and replied with a simple “yeah,” I took a deep breath, prepared myself for the awkward conversation that I knew was to come, then decided to take the club and beat the gopher over the head with it.

Your parents have problems, don’t they?

I still remember the look in his face the moment I finished the sentence. His forehead filled with lines, his mouth turned into a giant frown, the corners of his cheeks puffed forward like a chipmunk’s mouth filled with too many acorns. It scared me to see such a reaction, even though it wasn’t an obvious one, but I knew nothing bad would come of it. Josh wasn’t violent to say the least, unlike some men I’d run into, but everyone knew that asking a question about a touchy subject could go just about any way it wanted to.

After what seemed like an eternity, he finally said the three words I’d been waiting to hear: “Yeah, they do.”

With that said, I wasn’t sure how to reply. I expected him to elaborate further on the subject—to at least say his parents had marital problems or to mention some underlying issue that prevented them from living a fuller, happier life. That, however, did not come, which forced me head-on into the position of the farmer with the burning cattle rod.

What’s wrong? I’d asked.

“Nothing,” he’d replied, his normally-calm voice filled with hurt. “We’re just having money problems, that’s all.”

I expected something similar. It takes innocent things that don’t seem like such a big deal to turn good families into raging infernos, but I didn’t expect Josh to act so hurt about it. He was a good man—he worked a good job, was able to see the whole country and had decent wage. Even now, while I’m writing this, I’m still surprised at how strong his reaction was.

That doesn’t necessarily matter though. When we were more than hallway to the house, I asked if he was all right, he said he was fine, and I concluded the topic by saying I was just worried and wanted to know if something was up.

“Don’t worry,” he’d said. “Something’s up, and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

–Day 42–

I didn't find out what was up until two months later.

"Someone's been stealing money," Josh had said. "Mom thinks it's the gardener."

Usually when you think someone that's working for you is stealing money, you do one of two things—confront them or get rid of them entirely. However, when I asked Josh about this, he simply sighed and shook his head. He said there was more going on that he wasn't comfortable talking about in the house, but when I asked if we could go take a walk (my suggestion at the time had been to go get pizza,) he'd simply shaken his head and said he didn't want to deal with it right now.

He didn't want to deal with it until two weeks later, while we were walking home from our usual hangout at the burger joint.

"The reason we can't get rid of the gardener is because he's got some shit on Dad," Josh had begun. "Dad's had a bit of a rough past. He's cheated the government out of some money and he's afraid if we try to get rid of the gardener, he'll stab us in the back."

I asked Josh just how much his father had cheated the government out of. Josh said he "couldn't count it," which I guess translates into "he couldn't remember because it's such an extreme amount."

While we continued walking, Josh with his head slightly bowed and myself with my hands in my pockets, I tried not to think about my place in the family and just what might happen if the gardener tried to get a little too close for comfort with me. No one knew who I was—I'd never been broadcast as a 'missing child,' at least as far as I know, and I'd never heard people talking about the kid who went missing. Back then, I assumed that Dad had just let me run off without a care in the world and didn't bother to try and get me back because I was so close to being an adult. Now I'm not even sure if he's alive. Even if he isn't, that doesn't necessarily matter, but I distracted myself from my train of thought.

The point was, at the time, that the gardener was known within Josh's inner circle to be wrong, a bad seed planted within the perfect tropical paradise.

I asked if something was going to happen to me.

Josh plainly asked the only thing he could: "What?"

I then elaborated: *Will your parents force me away because of what the gardener's doing?*

Josh said no. I wasn't too sure. I guess what happened is pretty much clear.

The tension eventually became so thick that sometimes, I swore I could cut it with a knife.

Around the three/four-month mark, after I'd pretty much established myself as Josh's live-in boyfriend who helped cook, clean and manage the small property, things started to get bad. The fighting that happened between Josh's parents wasn't just hushed whispers and startled bursts of sound—they were full-out brawls. They never actually fought (Josh's dad was too old to throw a punch and too good a man to ever lay his hands on a woman, much less his wife,) but their arguments could be heard throughout the house on choice mornings, afternoons and evenings. I was always the first to leave—*To take a walk*, I'd said, *and clear my head*. Josh, as always, would follow. He knew that the fighting was starting to get to me.

One night, he asked why I couldn't stand listening to them argue.

I said it was because it reminded me too much of my dad.

This is going to be a first for you, John, and it's going to be a first for me too, because I've never really talked about my dad in this journal. I've said he stopped caring about me, sure, but I never mentioned that he used to beat me during his alcoholic rampages. When Josh first questioned me about it, I was afraid to answer because the memories that were flooding back were almost too much to take. Even now, writing this, it's hard for me to even put into words what it's like to have your vision go red over the amount of blood in your eyes, but I'm getting to it.

The conversation went something like this:

“It reminds you of your dad?”

Yeah.

“You haven't—“

My Dad used to beat me, Josh.

“But how is this—“

He used to rant and rave just like your parents do before he got his belt out.

My dad called these beatings ‘growing pains.’ Every time I would disobey him, he would make a tiny cut into the leather and refine the tips just enough to make them sharp. When whipped, these teeth would break apart from the main part of the belt and slice down, much like an animal when it's biting you out of defense. He would give me the amount of lashings equal to what he thought was punishment—two for talking back, three for disobeying, four for arguing, five for crimes he felt were ‘Beyond his mechanism of control’ and ‘Disrespectful to him in the greatest degree.’

The last time he beat me, he didn't stop at five—he only stopped when I turned to try and get him to stop and the belt slashed my forehead.

Some would probably say that seeing your child's bleeding face would cause you to stop everything and to help that child in any way you possibly could. That wasn't the case for my dad. When he saw the blood running down my hairline and into my face, he stood there for a moment with his eyes wide and his own blood dripping down from where he'd bit his lip before he turned and slashed the belt at the ceiling. The light bulb exploded and the room went dark, much of what usually happens when it's eight-thirty at night and it's pitch-black outside. The darkness didn't deter him though—he kept slashing the belt across the kitchen, destroying everything he

could. This went on for I don't know how long before everything just stopped. Like the calm after the storm, he simply sighed, took a deep breath, then told me to go to my room.

After I finished telling Josh this story, he brought me into his arms and started bawling. "I'm so sorry," he'd sobbed. "I feel like a jerk for everything I've done to you."

This might have been the point where he saw me as more than just a fuck buddy and more as someone he actually cared about. In those four months, he'd never explicitly said he'd loved me. Sure, he'd say it as we were having sex, when my legs were over his shoulders and his dick was eight-inches inside me, but he never once told me outside sex that he loved me.

At this point in our relationship, two months before I eventually left Josh and his family behind, he pushed me away from his chest and planted one gentle kiss on my lips. It was then and there that he said, "I love you."

–Day 44–

At this point, I'm not exactly sure what I should write. The final chapter, maybe? The big finale, the last crescendo? I don't know. I'm trying to figure out just what I should start talking about next, because seeing as how there's two months left, there's a few things I could write about: How Josh's parents and their fighting started getting worse and worse, how the knocks at the door started to become more frequent, how the whispers that used to come from the living room while Josh and I were asleep started to become more frantic, more desperate, more secretive.

I don't know.

Maybe I should just put it this way: The last two months I stayed with Josh can basically be described as purgatory, hell in the sense that I could barely stand being in that house.

What happened at the very end?

I think I'll have to brace myself for that.

Sorry, John—let me get myself together a little more. If I can mentally prepare myself to write out what happened, it'll be easier for me to do it without stuttering throughout the journal.

Sorry.

The final chapter.

One night, while Josh and I were lying in bed, I heard his parents discussing my presence in the house. This wasn't the casual banter they usually had—about where I came from, how long I had been with Josh and how close we seemed to be for such a short-term couple, that sort of thing. That night though, they weren't talking about that. They were talking about something else.

“Have you noticed,” his father said, “that things seemed to get worse since Dakota arrived?”

Those words were enough to freeze me in place. When Josh suddenly paused as well, I thought maybe my skin had taken an icy chill, as his fingers drummed across my stomach, then stiffened before they fell back into place. However, he quickly fell back into an even form of breathing, much to my relief.

From that moment on, I listened to everything they said. I don't think it's necessary to reiterate the exact conversation, even though I do remember it to a perfect T, but hearing what they said made me realize how much of an idiot I had been for leaving my wallet out for something to find it. They knew whose it was—it had my name scrawled across it in a cowboys-and-Indians-style leather piece, so it was only natural for them to pick it up, maybe even shift through it.

What sealed my fate and what ultimately made them think I was stealing money?

The fact that I had a thousand or so dollars in my wallet.

Money was disappearing. There was a new person in the house. There was a lot of money in the new person's wallet. Connect the dots is an easy game when you only have three possible marks to draw a line between.

The following morning, they didn't say anything. My wallet was sitting in the exact same spot I'd left it in under the lamp on the end table. Things seemed normal, peachy even, and they both greeted me as though they held no ill will in their hearts.

That night, while Josh was sleeping and his parents had gone out for the night, I wrote a letter to Josh and said that his parents thought I was stealing money and that it was best if I left. I said to stay here, in Florida, and that if I got my life together, I might come back one day.

I didn't end the note by saying I loved him.

Now, while writing this, I'm not sure if I should have.

I abandoned him without saying goodbye.

If I've ever regretted anything in my life, it was that I never told Josh goodbye.

To John—hopefully this suffices for that part of my life. The next part of the story is coming up here soon.

Shortly, my entire life story leading up to you finding me in the alley is going to come into a complete circle. Hopefully it won't snap my head off when it does.

I took to the road like a bird its wings shortly after its mother teaches it to fly. I walked down the road, toward the nearest bus stop and stuck my thumb in the air. One-hundred bucks and a trucker later, I was headed toward my next destination—obviously, here.

I didn't initially intend to stop here. I didn't. What I'd wanted to do was to cruise around and try to make a couple hundred more bucks before I started off again. At the time, my goal had been to accumulate enough money to open a bank account and to establish myself somewhere where I could get an ID, a job, etcetera. However, when the trucker dropped me off at the nearest gas station and said he was supposed to pick someone else up and that I'd be suspicious if I stayed along, I had little more to do than hop out of the truck and start heading into town.

You're probably wondering, and yes, John—this is it. This is where it happens. *Happened*, I should say, because it isn't happening over and over again. It *happened* once, and it'll never happen again, because I'll never allow it to happen again and because I will never walk alone at night, not anymore, not in that part of town or *any* suspicious part of *any* town.

With that being said, this is what happened the night I was beaten, raped and left for dead:

I was walking down the street with my backpack over my shoulders and my eyes set on finding a place to sleep. I'd known I was in a bad part of town based on the way people would look at me whenever I passed them. A woman pulled her blinds shut when I walked past her window. A group of children playing in a front yard were ushered into the house by a wary father. An elderly woman smoking on her porch looked at me, tilted her head up, then grabbed her cane and walked into her home. It seemed to be the perfect setup for something bad to happen: Little Dakota Hammell, ex-boyfriend and now full-fledged traveling prostitute, is walking alone at night while trying to find a place to sleep. Unbeknownst to him, something is about to happen. A monster is about to come out of the darkness and change his life forever.

And it did.

The black sedan seemed to morph out of the shadows in the alley before me.

At the time, I wasn't sure what was happening. I thought maybe the alleyway led to a group of apartment complexes and that the sedan was simply leaving, or that maybe someone had detoured through a broad alley so they wouldn't have to take the long way to wherever they were going. However, when the doors opened and five guys came out, I knew I was in trouble.

"Hey," the one guy had said.

"Hey," I'd replied.

That's when someone pulled a switchblade out of their pocket and another one dragged me into the alley.

I don't think I have to describe exactly what happened. It'd be too graphic and gruesome, and I know for a fact that you don't want to read about what they did to me. All I'll say is that after they asked if I had any money, and after they painstakingly tried to navigate the several pockets on my backpack for the wallet I'd had hidden in a secret pocket in the inside of my pants, someone punched me hard enough to knock me out, undressed me, then started having their way with me. The five guys took turns beating and fucking me until they had their way. At the end of it, someone pulled a baseball bat out and hit me in three places: my chest, my ankle and my arm. I'm surprised he didn't crush my bones with that bat. He probably would have if the guy who'd been driving hadn't stopped him.

After all that time—after beating and fucking me for however many odd hours they did—they finally stopped.

I didn't believe in a God until that moment, when a cloud of peace came down at the moment the guy stopped beating me with the bat. I'm not sure if *the* God exists, but it doesn't matter, and I'm starting to stray away from the point.

When the bat stopped raining down, everything stopped.

"He's good, dude," the leader guy said. "We got off. Let's go."

That's what happened that night.

I saw the sedan leave before I passed out.

The following morning, I woke to the sound of someone walking toward me in the alley.

You know who that was, John?

It was you.

You saved me that morning.

When you took me in your arms and helped me into your car, when you drove me home and offered me shelter, you did the one thing a dozen other people probably wouldn't have—saved me.

Thank you.

I don't know if I've ever told you this, but I love you. You're the greatest friend and one of the best men I've ever known. It's because of you that I'm alive right now.

Thank you for helping me.

Thanks for helping me fight this until the very end.

–Day 47–

It's December eighteenth. Eighteen days after John told me that I would start fighting this thing until the very end, I've conquered just that. It's kind of crazy to think that I've been here for forty-seven days, but it's even crazier to think that I'm almost completely healed after such a short amount of time.

I'm not sure what else to say.

John hasn't read my journal. I think he's been swamped with pre-Christmas clients and has been too tired to read my journal because of it. That's all right though. I'm ok with it. Right now, I'm just happy that I accomplished what I set out to do—to fight it, the memory, to conquer it and to start to put it behind me. Now that I have, I'm not sure what else I have to do.

I guess John will give me the next step.

I hope that now that this journal is over, it won't become meaningless.

I hope I'll keep writing.

I hope something will keep me going for however much longer I'll be here.

–Day 48–

Six days until Christmas. John asked me if I wanted anything. I could only tell him that I wanted to stay longer.

“You know you can,” John had smiled.

I learned a long time ago that Christmas wasn’t just about presents.

When I was eleven and mom died, Dad took me to see Santa at the mall and I asked him for only one thing: For my mom to come back to life.

Obviously, that didn’t happen; and obviously, I stopped believing in Santa after Christmas day came and my mom wasn’t under the tree. She wasn’t sitting there, smiling with a camera as I unwrapped my presents, and she wasn’t hidden in a box, a mummy in a brightly-wrapped sarcophagus waiting for the tree robber to defile her grave. No. My mother was gone. She wasn’t anywhere to be seen.

That year—on my eleventh Christmas—I learned that Christmas wasn’t about presents. I would have learned that it was about spending it with the people you loved had Dad not gotten drunk and passed out on the couch, only to rise later that night with a hangover that brought out the bad side in him.

It’s sad to think that I have such a bad memory of the holiday. Oh well though. I guess there’s not much I can do about it.

–Day 49–

I'm starting to run out of ideas, so I guess I'll start counting down the days until Christmas.

Five.

John's been at work more and more the past few days. Maybe it's because of the holidays. People say the holidays are bad for violence. People drink, get riled up, set off fireworks, pull out guns to 'salute the Big Guy up in the sky.' I've heard a few noises since yesterday. Maybe people are counting down just like I am, or maybe people are ending it so they don't have to count down anymore.

I dunno.

To John—hopefully you won't have to go into work within the next few days. I'd hate to think that you have to work to the bone right before the holidays.

–Day 50–

I can't believe I've been writing in this journal for fifty days. It's already more than halfway full. If I keep writing at this rate, I'm going to need another journal come time for the eightieth day.

Four days until Christmas.

A part of me is starting to miss how much snow we used to have at home. Another part of me is thankful for the temperate weather and the fact that it's not freezing cold here right now. Regardless, it's a bit different, not being all the way back—well, there, I guess I should say.

It doesn't really matter where I came from, not anymore. I'm here now. That's all that matters.

–Day 51–

Three days until Christmas.

John's been coming home the past few days dead-tired and with lines running through his eyes. "So many people," he'd said, "so little time."

He then proceeded to pass out in the recliner for three hours.

Now, as of writing this, he's in the kitchen scrounging up some dinner for us, but he's moving like a slug. His shoulders are hunched like he's hurt his back and his movements are so slow he seems like a sloth navigating its way through the Amazon rainforest. Not that I'm sure sloths live in the Amazon—I'd imagine they would, but I don't know. I guess I'll have to look that up sometime.

Ah well.

Even if sloths don't live in the Amazon, there's one in the house right now, swearing at the burners for not lighting when they should. I guess I should stop and offer some help before he burns himself.

–Day 52–

Two days until Christmas.

I'm not sure what all to say. I mean, Christmas has always been a weird thing for me, at least for the past seven years. After Mom died, the magic seemed to die with her. Sure, there were always presents under the tree, and Dad still had a few years of sanity left before his head became completely consumed by the alcohol, but—

I don't know.

I'm having a hard time writing this. I never imagined Christmas would be this hard, but I don't know. Maybe it's just because I don't have a lot of focus right now.

Maybe John will give me a prompt.

(Hint hint.)

I guess I'll end this here. There's no point in trying to summon magic when there isn't any left in the world.

John wants me to tell him about the best Christmas present I've ever received. He said it doesn't have to be a long entry, but seeing as how it's Christmas Eve and the holiday is almost upon us, he wants to inspire a little cheer in me, even if it might bring up some past memories.

So, without further ado, here we go:

The best Christmas present I ever received was a stuffed deer when I was seven. That day is still vivid in my head, even though it's eleven years later. I remember waking up, jumping out of bed and running into my parent's room only to barrel-dive on top of both of them. I scared my mother half to death. She screamed, then laughed when she saw me wiggling between her and my father, who laughed and shrugged me off with half-sleep disregard. My mother asked me if something was wrong. I only said it was Christmas.

It's Christmas, Mom! I'd cried.

"I know!" she replied. "What did Santa bring you, Dakota?"

I hadn't run into the living room to see if anything had appeared during the night. My mother's few simple words had me running from the bedroom.

To keep this entry down a little bit, I'll explain what happened in a nutshell: I opened all the presents in the room, from the largest to the smallest, until I had only one left. I hadn't noticed this one at first because it hadn't been under the tree—it'd been sitting atop a coffee table, completely unannounced and almost missed entirely.

You missed one, my mother said.

I'd unwrapped it with such fervor that the paper came off instantly.

When I opened the box, I couldn't believe my eyes. It was a stuffed deer, fresh and new with beady black and brown eyes.

On my seventh Christmas, my favorite present was a stuffed deer, one which has sat and probably still continues to sit in my room back home. I'll probably never see him again (I'd named him Rudolph, because I believed him to be one of Santa's reindeer, even though he was only a regular white-tailed deer,) but I guess that doesn't matter.

That was my favorite Christmas present.

It still is.

My favorite Christmas.

–Day 54–

This morning, when I woke up and walked into the kitchen, John pushed a small, gift-wrapped box across the table toward the chair I usually sat in and told me Merry Christmas.

This is for you, he'd said, just after I started saying that I didn't want or need anything from him. *I don't care if you don't want anything. I got this for you.*

I couldn't argue with him. John was my savior, my Godsend, I guess you could say. So, in ways Christ-like and whatever else you can manage, I seated myself in my usual spot, unwrapped the present and opened the box.

Inside that small, little box was a gold-colored necklace, a heart with a stag standing proudly in the center in it.

"I found it at the store," John said, "when I went out to get last-minute groceries."

There's little I can say about it. I feel guilty for not getting him anything, but I guess I really can't. I didn't go to the store. I didn't have any way to get him anything. When I mentioned this, John told me not to worry about it, that Christmas was for kids and I was a kid one last time when I was nineteen, but still—

I can't help but feel touched.

I *am* touched, actually.

To John—thank you. You've made this one of the best Christmases ever.

–Day 55–

It snowed Christmas night.

It looks beautiful outside.

I'm trying to keep these journal entries longer than a few choice words, but right now, it doesn't feel particularly easy. It's like I'm trying to force things out when they shouldn't be forced out to begin with. Is that wrong? To think that your journal is winding down to a close after such a short period of time?

I don't know.

John and I are going to the store today. He says he wants to get a few things for me, particularly a cell phone, as the one at the house has been acting funky and he wants me to have a little more independence. I'm not sure how much longer I'll have to write in this, but I figure I'll stop before I get any further.

John's ready to go. He just said so.

I'll stop here.

–Day 56–

Another day without much to talk about. I got a cell phone yesterday and a few pairs of new clothes. John's finally caught up on the last few pages of my journal and says that he's incredibly proud of me, even going so far as to give me a hug when I woke up this morning.

It's nice—to be hugged by someone who means it. It makes me wonder whether or not Josh ever meant it.

I probably shouldn't be thinking about that. It'll only upset me if I get myself too far into it and try to figure out what exactly I'm feeling.

I guess I'll stop here.

–Day 57–

I'm not sure what to say.

I woke up this morning without a whole lot on my mind. I got up, took a shower, brushed my teeth and walked into the kitchen expecting things to be normal, but when John looked at me with a huge grin on his face, I immediately knew something was up.

The first few words out of his mouth?

“Someone wants to publish your journal.”

I was floored instantly. Shock was the first emotion to take me over. Then anxiety quickly replaced it.

What? I'd asked, hardly able to believe what John had said.

“I have a friend in the publishing industry,” John had said, passing a paper across the table to show me. “I've been transcribing your journal so there'll be more than one copy. I erased your name and showed it to him. He wants it.”

Wants it?

“For the world to see, Dakota. For the world to see.”

John said that I don't have to use my real name in the journal. I'm not sure about that though. I guess that'll be something I have to decide within the next few days. I could easily say no, that I don't want anyone to know about what's happened to me, especially not my dad, but if what John said is true—that I don't *really* have to use my real name—then I guess that means it doesn't matter, right?

This is making me nervous.

I should stop before I keep going.

–Day 58–

It's two more days until the new year and I don't have much to say. I obviously still have stuff on my mind, considering what all John has propositioned, but I haven't really thought about it concretely. Publishing the journal is one of those fleeting thoughts that never really stay in my head for more than a few minutes at a time. I'm trying to think about this rationally. On one hand, someone may read it and get nothing out of it. They might even throw it away, thinking it's complete fantasy. I mean, what kind of stranger would just let a homeless kid into their house and leave them there and expect them to not steal anything? Then again though, some might see it as what it really is—the truth: the pure, God-honest truth about a man who took a homeless kid in and nurtured him back to health.

If it's under an alias, will it help people? I'll never have to give an interview, I'll never have to have my picture taken. Hell, I won't even have to ever admit to writing the journal.

I still feel a bit weird about John sharing my personal journal with someone, but if he really did wipe my name from it, like he said, it's not like anyone's silently judging me from afar, right?

“It won't be edited,” John had said. “Just checked for spelling and that sort of thing.”

I guess this is something I should consider.

I'll stop here.

–Day 59–

I have my cell phone in my pocket, charged and filled with minutes, and my backpack packed with clothes. John's at work and it's slowly ticking down to the new year. I'm taking the last few minutes of my time here at John's house to say goodbye and to tell John that I'm not abandoning him, just going back to something that I think might be right.

John: You are the most important thing that's ever happened to me, and the most important person that has ever been in my life. *You* are the one who saved me when I was hurt, nurtured me when I was sick, brought me back to health and made me feel as though I was more than human—a God, someone to be touched, admired and made human just like the right of everyone else. I hate to leave you like this, but last night, while I was lying awake in bed, I realized something that I should have known all along.

A few weeks ago, you asked me if I was in love with Josh.

I am.

I'm leaving you this journal with my blessing and permission for you to have it published. I realized that if someone like you can help me recover like this, maybe someone will someday read this and realize that people really *can* heal, that people *really* can be who they want to be and *can* recover from a lifetime of hardship and trial.

I just wanted to make sure that you knew everything was all right.

I have two-thousand dollars in my wallet. My number's written on a piece of paper that's hanging on the fridge. Call me when you get home—I'll probably be on the road by then, in some guy's truck heading back to Florida. I'm not doing the prostitute gig anymore. You've made me realize that I'm above all those things.

Thank you for being my friend, John, and thank you for helping me realize that someone like me is really worth more than dirt.

Thank you.

You mean the world to me, John.

I'll never leave you behind.

–ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS–

There isn't a whole lot to say about this book. *The Diary of Dakota Hammell* came about not only from an idea, but a need to try and at least supplement myself through the fans of my work. For that, a huge amount of gratitude and thanks goes out to Kirsche, who thought it good and purposeful enough to donate to a project. Thank you, Kirsche—you bought me groceries for two weeks. There's little I can say for that, but it meant (and still means) a lot to me.

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With that, I hope you enjoyed the book. Though I can't say whether or not Dakota had a happy ending, as the story ended here with this journal, I can only hope that he did, does and will.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born and raised in Southeastern Idaho, Kody Boye began his writing career with the publication of his story [A] Prom Queen's Revenge at the age of fourteen. Published nearly three-dozen times before going independent at eighteen, Boye has authored numerous works—including the short story collection Amorous Things, the novella The Diary of Dakota Hammell, the zombie novel Sunrise and the epic fantasy series The Brotherhood Saga.

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