

WELL SHIT



HANNAH MACDONALD

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To Mom, Dad, Bradley, and Bryan.
For unconditional love.
Because thank you could never be enough.
This is for you.

Character Map

Hannah —> This is ME! Thank you for reading my book, and I am so excited to share a little bit of my story with you!

Alyssa —> My childhood best friend. We grew up and grew apart, now living in different countries and involved in different worlds, but she remains my lifelong pen pal.

Mom —> She is the real OG bestie. I can't be more thankful for my relationship with her!

Dad —> Ride or die? That's my dad. He is my boss, my landlord, and my security.

Hannah —> This is my best Friend! YES, we are both named Hannah. Or better known as "Hannah Squared," which is a nickname we adopted in high school.

Bradley —> He is my oldest brother, by seven minutes, and he never let his twin live it down.

Bryan —> The middle child, and he held true to the title. Mitigating each conversation and always happy to go with the flow, he was a born middle.

Laura —> From my next-door neighbor at the age of three to the sister I look up to today, Laura is a friend who turned to family.

Meagan —> Starting as a roommate and ending as a lifelong friend, Meagan made my move to Florida not only possible but also pleasurable!

Grayson —> The boy that changed my life. Believe me when I say this is NOT a romance novel. However, if I did not include his part in the story, it would all be a lie.

Candice —> Scary older next-door neighbor from my childhood.

Nana —> A woman I wish I grew to know much more than time allowed.

Georgina —> A situationship at its finest, a childhood neighbor.

Blondie 1, 2, and 3 —> Camp instructors I worked with at Muskoka Woods.

Noah —> A next-door neighbor and a high school friend. Not the “boy next door” but a boy next door.

Ms. Lemans —> English teacher from high school.

Fabio —> A camper from across the world who had come to live at Muskoka Woods all summer long.

Steve Block —> A man who haunted my dreams. Or lack thereof, yet still helped connect me to people who changed my life forever.

Matt and Jamie —> American missionaries who took me in from across the world.

Martha —> Someone who taught me a lesson in a way I never would have wanted to learn it.

Charlie —> The fluffy pup who cures all cries with kisses.

Dan —> Someone who offered me resources that changed my life forever.

Jaden —> Someone who helped me see a decision I desperately wanted to make clear as day.

Guenther —> My favorite “friend’s boyfriend.” Thank goodness for double dating.

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The End



“The beginning of the end.”

I had struggled with that sentiment for a long time, because what did it really mean?

“The beginning of the end,” I repeated back to myself. What that simple sentence meant to me, I was yet to learn in those moments. The beginning of the end signified when the final stage of something was starting. The final act of a play. The final cocoon of a species. The final year of a life.

It was the first time I ever competed in a World Wake Association Competition, otherwise referred to as “Worlds.” After spending a year living in Florida and graduating university a few days ago, I was finalizing my journey with the event of a lifetime, or so I thought.

Competing in Worlds was not normally super accessible for your Average Joe. That was what I would at least consider myself. A small-town girl from Ontario. Someone who loves to drink juice from the carton, build sandcastles at the beach, and watch *Friends* on repeat.

However, in the midst of COVID, there was not a lot of travel going on, so the guidelines to sign up for the competition were a little looser to encourage more local riders to participate. I was highly excited to finalize my time in Florida with a crazy competition. Go big or go home; that’s what I thought, anyways.

I packed up my room, and my parents joined me in Florida to drive the U-Haul home and see the competition. We filled the U-Haul to the brim and headed down the highway toward Valdosta, Georgia.

In the car, I nearly burst into tears. A life I had worked so hard to get to was being taken away from me. COVID robbed me of my youth. I had only been living in Florida for a year at that point, and I didn't want to abandon my friends, my passion, and my plans for the future. The shortest and longest year of my life. Mom and Dad were in the truck in front of me, so I let the waterworks begin.

Time flew by as I tried to absorb as much of the sun and the heat as possible. With windows down and music blasting, I held tight to the only thing I had left: Worlds.

I didn't expect to win, let alone place even. My only goal was to have a stand-up run and not come in last. Having a "stand-up run" meant not falling into the water and dropping your handle at any point during the competition. Why was that my goal, you may ask? Because I desperately wanted to try a double flip on the last lap.

I was never going to be the best at wakeboarding. I did not start when I was a little kid otherwise known as a grom. My precision in the sport was—minimal. I almost always shut my eyes while I was flipping, and my aerial awareness sucked, if I was being brutally honest. Which I always was. I really was my own worst critic. BUT I could be the girl who tried a double flip, and the shock factor in that alone was more than enough for me.

I had tried it a few times prior and had actually gotten pretty close. About 1.8 of the two flips. I would land on my low back and hard heels but never with my feet underneath. If there was a time to

try, it was there. That day. On my very last set! Doing the double flip was not nearly as hard as I had assumed it would be. Not landing, but the actual rotation, the actual act of the double flip—it was all a mind game.

Doing that invert in the contest was similar to my university and professional working experience. I had the same gut-wrenching feeling before doing the double flip I felt right before graduation, and my first move to Florida, and my second move to Florida. The same butterflies came back time and time again as those massive life events came hurtling toward me. To do a double flip, you need to get into a mindset of “do it all” or “don’t do it at all.”

After you start, there is no going back. The momentum you push forward will have the effect of two flips, so wimping out will only be more painful.

Perfection is overrated, and if you actually land it, no one would care if it was perfect or not.

It will be intimidating the first and second and fourteenth time you try something. Just take a deep breath and remember your “why.” Landing a trick on the first try isn’t doable; that is a ridiculous expectation. It’s trying again that matters most.

After checking into the competition, I met up with a few other riders and we were sitting on the dock watching people start their runs. The wind was blowing aggressively, and the temperature continually dropped as the afternoon dragged on. The Florida humidity was long gone, and my heart sank. My stomach was churning inside itself. I had hardly eaten all day, so how could it hurt that much? Why did it feel like I needed to vomit out air?

Finally, late in the afternoon, my turn came up. As I headed down to the dock with the other amateur female competitors, my blood was pumping. I popped my headphones in my ears and stretched. No one else liked competing with headphones, but I couldn't do it without them. They drowned out the crowd and helped me forget about the judges. I just focused on riding. Sometimes, I nearly forgot I was actually competing. That was ideal because my competition performance seemed to decrease by at least 50 percent.

Performance anxiety, I suppose.

Wakeboarding at a cable park was a bit like wakeboarding at a skatepark. It was a full lake with massive jumps and rails in it, then a pulley system pulled you around in a circle, allowing you to hit each of the jumps and rails in the water. I had seen a few smaller versions in Ontario but nothing like what they have in the South.

As I was hitting rails and doing flips off jumps, I thought, *Don't look at the crowd of people, Hannah. They are only going to freak you out. Ok, there it is. The kicker (aka jump) I am going to do the double flip off of. Ok, it is time.*

I walked myself through each step and then picked the point I would begin to cut into the kicker. Pulling the handle close to me. I saw the kicker's massive white front coming at me crazy fast.

Not unlike the career path that unfolded in front of me a few years later. Life comes fast. Relationships. Friendships. Business ventures. Speaking engagements—it all came crazy fast.

Approaching the kicker, I popped off the top of it and thrust my head forward, beginning a double toe front roll. No females had ever

landed that, including me. I rotated a time and a half and came down on my head, crashing into the water.

A stand-up run, resulting in a double flip. I popped my head out of the water and wiped my eyes, seeing another girl who had also fallen on her last kicker. But she was punching the air with a massive smile on her face, and she screamed back at me with claps and hoorays.

I came in second to last place that day and could not have been happier! One of the first things I loved so much about the sport, and probably the only reason I got so involved in it to begin with, was the people. The community in the sport was insanely tight, and the care and commitment given on a consistent basis was beyond impressive for competitors who were always up against one another.

That was the first of two Worlds I competed in. It was the beginning of the final year I spent chasing wakeboarding, and I am very thankful for my continual desire to be in Florida. It brought me closer to my future.

Following my Worlds, I had given my word to stay in Ontario for two years. It lasted about nine months before I desperately begged my father, and boss at the time, to prove I could work from home. That little experiment was the explosion with a rippling effect that lasted for years to follow.

Fast forward in time, my whole family lives in Florida. I have opened up an employment agency. I became a public speaker discussing the best practices of hiring Generation Z. At twenty-three, I have a great sense of stability and everything I had once hoped to have.

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All of this success and security is great, too, but if I had to give it up to keep the friends and family who exist in my life, I would drop it in a second.

From riding on the back of a motorcycle with fireworks in the distance.

To dancing in the rain with a cheering crowd.

From hearing gunshots in the middle of the night in Haiti.

To moving to a different country alone at nineteen to meet all new people.

I would give everything up to keep those memories with those people.

For so long, I put my identity in the things I was involved with. My day-by-day. I thought my identity was wakeboarding, school, and Florida.

However, after some time had passed, far too many self-development books later and journals filled to the brim with thoughts and emotions, I finally found peace in myself. In who I am. In the people I loved and the memories I had.

I hope you can find some peace within yourself as well. Either through my stories or your own.

Drenched in Sparkles



Snow Valley Ski Resort, home to the town of Barrie, and a massive part of my memories in Ontario. I learned to ski there as a child and to snowboard as a young adult. I worked there as a teenager and have taken many hikes over the hills with many dogs I have called my babies.

One winter, when I was six years old, my father and I were getting ready for a daddy-daughter ski date. We were going to meet my cousin Alyssa and her dad, my uncle Todd. They lived really far away, but I loved Alyssa and was so excited to see her.

Looking over the railing of my childhood home, I could see my winter suit out in the foyer and ready for me to climb into. My mom had set my snow pants, winter coat, gloves, boots, and hat all at the bottom of the stairs. The assortment resembled the outline of a body. Rather than leaving me to my fruition or throwing all the clothing in a pile, Mom had carefully placed each article of clothing in a methodical rhythm that showed me exactly how to put it on and where it all went.

Perhaps that was a twin trick from my older brothers she picked up while trying to dress two wiggling toddlers at the same time, or perhaps it was just instinct, but I loved the way she always tried to help me get ready yet still allowed me to do it myself.

I slowly put each of my legs through the holes of the snow pants. Left first and then the right, careful not to topple over. With two pairs of leggings, an undershirt, and a sweater, along with three layers of socks, I grabbed the straps and hauled them over my

shoulders. The weight built. I put my left arm through the right hole of the coat and wiggled around, flustered.

After a few more seconds, I readjusted the jacket. The masterpiece was nearly complete with the jacket zipped to my nose, mittens crammed on my little fingers, and the only tight-fitting toque that fit under my helmet. The only thing left to do was pull on the ski boots.

If you have never had the pleasure of putting a pair of ski boots on, it sucks, but it's worth it. If you have never had the pleasure of putting ski boots on a 6-year-old child, count yourself the luckiest person alive. After readjusting the kerfuffled layers of socks on my feet, I jammed my foot as far into the stiff boot. My toes squished up against the edge, and with the extra inch of fabric, my feet were squashed from every angle. Then we had to tighten it. When you get your foot into the death trap, you strap the metal cranks across the boot and yank them back until they snap shut five or six times later.

Congratulations! You have now won the inability to walk functionally. For that reason, we wore normal boots or shoes in the car and changed at the bottom of the hill. Arriving at the hill later in the evening, we got assigned to the far back of the parking lot. After the war of fighting the ski boots, we successfully got them on and made our way to the base of the hill.

We all had seasonal passes, so we went right to the ski lift where Alyssa and Uncle Todd had already been standing. I had spent a little bit of time skiing that season already, and for the most part, I had no issues learning. Sure, I still used pizza to stop, but I enjoyed going faster than the year before and beating people to the bottom

rather than meeting them there. It was fun, and that was my first time skiing with a friend!

I hugged Alyssa, our helmets clanging against one another as we giggled and said hello.

“I missed you!” I said.

“I missed you too!” she replied.

As we stood in line, my toes and fingers were already beginning to get cold. The frigid air was seeping through layers of protection and chilled the inside of my snowsuit. *It's ok, we will get moving soon and you will heat up*, I thought.

Our turn approached, and we shuffled toward the gate of the ski lift. At the front of the line, we stood before the gate holding us back. The lift gates always reminded me of a bull's pen. Separating each rider from one another allowed for the right amount of space and weight. Then the lever would release, allowing me to move forward, same as when a bull got released from its pen.

The magic carpet pushed us forward into place, and the chair lift swung around the corner. The lifty pulled with all his weight to lower it so that Alyssa and I could hop up onto the seats. With Dad and Uncle Todd on either side of Alyssa and me, we ascended the hill, snow dusting our faces with natural sparkles. We chatted about nothing, our days, and how we had been doing. When we reached the top of the hill, Dad raised the handlebar so that we could prepare to get off.

Leaning as far back as I could and clutching the seat, I was terrified to fall between that point and when we got to the very top. With my feet dangling only a few feet above the ground, I inched

closer to the edge and prepared to hop off. My feet hit the ground, and then I pushed off the seat and stood up, propelling myself forward. I was charging toward another skier, so I shifted my weight back to stop. But my ski slid out from underneath me, and I ended up sliding a few feet further forward on my back.

Ouchhh.

I picked myself back up and prepared to go down the hill. On the top of Family Hill, Alyssa had no hesitation as she shot over the top and dodged skiers left and right. Dang, could she ski or what?

Feeling less than adequate, I shuffled to the edge and began on a trip down the slope. I snowplowed my way past a few people sitting and strapping their snowboards on just at the top of the steepest part and secured an open pathway. My skis were parallel as I slid past a few more snowboarders and gained speed.

I weaved in and out of the surrounding people, feeling like I was flying past everyone, and then I lost control and fell directly on my face. The hill was beating me! I deflated. Why was I falling so much? Why did I suck? Why could I not keep up with Alyssa?

With my desire to continue decreasing, I faked a smile and tried to stand up. Dad arrived to check in and see that I was all right. He dusted some of the snow piled up on my jacket sleeves and said,

“If you don’t fall down, you are not trying hard enough.”

That was a quote I had heard a few times before. I had never particularly liked learning. I liked to do things I was good at, but if I was not naturally good at something, I often found it hard to invest interest or time into it. Discouragement came easily, and I became frustrated far too fast.

Nodding to him and to myself, I was determined to believe him to be true. I repeated it time after time internally. As it sunk into my brain, I understood the statement more. “If you don’t fall down, you aren’t trying hard enough.”

Everyone talks about how important and valuable the process of learning is. Yet, when things don’t work out as quickly or easily as we might have hoped or dreamed, we give up. Falling down does not mean it is time to give up. It means you are learning something, and that should be hard. It means you are progressing and putting yourself in a vulnerable position for self-improvement. It means it is time to stand back up and try again so you do not always fall. Oftentimes, the very best things are worth working hard for.

Looking up at him, I sighed, with shaky legs below me. But he was right. I had to get back up. I needed to keep trying. While I wouldn’t be able to keep up with Alyssa, I could keep up with my brothers one day. I just had to get back up. In those days, I had a little mantra. “Anything you can do, I can do better. Anything you can do, I can do too,” I would sing to my brother.

They would yell back, “No, you can’t,” and I rebutted with a good, harsh “Yes I can!”

Then it began.

My Monkey



Confident.

C-O-N-F-I-D-E-N-T, she's confident.

Please meet Laura, one of my lifelong friends. Laura is one of the most confident people I have ever met. I have looked up to her since I was two, for she is the essence of confidence in my eyes.

If you were to search the song lyrics of “Confident” by Demi Lovato, you would realize this song emulates everything Laura has been from the beginning.

One might think her drop-dead beauty, massive boobs, bright blue eyes, and bleach-blonde hair would be the source of her confidence, but I am here to guarantee she has been confident from day one, with the black box dye job and bright pink choker.

Laura was my brothers' age, so four years older, and basically the coolest person ever in my eyes because she had all the things my parents would never let me have: colored hair, extra piercings, and Bratz dolls. And we could watch extra TV shows at her house that we couldn't at mine. It felt like she was out of my league. As our next-door neighbor, she took a liking to my annoying younger self for some reason.

Despite the age gap, she never spoke down to me. Occasionally, over the years, she would put me in my place or tell me to grow up, in the best way a sister should. But diminishing me, never.

A moment that burns bright in my brain takes us back to the summer of 2005. I was six years old, and Laura would have been ten. Digging around in my dress-up chest strapped with gold lining in the basement, we pulled out the two coolest items from deep within. Sitting on top of the deep green chest was all the light stuff: Disney princess dresses, Halloween costumes, and those beautiful silky skirts my mom had found at Goodwill. But at the very bottom, where the heavier objects tended to fall, were my dad's old and very dead cell phones. Nearly paperweights at that point. With our newfound hefty flip phone and version one BlackBerry, we pretended to be little adults. The make-believe empowered us.

We were beyond excited to show off those bad boys! Show them off? Weren't they just paperweights? Yes. But it is all in the illusion.

When I turned off the lights behind me, my heart skipped a beat, and I ran to the edge of the stairs. I grabbed the railing to hoist myself after Laura.

Cliché or not, the basement of your childhood home was always terrifying in the dark. After getting my childhood dog, Radar, the spiciest Mini Schnauzer you'd ever meet, ready for a walk, we opened up the screen door of the house and began our walk around the block.

On the sidewalk, we passed my beige-bricked home. I was wearing my favorite outfit at the time, which was cheetah-print shorts and a brown tank top with straps more than three fingers wide so that I could still wear it to school without breaking the dress code. That was a big deal at my ultra-conservative Christian school.

Quickly after we started walking up the hill, I was already winded. Radar stepped off the path, itching toward the edge of a

farmer's field. I tried to yank him back and keep him on the sidewalk. Defying my will, he folded in half and pooped. He arched his back like a rainbow, although there was certainly no pot of gold at the other end.

Grossed out that I had to bend down and pick up the poop, I looked over at Laura with the hopes her big sisterly love would kick in and she would offer to do it for me. Her love did kick in but not in the way I had initially hoped.

“Just pretend it's like hot fudge. Just heated up and coming out of the oven. And YOU get to pick it up! How lucky.”

She affirmed my fear without even making me ask. *Yuck, I have to pick up the poop*, I thought. I bent over, coughed, and gagged as if picking up dog poop was the worst thing imaginable. After I tied off the bag, we continued on the mission up the hill to her house. My stomach turned, and I blamed the smell of his poop hanging in the bag.

Then we ran into our next obstacle. Candice. My stomach dropped and flutters rose to my throat. She was always outside with her brothers. They had a mini ramp right outside the garage and tons of bikes or skateboards they would ride around on. Candice was not nearly as nice as Laura was. She never played with me and would swear at us when we were around, and every once in a while, she would chase me if we were both out riding our bikes, then proceed to laugh and yell at me.

The butterflies tattooed across my stomach came to life, once again dancing and fluttering across my skin. With the muscles pulling inside my stomach, I took a deep breath. I was with Laura, and that meant nothing bad could happen.

We got closer to Candice's house and puffed our chests up. Ready for the twenty-foot battlefield in front of us, we crossed their line of vision and raised our phones to our ears, beginning to speak.

"My monkey is turning two this weekend!" I said in an enthusiastic, high-pitched voice.

"Wow, my monkey is turning four next weekend. That's crazy!" Laura chirped right back at me.

"I'll come to your monkey's birthday party if you come to my monkey's birthday party!"

She agreed, and we giggled with pride in ourselves, thinking that we had just left the coolest impression.

Not only did the phones not work but also were we walking directly next to each other, with no reason to call each other. I'm sure we were delusional about the fact that the adults did not know we were just playing. Regardless of whether it was a game, the surge of comfort in my own skin that came after that was very real.

The battle was won. We continued to walk forward, occasionally putting on a show for people pulling in from long days of work or with a trunk full of groceries. We chitchatted about Oliver and Scout, our two baby monkeys, their hobbies, birthday gifts, and anything else our creative little brains could muster up.

People probably thought that we were just these little girls walking a dog and playing make-believe, but those moments were so much more than that. It was there that Laura taught me how to walk with my head held high, how to face people and situations that made me uncomfortable head-on. She taught me to think outside the box with ammunition and never to cross the road but continue

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forward both figuratively and metaphorically. It transfers over to everyday life. If you avoid everything you fear, you will struggle to progress forward.

Don't cross the road and avoid something because it is scary or unideal. Continue forward without hesitation. Do this on the street. Do this in life. Face problems head-on and always be confident.

Hammy Halloween



As a kid, I attended a grand total of three elementary schools. Timothy Christian School, homeschooling in my kitchen, and Emma King Elementary School. Timothy Christian School, also known as TCS, was a small private school. It was . . . fine.

Following fourth grade at TCS, my nana got sick with ALS, and Mom volunteered to travel to her house regularly. It was about a four-hour drive, so we would go at least once a week and I would bring school with me. The following year, she passed, and I went back to school but in the public system.

From sixth to eighth grade, I went to Emma King. It was a cute public school a few neighborhoods away from my house. Mom would drop me off every morning, and I would walk home every afternoon. The school itself was pretty idealistic. It was two floors and had a few playgrounds outside equipped with swings, slides, and a seesaw. The big orange building was two floors, with a big green field in the back and a playground to the side. While it was cute, public school was scary!

I remember being terrified on the first day of sixth grade. What would they think of me? Being the new girl could suck. I was petrified of meeting a big class or getting lost in a two-story building. It all seemed so scary, and I didn't know how to act or what to do.

When the bell rang, a student volunteer chauffeured me and other new kids to class. Standing towards the back of the line, I stood parallel with all my classmates. I froze, as if I could not possibly continue on.

Eventually, as the days passed on, I grew more comfortable being back at school. It was an adjustment, though, from homeschooling to public school. When I was homeschooled, I worked fast and finished class every day at two p.m. I would do classes early or late and take time to go shopping or to lunch with my mom. We just kinda did whatever we wanted to as long as I got the work done. Back in public school, I was stuck from nine to three every day, but at the same time, I was grateful because I missed the student interaction.

It's funny, when you grow up with a class and naturally form around them, it feels very organic to be yourself with the group. When you are dropped into a class dynamic that is already formed, however, it is incredibly intimidating and much harder to find your footing. At least that was my personal experience. In order to be someone they liked and wanted to hang out with, I would have strayed from being genuinely myself, laughing at things that were not funny or not laughing when it was, in fact, hilarious.

One of the first friends I made lived a few doors down from me, Georgina. We connected by walking home together every day and quickly united. That was one of the first situationships I was in. A friendship based on proximity.

On the night of Halloween, I had invited Georgina over to go trick-or-treating because she was my next-door neighbor and the same age. It worked perfectly.

I dressed up as Little Red Riding Hood. I had a fully black outfit with black gloves and a black coat to keep me warm on the cold October night. My large red cape had a hood that fit over an

additional red hat underneath it. Unlike most of my friends, who were beginning to look sexy for Halloween, I wanted to be warm.

Sure, the Little Red Riding Hood choice was already a little more grown up than my Cookie Monster choice three years running. But what was so wrong with that, right? A little change never hurt anyone.

Cuter, yes. However, I refused to be cold. I knew I would live in a hotter place one day because, dang, if the doomsday winter season was not a buzzkill to my whole being.

Every year, before going trick-or-treating, Mom made us sit down and have a healthy meal. That night, she made a big ham dinner. There was corn, mashed potatoes, and warm buns. We were all anxious to be done with dinner, but apparently, some more than others.

Conversation was casually flowing along at the table. Bryan was talking about gym class and his teacher hitting him with a dodgeball. Georgina bragged about how much candy she would have for lunch the next day. Mom was talking about all the cute little trick-or-treaters who had started to sparingly stop at the door.

I peered to my right, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw Bradley folding his piece of ham in half, and in half again, then again.

“Oh no,” I said quietly, understanding the embarrassment to follow. I thought, *Maybe, just maybe, he will realize it is not the time or the place with company at the table.* Looking at him with deadly eyes, I wished and prayed he caught a glimpse and cut it out.

We locked eyes. Widening my eyes as far as they could go, I glanced at his meat, then down at his plate. I tilted my head, cocked a brow, and slowly shook my head.

The clumsy pile of stacked meat was trying not to collapse. He made no movements, as if he were contemplating whether it would be a bad decision to move forward.

Then Bradley reached down with both hands to stabilize it, raised it to his mouth, and shoved the whole thing in.

You know when you can say someone popped something into their mouth? That was not the time. He looked a lot like a python eating a pig from Animal Planet. You would have no rational reason to believe its mouth could hinge open to that magnitude, yet there we were. And there it was. Open just as wide as the snake's.

Halloween was scary and all, but that night, I was going to have a nightmare about the snake, not anything we would later see on the street walking around. Halloween was so much more about getting to know your neighbors—good childhood fun!

As everyone turned to watch him, the corner of his mouth curled up, and drool poured out of his too-full mouth.

I dropped my head into my hands and wanted to hide from Georgina's face. What would she think of my crazy older brother? Would she not want to hang out with me because they were weird?

"Bradley Edward MacDonald, I swear," Mom said as he chuckled. There was nothing left to do but laugh.

Hoping so desperately Mom would give him heck for embarrassing us like that, I rose my head to see Bryan pursing his lips together and growing red in the face. Then it began. Like a wave

crashing over us, Bryan burst out in laughter to join Bradley. Mom lost her straight face and laughed with them.

Bradley laughed at himself because he was being funny. Bryan laughed because his brother was hilarious, and Mom laughed because her sons were goofballs. Why would I be surprised by that outcome? What I was surprised by, however, was Georgina's reaction.

I had been trying to avoid her gaze that whole time. But Georgina was giggling along with them all!

From as far back as I could remember, Bradley had always been nothing but himself. He enjoyed a movie you didn't like? He did not care. His hair was always crazy curly and long. His humor was always of an acquired taste, not for every crowd. Bradley had always been and will always be nothing less than Bradley!

Then I became horrified. Not at Bradley, but at myself. Had Georgina not been in the room, I might have been the first to crack a smile. I had been so worried about creating a perfect image that these new "cool" girls could buy into, I had lost track of finding the value that truly lay within myself. I tucked my emotions away and tried desperately to fit in with the reaction expected of me. To acclimate to their way of living and blend in with the crowd.

At the beginning, I could not believe he was being so ridiculous in front of my new friend. By the end, I could not believe how ridiculous I was to give up my own identity so easily.

Bradley had taught me that lesson before and continued to prove it time and time again. There we were, all laughing around the table, trying to keep our food down. After we finished, Georgina and

I walked along the neighborhood asking the most popular question to date:

“Trick or treat!”

Later that night, after we had gotten home, I asked Bradley why he shoved the food in his mouth like that.

“Because it is funny,” he said, looking at me with a “duh” expression plastered across his face.

I needed to soften him up and get some real answers. He and Bryan were a little older and out of the trick-or-treating stage, so I brought a few treats from my goodie bag down the hall.

“Here,” I said, passing a couple boxes of Nerds and some of his favorite sour gummies, for I knew very well I would not be eating either of those. They would have rotted at the bottom of my pillowcase in the corner of my closet until at least Christmas.

“I like to be the class clown,” he added as he picked up a box of Nerds on the table in front of him.

“Right, but why?” I rebutted.

“Because it makes me feel good, I guess. It is a part of who I am. I like to make people laugh.”

“Right, but aren’t you worried that some people won’t like that and will think you are weird?”

“I mean, I suppose there is always that risk. But there is that risk in life anywhere you go. Not everyone is going to like you, and that is ok. The ones who do, and the ways you find to love them, are what matter most.”

“But how do you know?” I pled.

“Look, Hannah,” he said, clearly becoming exhausted by my questions. “I just know, okay? Take it from your older, wiser brother. What other people think, how many friends you have on Facebook, or if you make the leadership team at your school, it does not matter if you are not comfortable and happy with who you are each day. Don’t question it. Now, get out.”

I backed out of his bedroom, decorated with Toronto hockey gear, wondering if I would be as smart by the time I was in high school as he was. I looked back at him and ask one more question begging to be released.

“Do you even like hockey?”

“No,” he replied, “but Mom likes decorating, and I like being supportive. That means a whole lot more.”

At that moment, I felt almost embarrassed for myself. That I had cared so much about another person’s opinion of me and sought validation through their eyes. How could I have been so self-centered I did not see the beauty of Bradley was right in front of me? Fully acting like himself, not conforming to someone else’s opinion or desires.

Status comes and goes. There is something called the five minutes of fame for a reason. But when the lights turned off, when the people around me stopped watching, when it was just me, was I happy with who I was? That was what truly mattered.

Optionable Othello



High school was such a strange period. Prepubescent teenagers shoved into a cage for six hours a day each day for the majority of their young lives. Around tenth grade, I started opting out of homework assignments from teachers or professors. Perhaps not a great habit to pick up in high school. A year after I started working, I got involved with sports activities and expanded my group of friends. My time was becoming more valuable to me than the information I would learn from said assignment.

I loved learning throughout the duration of my formal education, and I continue to even more now that I am out of the system. However, at that time, I was finding a lot of value in learning outside of education and my school's four walls. I was learning what the meaning of hard work was at a job I took at Snow Valley, our local ski resort. Through soccer and rugby, I was learning what it meant to be a part of a team and to work in unison with others toward a final goal. I learned time was valuable and must be protected at all costs.

So, my education took a back seat. However, I took a fairly strategic approach to getting higher grades. At my high school, we had four classes a semester and eight classes a year. With an economics class desperately begging for my attention and a marketing class I loved working on, English was the easiest option to neglect.

Unwilling to let my grades take the hit, I had to make a plan. How would I continue to earn the in-class credits and score well on

the tests if I did not read the materials? I would do what anyone else would—fake it till I make it.

I was in eleventh-grade English class, sitting toward the back with my friend Noah. He had moved from Chicago and into a house two doors down from my own the year prior. He kept to himself, but as a fellow American and next-door neighbor, I took it upon myself to make him my friend. Every few days, I would show up at his front door in a surprise attack, awaiting his company for a walk around the block with one of my childhood dogs, Bella. I don't recall offering much of a choice most days—sometimes he would moan in frustration, saying, "Let's just stay and watch TV and not go outside." But it was good for all of us, and he always agreed in the end. His mom loved it, always encouraging him to get out even if for a few minutes.

We were supposed to have read a few chapters from the play *Othello* by William Shakespeare. Having been in that teacher's class for a few months, I understood what she liked and did not like in class discussions. While she always encouraged banter between students on concepts discussed in books, she appreciated standalone thoughts that revolved around the symbolism of the novel even more. She would nod her head and make direct eye contact with students who discussed symbolism, often writing their answers on the board. She did not replicate with others who discussed overviews or recaps. I knew my audience and what she wanted to hear. Piece of cake.

Therefore, I opened the book to the act we were working on. I had read over a SparkNotes entry for the play and felt concrete in my ability to pretend I had read the assigned work. I followed along with the section of the play being read off by the student before me,

then I skipped past a few chapters and scanned for the words love, bond, and marriage. I had already looked up that act moments before cell phones were put away, and I recalled what I read in my head in those earlier moments,

“For Othello, the handkerchief symbolizes their marriage bond, love, and Desdemona’s purity. Later on, though, it becomes a symbol of infidelity and cuckoldry. For Iago, it is a symbol of the power and control he has over Desdemona and Othello. For Desdemona, it is a symbol of Othello’s love.”

It was straight from the Google search engine, and I had little time to question it.

Love, bond, and marriage. Purity and Othello’s devotion to Desdemona. *I can work with that.* I found a line that described that love and devotion and put my hand up, smiling as I looked up. I was eventually called upon.

“While going through the reading for yesterday’s assignment, I was really struck by the devotion that Othello is not only beginning to show but also seems to be growing through the chapter,” I said, then read off the quote.

“She loved me for the dangers I had passed,

And I loved her that she did pity them. ”

I continued, “Despite the ongoings of the chapter, Desdemona seems to have such a passionate and pure love for him. The way she talks about him does still come across as a lovesick child looking for puppy love. I am excited to see how it continues to develop through the upcoming chapters and if it stays pure at its core or if, like in

many Shakespeare plays, it will ultimately dissolve over the next few acts.”

Ms. Lemans nodded, and she turned to write a portion of my answer in white chalk on the large blackboard. White dust danced as it fell onto the ledge, and I smiled knowing my participation grade would continue on unharmed.

Noah’s mouth was hanging wide open. Probably because that morning on the bus, we had discussed our inability to read the chapter last night and commemorated our annoyance with the reading assignment.

“How . . . but . . . you . . . how?”

“You don’t have to know everything, Noah, just enough to get by sometimes.”

Shrugging his bewildered face-off, I leaned back and continued to listen as the remaining students filled the room with specific points, quotes, and names I had yet to hear or learn about. That was my opportunity to read the book, by hearing what my fellow student had learned the night prior while I was fast asleep.

Perfect is unattainable 100 percent of the time. If we always work on getting things to always be picture perfect, we will be paralyzed by impending doom that never gets moved through the finish line. I needed to stop striving for perfection. Rather than helping me reach my goals, it only pushed it farther away and made it less attainable. For that reason, I began to think outside the box and leave perfection to the wayside.

Love You More



In the summer of 2016, Hannah and I worked at Muskoka Woods, the most ridiculously decked-out camp. In fact, it was called a “resort for kids” because parents paid so much money that we could not call them campers. It was nuts.

Hannah and I had been best friends since the tenth grade. We met in a math class, sitting side by side, confused over the cos sign and $y=mx+b$. The first time we hung out, I had invited her to my cottage with desperate hopes she would help me entertain my little cousins for a week while we tanned and got to know one another. She agreed with no hesitation. Her mom, on the other hand, had lots of questions about these strangers she was spending a week with.

Flash forward a few years, and we are back in Muskoka together for the entire summer! It was a crazy camp. The water slide was six lanes wide. Called “The Kraken,” it had intertwining lanes that raced to the bottom yards away. A full ropes course was included, along with a massive inflatable water park with more than thirty obstacles. There were competitive trampolines, ten brand-new Nautique wake boats each season . . . You name it! At seventeen years old, I thought Muskoka Woods was the coolest spot to be all summer long.

Staff housing was separate for boys and girls. Boys were all at the top of the hill, tucked away from everything and hidden from all, and girls were at the bottom of the hill and right next to the exit, clearly trusted more. There were about ten trailer units with bunks

and shelving units in them, fit for six to twelve girls each. The bathroom trailer had fifteen stalls in the middle.

While it was a unique experience, the best part was that Hannah was there the whole time. We worked the same hours, lived together, would take our days off with one another. “Hannah Squared” was nearly impossible to separate, and it was an amazing way to spend our last summer together before high school ended.

Everyone said friends drift apart after high school, and I was desperately trying to keep myself from feeling those flutters in my stomach each time I remembered Hannah would be leaving for college the next year.

That entire summer, we would say to one another.

“No matter what.”

“No matter where.”

We had talked about it, how the distance between us should not really impact anything. That we would remain close despite the challenge. But I knew in my heart things could not remain the same. Love might be boundless, but change was inevitable.

One morning, I woke up and got changed. It felt like any other day as I headed down to the water. I was a kayak instructor, so my days were pretty relaxed for the most part. On the first day, I would teach them all how to get their equipment out, flip out of the kayaks, and crawl back in them. On another day, we would focus on different strokes. Then they would have free time and a longer trip one day. Not hard, or so I thought. What I did not know was what would be the most unforgiving part of the job.

Well Shit

My least favorite part of the week was Thursdays, when I had to write all their report cards to take home. With nearly one hundred kids under my supervision at any given block of the day, I hardly had time to remember some of their names, let alone all of them. How could I possibly have been able to keep track of all of them? Sad to say, I had about fifteen generic answers I would use, so not many kids had specialized notes.

After my long day of writing report cards, my handwriting was getting sloppy for the last few. My cursive looked great at the beginning. The last ten cards, however, well, it finally made sense why doctors got such a bad rep.

Sarah.

Abby.

Michalea.

Ewan.

Riki.

I count the kids. One, two, three, four, five.

We had drills for the scary moments, like at school, to prepare for the worst. However, rather than fire drills or a lockdown, we did search and rescues for missing children.

As front water staff employees, we held the responsibility to wade through the water and look for a body if a child was MIA from the campground.

The drill happened a few times through the summer, and each time it did, a rush went through my body like butterflies that had

been lit on fire, ripping a hole of destruction through my stomach. I would pray to never hit something with my leg.

Standing at the front of the class I read off the names of the students marking some as absent.

Braydon.

Abby.

Cheyenne.

Nicole.

Corey.

Michaela.

Riley.

Mackenzie.

nine, ten, eleven, twelve.

I went through the remaining students, no longer remembering any names. Thirty. I had all thirty.

I finished off the cards, and I was grateful to be done, rubbing my hand to release the tension.

Tension. It was a ridiculous thought that there was tension at all. And other than my cramped muscles, only one thing about the job absolutely sucked. My coworkers.

Blondie 1, Blondie 2, and Blondie 3 worked on the beach as well. While we worked on the same beach, we were separated by about three yards of bush and forest. They had been there two summers in a row and were clearly already close and exclusive. They were the worst part about the job.

By the end of the summer, all the side glances and snarly stares from the B-Queens were really getting to me. There they were, floating in the water, all together on a little paddleboard. It looked to me like they had “accidentally” floated over to my section, where none of their kids were, to unauthentically laugh uncontrollably over a joke. But, you know, who was I to judge?

Dinner was around the corner, and I was so hungry. Heading back up to the dining hall, I noticed the international students had started a game of soccer. Fabio, an exchange student who had been there all summer, snagged the ball and was running for the goal line. He kicked hard and scored against the counselors.

The international students had a special place in my heart. Whether it was because they were there for the entire summer or simply because I had wanted to be an international student myself, their ability to travel alone so young impressed me. They came down to kayak frequently, and with a few minutes left before dinner began, I ran over and joined the game.

I yelled at Fabio to see who was down a player, and he said “skins,” which meant his team. As I ran up the field, Fabio passed the ball to me. Then I passed it farther up to Marcus, who took a few strides with it, shot, and scored. I high-fived my teammates and the bell rang, so dinner was about to begin. The bell was loud, but the looks Blondies 1, 2, and 3 would give me at dinner were so much louder.

“Who does she think she is?” “Why is she always like that?” “What is wrong with her?” “Why is she so weird?” Their potential table dinner conversations were already ringing through my brain. Heading towards the hall, I felt less hungry.

I met Hannah and my friend Henry as they headed down from the trampoline hangar, and we walked into the dining hall together.

“Hey, are you ok?” Hannah said to me.

“Yes, I am fine. Just . . . hungry, I guess.” I shrugged off her worries.

She raised an eyebrow but dropped it, but that would not be the last we talked.

Sloppy Joe night. I grabbed a big bun first and plopped the Sloppy Joe mix on top of the bottom bun and placed the top down over it. After loading my plate with chips via tongs, I finished the plate off with an apple.

It was reminiscent of every middle schooler’s plate in their school cafeteria, but whatever, it looked delicious in my eyes.

Hannah and I laughed about some stupid things that different kids did over the day as we ate, and just her presence grounded me back and made me feel loved again. We chatted with Henry and his friends around the table, and I was excited to head back to the trailer to shower.

However, as the evening progressed, I felt sicker and sicker. After showering, I went down to the staff lounge with Hannah to hang out with a few other instructors, but I called it in early and headed to bed before nine.

Unable to fall asleep, I lay in bed and watched some *Friends* episodes one after the other. I’ll watch *Friends* one hundred times before I die, guaranteed!

I began to sweat, feeling beyond sticky. It was late, and all the other girls had slowly filtered in for the night and gone to bed. I

texted a few people. First, my boss, to let him know I would not be in to work the next day. As well as Hannah, to tell her to not wake me in the morning, and Mom, to ask what kind of medicine I needed.

I had been awake all night, going back and forth to the bathroom, desperate for relief. I rolled back and forth in the bed as the suspected food poisoning took over my intestines.

The night continued to pass. I got five minutes there and fifteen minutes if I was lucky, until the night became morning. What felt like the longest twelve hours of my life passed.

With my eyes still closed, I heard a light knock on the door. Who could be knocking? Hardly anyone does that. Then I heard from a distance, “Mom coming in, hello? Mom entering!”

Mom? My mom?

“You came for me?” I said, looking up at her.

“Of course I did. You are my baby.”

At that moment, I felt so incredibly grateful for her. Knowing she traveled an hour to pick me up and was about to travel an hour home filled my heart with love. I did not know how badly I had wanted her to come for me, but as soon as she scooped me up, I was a little kid again.

Within a few minutes, we packed a bag and got in the car. With Dad driving the getaway vehicle, I told them I needed to go down and tell my boss I was leaving for a few days of rest and recovery.

Working at a camp is weird because while you have a little freedom, you also have none. I was nervous about talking to my boss. He was nice enough, but how would he cover me? Surely, he would

have to step in and be mad. But instead, Mom got out of the car on my behalf. She did not seem to offer much of a choice in the matter. Getting back in the car, she looked at me and said, “He understood. Ok, let’s get you home.” Momma bears can be scary.

That moment reminded me of the year prior. Not one week did I attend all five days of my eleventh-grade classes. She would sign me out at the office or call the school and tell them I would not be attending. We got in trouble about halfway through the semester and as far as I can recall, she basically told the admin department to shove it.

“She is my kid, she keeps her grades up, and I want to take her out of school.” I suppose that moment was not unlike those. She probably did not give the admins much of a choice in the matter.

What would we do, you might be wondering? Anything or everything. Some days, she would let me sleep in; others we would go shopping or for lunch. Sometimes, we would go for walks or get our nails done, whatever we wanted. She was awesome for that, and I would not trade that time for anything.

Pulling off the campground was a relief. The responsibility and tension that had been building behind my mind released. No, I wouldn’t have to teach kayaking that afternoon or help with the program that night after all.

When we got back to the cottage, I went straight to bed, sleeping a grand total of five hours through that day and fourteen more that night. Whether I had a horrible anxiety attack, food poisoning, the flu, or a mix of a few, I have no idea. All the symptoms seemed to blend in those moments. Perhaps all I needed was rest.

“Burning the candle on both ends of the stick,” as my mother would say. Meaning that I was trying to do too much in too many areas and overwhelming myself. Which forced my body to slow down.

I lost nearly seven pounds in those three days. I was sleeping continually, throwing up and pooping all waking moments and not keeping any food down. Whatever that combination sickness was, it came in and went out like a lion.

After being home for two days, I felt remarkably better but hardly wanted to go back to work and finish the summer. The Blondies had won, and I did not want to return to camp knowing Hannah would be leaving soon and I would be there without her.

Being back with Mom and Dad reminded me of how nice it was to be at the cottage. The food was so much better, Dad would take me wakeboarding whenever I wanted—he had been asking since I had arrived, and I would not have to wake up early every day.

On the morning I was supposed to go back, Mom came into my bedroom and asked me why I seemed so upset. I explained to her some of my frustration from the experience. At that moment, she looked me in the eyes and said, “Hannah, sometimes you need to choose joy.”

Confused, I didn’t respond to her statement.

She continued, “While I would love to save and keep you here for the rest of the summer, sometimes it is important to see the joy in your current situation and move beyond the question of your happiness.”

Her viewpoint shifted my perspective on joy. I had always seen it as happiness. As in, the things in front of you are good or exciting

or enjoyable, therefore making you happy. I was wrong, though. Happiness is not joy. Joy is not the simplicity of happiness. It is not immediate, and it is not circumstantial or bought. Joy can be chosen and implemented over time and with intentionality. You can *choose* joy.

Choosing joy was a tricky game, and she was asking me to do it. I looked at her sitting across from me on the bed and knew I had to do exactly what she was recommending. Whether I liked it or not, she was right. I had to continue forward so that I could finish what I started.

With her advice tucked into my back pocket, I returned to camp. Over the few weeks left, I worked on choosing joy each day. That meant trying to enjoy the amazing moments that came in between the frustrating ones. I worked on seeing beyond my current situation to the greater picture of it all. I chose joy every single day with intention.

Only a few people could have taught me that lesson with such validity behind it. My mother is one of the strongest people I have encountered to this day. Some stories she has carried from her childhood forward. The relationships she had dealt with and traumas that came from them would turn most to stone. Yet those are her own. They would have broken me without a doubt, yet she remains a beacon of light and joy in my life.

Before I had left for camp, I laid my head on her shoulder as she wrapped her arm around me.

“I love you, Mom,” I said quietly.

“I love you more,” she said back to me.

Exorcism: Who?



In 2010, a 7.0 magnitude quake struck near Port au Prince, Haiti. The earthquake affected 3.5 million people, killing an estimated 220,000 people and injuring 300,000 more.

That earthquake was the first natural disaster I can specifically recall, and it had a lasting impact in my memory. My two brothers loved the song “Just Like A Wavin’ Flag,” which was written by K’naan and performed by a group of Canadian artists to raise money for Haiti. It played across my house day after day for months when I was ten.

Haiti had been set on my heart from the moment the earth shook. I graduated a semester early and had nothing to do. Some would think I was incredibly smart or that I started school early. But my drive to finish prematurely stemmed from a bet I had made with my father at the beginning of high school. With a paid trip to Florida as a reward for graduating early, I had a point to prove, and then I made it happen. However, after it was all said and done, I had an entire semester off and nothing more than a vacation planned.

Both of my brothers had done a mission trip, and they had come back with amazing stories about meeting some of the most incredible people and seeing breathtaking things. I had always wanted to do one, but I had not expected my time to come so soon. With the realization of what my free time had been really meant for, I knew Haiti was the next step.

I spent a bit of time fundraising and working to earn some money to pay for the trip, donate to the orphanage, and buy pillows

for all the kids. Rather than waiting for the following year to attend a Bible school overseas or join a group that went to build wells, I reached out to a mutual connection of a family friend who did a lot of volunteer work in Haiti.

Steve Block. Steve was a distant friend of my uncle but had been friendly with Dad a few times too. Rather than setting me loose on a plane to Haiti, Dad and Steve loaded up, and we flew together. My Creole was not good by any means, but I had learned enough to communicate basic sentences and I would be living in a house with English-speaking people.

On a layover in Miami, the three of us had dinner. Chomping down on our big juicy burgers, Steve told Dad and me stories about Haiti. We learned about the kids and the work his volunteer team had done there, about the clinic and the difference it was making. He told me about some of the work I would be doing, and he slipped in some traumatizing stories about devils and dark spirits that reign through the country. The most memorable were the demons taking over psychics and the exorcism he had allegedly witnessed. Regardless of what you believe in, trust me when I say these stories scared me to the bone. Yay, let's go!

After landing in Haiti, we got on a bus and traveled over the mountain Morne Malanga and then into Jacmel, a port town on the south coast of Haiti. It was a long and windy ride as we twisted and turned around several trees, boulders, and more.

When we rolled into town, an urgent need to care for the surrounding people struck me. We were squished in a tiny van and passing through their home country, yet the Haitians were lighting

up with excitement. The area was gorgeous; there was no doubt that the scenic view had taken my breath away.

Nevertheless, there was so much devastation. Nearly eight years later, houses were still demolished and sitting in rubble. Trash scattered through the streets. I was happy to have the privilege to visit and the privilege to leave in a month's time. Wow. That was the first of many times on that trip I was amazed by the country and what was within it. Awestruck by the vastness of the world and scared by the bubble I had been in.

When we arrived at the orphanage, thirty girls, big and little, greeted me, as well as the house moms. The house moms would rotate in and out, but the girls lived there full time. I was going to join them each evening after school to help with laundry, cooking and cleaning, or simply playing with the girls. We stayed at the orphanage for about an hour. An hour of sitting in the heat and sun with a troop of little girls hanging on my every limb. They smiled ear to ear and chirped faster than Google Translate could ever account for. Duolingo could not possibly have prepared me for that.

We sat together on the ground, and they took turns poking my skin, mesmerized by the already-forming redness. They giggled as my skin turned white against their touch and then faded back to pinkish-red. I gave more than a few piggybacks, and we did lots of jumping rope. The girls were extremely talented and excited to show off.

It was great to be there, but I was ready to go, so tired from the day already. We said goodbye, and when we stopped at the school, I met the English teacher I would be helping in the afternoon. One teacher for eight hundred students, yikes. Then we stopped at the

clinic where I would be spending my mornings creating computerized medical files for the patients. I was so excited to get involved. Less so with the files and more with the students, but I reminded myself it's about whatever needed to be done!

After packing up the car once more and heading away from the grounds, we headed into a more residential area where we pulled into Matt and Jamie's house. They were missionaries from the US who had moved there with their family to work at the same school. They had three adorable young kids I would be helping with their homework each night after dinner.

One more thing. *Ok, wow. I don't think I have ever been this tired, and I don't think I will ever be this tired again.* I thought.

I said goodbye to Dad and Steve, who were going to a hotel about fifteen miles away. I was excited yet terrified for my first night.

There is a funny feeling when you spend a long time working toward something and it finally comes to fruition. It is rewarding, but often, these developments bring new anxieties and even fear, which can become paralyzing. Now what? I can't believe it's actually here. What if I fail? What if I get hurt? What if I can't do that all day every day? The last question can sting a little longer and brighter than the rest.

It was getting late, and I was ready to take a freezing cold shower and, ideally, go right to sleep. After the fastest shower I could manage, I crawled into bed and was trying to snuggle down and regain my body heat. Shivering beneath the covers, I heard someone scream in the background. I gasped quickly, then stopped breathing, waiting for more sounds. I lay there with eyes wide open.

The scream was far away but so loud. I stared at the ceiling. I was drifting in and out of sleep, until an hour or two later, when I heard gunshots going off in the background. My brain shot into high gear. Between the nightmarish sounds coming through the window and the stories Steve had put in my brain, I was unwell, to say the least.

“I am in a safe area,” I said aloud for reassurance.

“There is barbed wire on the fence keeping me in and others out,” I continued.

“I would bet anything that Matt has a gun inside for protection from the outside.” I finished with a groan of anxiety, frustration, and fear bundled together into my pillow.

After a night riddled with tossing and turning, my brain felt like it was pounding against my skull as I got ready for church. I tried to move forward as usual and put on the longest dress I had, covering my knees. As I brushed my teeth, I thought about how excited I was to see Dad. He was supposed to leave that afternoon, and I needed to talk to him immediately.

I cannot exactly articulate how I felt at that moment. I was in the same situation as the family sleeping in the same house as me. They were fine, I was fine! But you know what they say about fine—I was not. I had worked so hard to get there, but my doubts led me to believe my dreams were slipping through my fingers. I had a job to do there! I could not leave Haiti! There was so much to be done, so many ways to help, and I could not leave without doing at least some small part. However, I was terrified. Terrified I could not do it. Terrified it would break me.

After getting everyone in the car, we were ready for church. It was on the same plot of land as the orphanage and school—I was beginning to sense a trend.

From a distance, Dad and Steve were heading my way. Dad was smiling, and I had never been so excited to see him before.

It reminded me of the times when I was a little kid and he would come home from work. As he walked through the door, I was typically in the kitchen with Mom while she made dinner. I would run down the hallway and leap into his arms, so excited to see him after a long nine-hour day.

I felt like running and jumping into his arms saying, “I can’t do it! Take me home!” But I kept it inside and walked over to give him a hug. We went upstairs in the church by ourselves to a vacant hallway. The moment we were alone, I burst into tears.

I confessed I was terrified of not finishing what I had started, aware of my own capacity reaching its limits. I could not see an alternative solution.

He wiped my tears and said, “Hannah, capacity is not a stagnant thing. It ebbs and flows. It changes and grows. This is scary, no doubt. But I promise you that you are safe. This is going to be a lot, and this is going to be hard. Your capacity is going to have to grow as you learn to be comfortable in new and hard situations. But, baby girl, I promise you that you are going to be ok. I would never ask you to do something I knew was going to put you in danger. This will be a lot, but this will be good! Just because you are scared does not mean you lack the capacity to do it. Just because you are overwhelmed does not mean you will not grow. You got this.”

I am very blessed to have a father who comes through on his promises. It means I have a ridiculous amount of trust in him. He might have missed a few school plays or stayed late at the office through dinner, but when he promised something, he always followed through. When my safety was at risk, I knew for a fact he would take no chances. He proved that to me just by showing up and bringing me there.

“I will be safe,” I repeated back, and he smiled and nodded. “Ok, Dad, I trust you. If you say I can do this, then I can do this.”

And he was right. That trip turned into an amazing experience. I was exhausted at the end of each day, more tired than I had ever been before. But my capacity slowly yet surely expanded.

I watched students say new words for the first time and sing beautiful songs at the orphanage. I transcribed a ridiculous number of documents until my hands cramped and my next duty came up. I washed clothes by hand for thirty girls and slept harder than a rock each night.

I did everything I possibly could to help them because they did everything they possibly could to help me. They taught me patience and gratitude. I learned about hard work and capacity. Those were some of the best lessons to learn right after graduating high school, and, man, would I need them.

After the month ended, I went home but never forgot. Not about the little girls in the orphanage and how special they were or the lessons they taught me in so few words.

The Liberty Bubble



Freshman year . . . What a magical, amazing, heart-wrenching, horrible period in my life. Freshman year often gets promoted as the most amazing year of university, and if university is supposed to be “the time of our lives,” then, hypothetically, freshman year is supposed to be the best year of our lives! Right?

Well, that was what I was hoping for, but sadly, life slapped me in the face. Parts of my first semester at Liberty University were enjoyable, thanks to a few people I had met, the gorgeous campus, and the breathtaking mountains in the backdrop outside my window. Beyond that, we had room checks every night where our RAs would shine a flashlight on our beds to make sure we were in it. We attended multiple mandatory religious services weekly. And if that wasn’t enough, we were only granted one or two sick days per semester or a doctor’s note was necessary, punishable by fine. It was not the experience I had been hoping for.

While all the obligations, curfews, and dress codes were annoying, I ended up struggling with my fellow peers the most. They called it “The Liberty Bubble” because the world was so far away and reality felt augmented. Beyond the confines of Liberty property, the world did not exist—we might as well have been in space. My classmates, hallmates, and everyone I met gave off a “I am happy 100 percent of the time” kind of persona. I liked being happy and all, don’t get me wrong, but sometimes, life sucked and not having the freedom to feel those negative emotions was crippling.

Perfection was the goal at Liberty. Perfection was not my goal. My goal was to be authentic and be true to both my successes and my failures. I did not want to wake up and put a full face of makeup on each day. I did not want to curl my hair or dress like I was attending Sunday morning service for each class. I wanted to wear leggings and hoodies to the library—or sweatpants! Neither was allowed, cue another fine. I wanted to oversleep and show up with a messy bun and not a splash of color on my face. That was looked down upon.

Late in my first semester, I had made a few friends in my hall and was finally starting to feel like I might be all right. It had been a long week, and I was very ready for a quiet evening binge-watching *That 70s Show* while I lay in bed and snacked on popcorn from my food stash under the couch.

My roommate and I had been gifted the handicapped room, which meant we had more space in our bedroom and en suite bathroom than anyone else on the entire floor. When we learned that on our first day, we bought a couch to sit on. Ideally, we could be the party room, and everyone would come here.

That night, however, I was all alone. Alone on a Friday night in my freshman year. Some of you might be thinking, being alone is nice. At least it can be. I had texted each of my friends throughout the day and asked them if they wanted to hang out that night. Each one gave me radio silence.

Just as the theme song to the show was ending, my roommate texted back, *Can't, I have plans. Have a good night!*

Hm, suspicious I thought. Normally, she would tell me what she was up to. Perhaps complain about her homework assignments or rave about the people she was meeting up with.

Since I was thinking of it, I realized she hadn't filled me in on her life during the few days prior. What was new with her? How many exams did she have that week? Did that boy she liked ever text her back? All things I would have normally heard about, but that week, nothing.

I pondered on all the interactions I had with my friends that week. Brief, short-lived, and just off. *What is going on?* I thought. *Why are they all blowing me off?*

An impatient person, I did not want to wait for my roommate to come back. I couldn't possibly hold out for the answers to my questions. Instead, I hopped out of bed and walked down the hallway to Martha's room. Perhaps she would have some answers that would help me understand what was going on.

I knocked on the door three times softly and waited for an answer. As she springs the door open, Martha's squinted eyes and wide smile immediately fell slack.

"Hannah . . . What are you doing here?"

The music in the background of her room falls quiet as my name is mentioned. I can see the feet. All their feet. With two beds up against either wall they were clearly facing one another with their backs on the walls and feet dangling over the sides. Chitchatting back and forth, just like I had wanted to do. With the aura of pizza coming from the room, it felt like I had been punched in the gut. I might have puked right then and there on her doorstep, but I

swallowed my nausea and locked them tight in the bottle buried within me.

“Oh, good, you are all here. That will make this quick,” I said, nudging my way into the room.

Martha’s jaw hung half-open. I mustered a little smile and rotated to face the other girls. Girls, I think. Not women, but damn girls. Did I mention we were not allowed to swear on campus? Again, another fine.

“So, girls . . . What’s up?” I said with a bit more snark than I’d care to admit.

“We were just having a little bit of pizza, umm . . .” my roommate said, looking from Martha to me and then to Alisha and Emma, who carried blank looks across their faces.

“No shit, eh? I can see that. What is going on? I have been messaging you all, and you are blowing me off. What did I do? What is wrong?” I held back the tears creeping closer to the surface.

“So . . .” Martha began. “We didn’t know how to say this, but we don’t want to hangout anymore.”

“Why? What did I do? I’m so sorry!” I pleaded.

“Nothing specific!” my ex-bff roommate said.

“We just think you are a little too judgmental, and we don’t want to be around it anymore,” Martha added.

“Ok,” I said, “I am sorry I made you feel that way. I don’t really know what to say. Was it something I said or . . .?”

Quieter than a mouse, my roommate interrupted, “No, it’s just . . . you.”

Crack, my heart took a nasty blow.

That felt like the opposite of “It’s not you, it’s me.” And more like, “It is absolutely you, suck a duck.”

Nice. I had no idea what to do. My head was spinning, my stomach was churning, and the whole room felt spotty.

“All right, everyone. Thanks for whatever the last few months have been then. Bye.”

I turned around and walked to the door. Silence, until the door clicked behind me, then came the laughter. I sprinted down the hallway.

I passed doors decorated with name tags and cute seasonal carpets out front. Most Liberty dorms were Pinterest-decked out from top to bottom. The world spun around me, and I feared I was going to fall over. But I reached the end of the hall and hovered my student ID above the door handle until it popped open. I let the tears fly.

I was crying so hard, no sound came from my mouth. I shook in a curled ball on my bed. Why did they do that? I was so confused.

It was nothing I did—it was just . . . me? They just did not like me? I was judgmental? I tried to be open and caring to everyone. I did not care who they were. I mean, come on! Judgmental? I tried my entire life to stay away from being judgmental. I intentionally tried to give everyone the light of day, and I got that treatment.

About twenty-four hours after I had the interaction with the girls, my RAs pulled me into their room and sat me down on the couch.

“Hannah, have you been doing your devotions recently?” They looked me dead in the eyes with concern etched on their faces.

“Ummm, yes?” I said, confused about what was to follow.

“Ummm, yes?” one of them repeated back at me.

“Yes, I do them. Why are you asking?”

“What was your devotional about this morning?” The other one raised an eyebrow.

“I . . . I don’t remember,” I said. “I have a one-page devotional I read every morning, but it was early because we had to go to church this morning and we were in church last night. Followed by more Bible class this afternoon. So, honestly, after each of those in the last few hours, I can’t quite recall exactly what it was.” I finished off with a bit of snark. But I felt like it made a point, and it was better than sharing my secret.

She would not believe me if I had said, “It was early, and my roommate was not awake yet. I don’t do well at processing things I read internally. For me to really engage with the information and recall it later, I need to hear it audibly. Normally, I read aloud to myself, which is embarrassing because it has to do with my learning disabilities.”

They looked at one another and nodded, clearly with an understanding between them. I failed the test.

“Hannah, we are going to ask you to step out of your leadership role on the hall.”

When our senior leader switched dorms, the RAs had asked me to step into her place. Then they were asking me to step back out of it. Nice.

“Can I ask why? What happened?”

“One of the girls on the hall came forward and said she knows that you have been swearing.”

Another girl took over. “And we don’t think you have really been doing your devotionals, which you know is a prerequisite for being a student leader. It sounds like your faith is in trouble.”

I knew exactly who submitted the complaint. Clenching my jaw, I said nothing at all. *Breathe in, breathe out.*

“It’s not personal!” they nearly said in unison as they looked at me with crooked expressions and caulked heads. *Breathe. Breathe in and breathe out.* My teeth built so much tension between them, I feared I might crack a tooth.

“Have a good night,” I said as I stood up and headed for the door.

“Hannah, did you want to stay and talk about it?”

“No, have a good night.”

The remaining part of the semester dragged on slower than molasses. Each day, I grew thinner. Freshman Fifteen? I dropped at least that and scared my mother on FaceTime each day.

“Your cheeks are sunken in,” she would say. “I am just worried. What is happening?”

“I’ll be ok, Mom,” I lied.

I returned home with just skin and bone, my mother having been the saving grace who held me.

My faith had been at an all-time high at Liberty. Was I in a great place to be in leadership? Perhaps not anymore, but the base of the judgmental call was completely fabricated, which somehow made it so much worse.

Judgmental, I would think to myself. I was kicked out of my friend group for being judgmental and then off the leadership team because they did not think I was doing my devotions. Ironic, almost.

So what? A girl liked to swear every once in a while. Sue me. But seriously, the judgmental tag wrecked my brain and body for years. Often too scared that people who dislike my genuine personality, I became softer and more at ease for a while.

As much as I hated to admit it, the words that they called me in the span of those few moments and the days to follow had such a dramatic effect on my life for a reckless amount of time.

I was a “yes girl” instead of a “down bitch,” which would be my preferred title. I tried to fit back in and flow with the crowd. Seen and not heard. I learned the hard way that letting someone else’s title of you change the way you view yourself is only going to leave detrimental scars.

After I moved home, their words were seen both in my physical appearance and my mental one. I would fill my days with so much to do that I would forget about what had happened. Maybe if I just kept working, it would be enough. Enough to get me up and out of my funk. Enough to help me shake the feelings of failure that lured over my head. Enough to make me good enough again to be loved. Did I take their words too close to heart? Probably, but I had placed trust in them as my new family. In a different country, living far away from everyone and everything I knew, I chose them. They just did not choose me.

The sense of false hope I had placed on the relationships with those girls left me with far too many issues to count, trust issues being the slightest of my problems.

For a little more than a year, I lived at home and saved. What I was saving for, I did not know. Shoving the emotions in the bottle for too long made them burst as I experienced my first health concerns. Randomly puking on occasion and struggling with some serious eating issues that were only fixed by going gluten free. I took celiac tests that proved I was not celiac but highly, highly intolerant. I was glad to be home with my parents while whatever that was began. It would all be worth it eventually, and then it was.

After a few weeks, I started to get better! I was having less bloating, less shitting, and for the most part, I felt fine. But the doctor called back a couple weeks after that to let me know the blood work came back negative and I was fine.

Really? More than eight weeks gluten-free, I decided that was great news, dove right back in, and suffered the consequences all night. After a delicious sushi dinner, with all the soy sauce and deep-fried everything I could imagine, I was sitting on the toilet with diarrhea and a bucket in my hands hurling at the same time, with sweat dripping down my back as I heaved. My eyes burned, and I shut them tighter.

That night in particular, I was staying in Brandon, Florida. In the home of a stranger from around the world. I lay on the old creaking bed in a ball, holding my stomach and crying in pain. That was the first night of many like that, but let's not get ahead of ourselves.

After that one evening, I decided gluten was the devil and to avoid it permanently. Cutting it completely out of my diet did really good things for me! I had more energy, my stomach mellowed out, and symptoms subsided again. Life was pretty much back to normal.

Well Shit

Despite eating things that tasted like cardboard and overpaying for each meal, I was nearly fixed! Or so I thought.

NO—Does Not Compute



Sitting in my bed cross-legged, I was running through a list of each of the things I would need for the month.

Shorts

T-shirts

Bathing suit

Wakeboard

Sunscreen

All my school stuff.

During my sophomore year at university, I was taking my classes online. Having already transferred from Liberty University to remote, I was living back at home in Ontario. I was back in my parents' basement, eating their food and hanging out with Mom like she was a roommate.

I was working three jobs and in school full-time taking six courses each semester. Occasionally, I'll look back at the day planner I was religiously tied to and, frankly, have no idea how I managed what I did. I loved working though, all my jobs felt fun, and besides, I was getting a degree in business . . . not planning to be your next neurosurgeon.

Despite the lack of sleep and resenting every move of my boss from the gym, life was pretty amazing. I continually saved each paycheck from all three jobs and had basically no life. I bartended at a local indoor golf lounge, sat front desk at a gym, and worked as

an on-call recruiter for the family business. I didn't like to think of myself as a workaholic, but frankly, I can't deny that I only have fond memories of those times. My jobs were fun and all, but perhaps it was because I knew deep down I was building myself the opportunity I needed to take for change. I just had no idea what that really meant.

A few months later, a family friend of mine was getting ready for a long trip to Florida. She, her husband, and their newly adopted daughter were going to spend a month in Orlando, Florida, and asked if I was interested in coming along to nanny. They were going to help lead worship at a church and would need a little extra help. Ummmm, duh. The trip was pending, and my two-week notice had gone out to both of my local jobs.

Only days away from departure, I was ready to pack and had already gone shopping for new swimsuits. I had created a picture-perfect world in front of me. I could almost reach it, then it all came crashing down. A message on my phone read, *Hey Hannah. I am so sorry to tell you and to do this on such short notice, but something has come up and we are not going anymore.*

I remember something huge had been going on at the church at the time. Whether the pastor got caught drinking, smoking, having sex with the wrong person, or who knows what else, the man's whole double life was blasted publicly. Church politics and all that fun, because high school was not enough, and even in their 50s and 60s, adults still played games. It is insane, really. How horrible the people within the church can be to one another. We are all humans, I suppose, but for a long time, I had higher hopes for the people in power within churches that ultimately crashed.

That, however, was a false faith I struggled with, hope in man rather than higher power.

There I was, sitting crisscross applesauce in my king-sized bed on an overly plush mattress. There were seventeen pillows and three throw blankets, yet still extra room. I know, seventeen, that is insane—I have pillow problems.

But I also had much more than just pillow problems, I had already quit my two jobs! Burying my face in my hands, I shut my eyes so tight I could see the stars lighting up and shooting off like fireworks behind my closed lids.

Deciding that could not possibly be the end, I opened my eyes and immediately reached for my laptop. *How else can I get to Florida?* I thought.

There was no particularly reasonable solution, so perhaps I needed outside-the-box thinking. I could rent an Airbnb online for a month? How much would that cost? Far too much. I could enroll in the Disney College Program? I watched one video on YouTube, and it looked like a preschool for grownups. Next.

How was I going to talk my parents into my idea? The idea crept in a little further. They loved to support my big, hairy, audacious goals, but traveling to Florida with no reason other than to do it would not get their buy-in. I needed a safe spot that offered a valuable reason—and I wanted it right away.

A light clicked on in my head. I clung to the brand of church that my family had been a part of for so long. Like any brand affiliation, it had deep-rooted trust. I searched for churches around Florida. Just like Chick-Fil-A, megachurches were planted across

North America and beyond. I quickly found one in Orlando and one in Tampa, and I sent direct messages to each.

My parents were not going to be thrilled about their nineteen-year-old daughter traveling to a different country alone just to have an experience by herself. They knew I was crazy but hated when I put myself in unsafe situations. In my brain, it made perfect sense to take their most comfortable state—the church—and find shelter within that.

Hello, GREETINGS FROM CANADA! My name is Hannah MacDonald, and I am a university student from Ontario. I am doing my degree online through Liberty University and looking for a place to donate some time, and I wanted to see if we have some mutual interests. I noticed on your website that you guys are looking for volunteers for (insert need of individual church). I have experience in (insert experience needed for specific role) and wanted to see if you guys would be interested in some support! I wouldn't mind staying with a young family looking for an extra set of hands or any single females who would be open to renting an extra room. Please feel free to give me a call anytime to discuss. I look forward to hearing from you.

FYI: I am happy to submit references or background checks for any family willing to open their home up.

Sincerely, Hannah MacDonald

I included my phone number and sent my emails into the abyss. Talk about working for a flexible solution—I heard back within days.

A nice man named Dan reached out to me. He was a pastor from the church, and his parents had just gone out of town on a mission

trip to Mexico for a few months. Their home was going to be vacant, and they wanted someone to house-sit. It was easy enough: just water the plants and cut the yard. In addition, I was to help with childcare for a small group nearby and babysit for a few families while I was there.

Watering plants and hanging out with kids, that was going to be the life! All I had to do was convince my parents it was a good idea. I walked them through my plans step by step, and the first thing they wanted to do was talk to Dan. He and Dad hopped on FaceTime and quickly realized we had actually all met before. A few years prior, while on separate mission trips in Haiti, our two groups randomly had shared tables at a pizza place. The exact connection that sparked a conversation between our groups, I am not too sure about, but I imagine, as always, the church chain affiliation probably initiated conversation.

After the FaceTime, my parents were put at ease fairly quickly. I was surprised my parents hopped on board so quickly, but after learning I would have the home to myself and we already knew Dan, it was hard to reject. But they had one condition. Mom wanted to see the place and put me there herself to know I was safe. She and Alyssa would join me for the first few days of the trip for Disney fun, and then they would drop me off at the house I was staying at before heading back. That was the best compromise to make sure Mom could sleep at night. Fine by me, though. Because of her, we went to a cable park in Orlando and met Grayson for the first time. The world works in mysterious ways.

The trip down there with Mom and Alyssa was pretty easy! Mom drove for a little bit, but Alyssa and I split the driving for the most

part. I would drive back all by myself a month later. *Huh. That will be a thing*, I thought.

Disney was a ton of fun but far from the point. Mickey was Mickey, Minnie was Minnie, just what one would expect. After these few days, Mom dropped me off at an adorable, quirky house in Brandon, Florida, just outside of Tampa. The small house was painted bird blue and had a front porch with two soft-cushioned circle-framed chairs. The front door was white and had a huge glass front, and the screen creaked slightly when opened.

I stepped inside the home, and directly in front of me was an open-concept kitchen with the oldest appliances I had ever seen. To my right was a little living room with a semi-flatscreen TV and a less than comfy-looking couch with stiff cushions and a scratchy gray material. The bedroom was off to the right side with an add-on bathroom. The bed was well worn in, but it radiated the homiest feeling I could have asked for.

We had dropped Alyssa off at the airport that morning, so it was just Mom and me in the house. As we navigated our way through the house, she looked at me and said, “Well, honey, it looks like a very sweet and safe place.”

I could not read her emotions. Perhaps she was relieved it was safe, or perhaps she was sad to leave me here. Maybe a lot of both. I smiled because she would do anything for me, including going to a different country to check out the safety of a spot my crazy ass wanted to travel to. That afternoon, I took her to the airport and started my time in the home.

The home was tucked away in a quaint neighborhood, with a fresh fruit market ten minutes away by walking. I would make fresh

smoothies with a blender I found tucked away. It was lime green on the base, clear in the middle, with a spout coming out the bottom. Fresh fruit smoothies every morning, how could I not fall in love with that? The “Sunshine State” was shining brightly every day, and I loved it.

Through the two months I lived in the house—yes, two because I extended it an extra month—I was loving Florida. The community was small and separated from the crazy Orlando tourist trap. I would get breakfast at a local mom-and-pop shop a few minutes down the road. I can still smell the coffee I ordered time and time again as I studied for classes and munched on bacon.

I would go to the movies alone, always last minute, to see anything I wanted! When I went to the beach, I borrowed a surfboard from one of the moms in the small group I was babysitting for and tried to teach myself to catch a wave or two. Being alone for the first time in my life was incredible. I started to wakeboard at Orlando Watersports Complex a few times a week, where I met a few key friends who eventually grew to take much larger roles in my life, like Grayson.

Before my two months were up, I already knew in my heart Florida was going to be a much larger part of my life than I had expected. From the time that I was a kid, I had often joked that I would move South and my family would have to come visit me. Being cold in Ontario just was not going to work well with my future plans for enjoying life.

The day before I was set to leave was beautiful. I was sitting on the front porch with my legs tucked into my chest, looking down at my phone and the log of two hours and thirty-two minutes spent

talking with the University of Central Florida. What would it look like to transfer down there? How long would it take, how much would it cost, and how the hell could I make Florida my forever home?

I was hooked.

Hold music was blasting in my ear. It sent lullabies dancing through my mind as my heartbeat drowned out my senses. I was not hot. Nor cold. Time was questionable, and I could think of nothing else.

“What am I doing?” I dropped my head into my hands. I was a Canadian citizen. All my family lived in Canada, my friends! I couldn’t live in a place without Hannah! I couldn’t move to the US and start an actual life there, could I?

Pacing through my house barefoot up, I knew the moment to tell my parents was coming. I loved Florida, and as much as it terrified me, it was going to be the next chapter of my life. Then I paced up and down the street, passing orange, green, yellow, and white homes. Trees lined the sidewalk, their branches hanging over the road with moss dripping down. It was hot and windy, and everything around me jumped to life as it rustled and danced.

Left, right. I stepped carefully to avoid piercing myself with any of the sharp pinecones lining the walkway.

I mean, I was also an American citizen. My mother was born and raised in the US, so technically, **TECHNICALLY**, I could do it.

Stopping dead in my tracks, I took a breath in and felt the air fill my lungs. Yet I was so overwhelmed by the concept at hand, it

escaped and my chest felt empty. I waited for the ground to feel firm underneath my feet. I had already made the decision. My stomach dropped below the earth, and in my heart, I knew I would live in Florida by hell or high water. How and when, I was not sure, but the worst news of all was that I had to tell Mom.

“No matter where.” Love is not geographical but intentional. Being in Florida did not mean our close relationship was over; it simply meant it was going to need work to remain as good in a new dynamic. Try being the one to tell her that, though. It was going to be rough.

Mom would still be my mom.

Dad would still be my dad.

My brothers would still be my brothers.

Hannah would still be my best friend.

Even so, at that moment, I had no questions. Whether it was through the University of Central Florida call I had spent forever waiting for or if it was 101 other avenues, I was going to end up back there one way or the other. Lucky for me, I had people around me who were willing to help me try.

That moment in my life reminds me continually that there are an obscene amount of options to get to where you are trying to go. If you want to be a surgeon or move to Hawaii or travel the world endlessly, there is a way to do it! My first option did not work out, but rather than quitting, I created something different for myself. Sometimes, it will not look perfect or exactly as planned, but continuing to chase the things I desire moves me forward.

Well Shit

When something in front of me scares me to the core, I take perspective, curate the confidence I need, and then, no matter what, make it happen. If I can't take the road well-traveled, I will make my own freaking bridge.

I Might Know A Place



It was a normal day at work. The sun was shining, the beach was crowded, and the kids were loud. Jaden and I had just finished setting the tent up in between the boat docks and the beach.

“Best job ever.”

“I am so jealous!” Hannah’s continual comments rang through my head, as she worked for an annoying family with a creepy dad. I had been working at the Wakeboard Day Camp for three summers in a row. It was in my hometown and involved managing a group of eight kids who really just wanted to kneeboard. My coworker Jaden and I drove the boat all day and fought with the aux cord that never wanted to cooperate.

A chime went off on my phone, and I looked down to see a message from Liberty University accepting me back into their in-person program. *Hm*, I thought. *That is a choice, now. Choices are good.*

I had been saving money to move to Florida! I had a full plan for getting there and a place to live through a church friend. It was a cute little studio apartment over a garage. Finally! I had an adorable Ford Focus Hatchback named Juan to get me there and a degree that traveled online wherever I was! It was perfect, until it all came apart. About three weeks before the departure, my apartment fell through.

My heart sank. I had been working all summer just to move! I had saved a ridiculous amount of money while earning thirty dollars

an hour in cash teaching kids to wakeboard on a boat all day. I was nineteen and making the best money I would see for a long time while doing the most fun job I've had to date. And there had been a bunch of them.

With no plan to get to Florida, I readjusted and sent an application back to Liberty. Perhaps I was too young and needed to mature a little before university could go my way. What if I just needed to join a few more clubs or live in a different dorm? Maybe all I needed to do was try again. I was working hard on getting myself excited, as I really thought Liberty would be my only opportunity for the fall.

But I also wanted to see what other kinds of plans I could muster up. I didn't know a lot of people in Florida, and I also didn't feel particularly comfortable with just finding a random apartment online. So, that same day, I also sent off a message to a girl I had met while wakeboarding in Orlando the year prior. I sent a message on Instagram saying,

Hey! I had a place to stay this September, but my deal just fell through yesterday. Is there any chance you are looking for someone to sublet your place while you are in Australia?

I repeated to myself, *I will not be in Ontario this fall. Whatever it may be, I do not know, but it will not be in Ontario.* At least I could go back to Liberty.

Sitting in the passenger seat as Jaden took his turn to drive, I allowed my mind to drift off, wondering what it would be like to go back to Liberty. Perhaps it would be just fine that time. Perhaps.

Lunchtime rolled around, and we were back under the tent as the kids munched down on their food and quiet poured over the

group for the first time all day. It was almost nice. Almost. Another chime went off on my phone, and I received a message from the girl in Florida. It read,

My lease ends July 31 :(I might know a place tho. When r u coming?

And so it began. She immediately sent me the details of a girl named Meagan who might need a roommate. Naturally, the first thing I did was look her up on Instagram, and I quickly found she had a double-digit K amount of followers. That “place” was with a professional wakeboarder who had a really cool boat, trophies for days, and titles I could not fathom. World Champion, First Place. I mean, come on, she was so cool, and I was scared.

We set a time to connect via FaceTime the following day to see if our plans lined up and we generally felt like a fit. I was ready to pee my pants.

While loading the boat back up at work, I looked at Jaden with what I was sure looked like crazy eyes. I poured my whole story out to him and one of our very nosey campers, who was older than the rest and wanted to be in the know. After offloading everything, with only the pros and cons list left to dance through my head, he looked at me and said,

“Hannah, that does not really sound like a question to me. You already know what you want to do.” With the twelve-year-old sitting next to him eagerly bobbing his head up and down, I knew.

He was right. While talking it all out and hearing my own words, I knew what I wanted. It was Florida. It was always Florida.

As we were pulling the last kid in for the day, I yanked the rope inside. Hand over hand, awaiting the end, we were sitting in idle waiting for the next step. The rope came in, and as I was stepping over the board on the platform at the back of the boat, a large wave hit the side of the boat and jolted us forward. I fell backward into the water.

The cold lake water rushed over me from head to toe. I kicked my feet and pushed to the surface. Gasping for air, I saw nine little heads pop over the side of the boat. Eight were giggling, and one was a very sorry coworker.

“Oh no! Hannah, I am so sorry!” Jaden said as he put the boat back in idle and walked to the back with a towel.

“It’s all good. It has been three years; it was bound to happen at some point.”

“Maybe that is just what you needed, then.”

Normally, I liked to wade into the water, but it felt nice to just get dumped in that fast. All in.

The next day, I FaceTimed with Meagan and within a very short few minutes, we were casually chatting as if we had been friends for a while. The butterflies in my stomach calmed, and she gave me a virtual tour of the house.

We continued talking for about a half-hour, and it did not take long to realize we would enjoy living with one another. It was an amazing opportunity I could not pass up.

After hanging up, I knew exactly what to do. Going on to her Instagram page once more, I looked for any people we both followed, to see if I knew anyone she did.

Grayson. His name popped up, so I sent him a message.

Hey, Grayson! I hope you are having a good day. I am talking with this girl Meagan right now, who I am thinking about moving in with. I noticed she follows you and thought you might know her. Do you think that might be a good idea?

He got back to me after about an hour.

Hey, Hannah! Funny that you ask, I just moved out of Meagan's house. I really liked living there, but because I recently acquired a dog, I am going to have to move out. She is really clean, and the house is really nice. Meagan is cool! I think you'd like living there.

Sounded like enough confirmation to me. A random stranger I met a few months ago thought she was cool; I'll go with it. For whatever reason, Grayson's reassurance had so much levity to it. Hardly knew the guy, but I was really about to flip the switch on his reference.

Normally, I'd like to think things out a little more, try to set myself up for success in the future. That time, however, I just knew! It was the next step. I was ready to jump in headfirst.

A few weeks later, I had thrown a trunk full of stuff together and was ready to head to Florida! My parents, being the supportive duo they are, drove down with me, the twenty-one hours from their house to my new home.

Crossing borders as a dual citizen was fairly easy. Taxes perhaps being one of the largest inconveniences, but beyond a new driver's license and phone plan, it was fairly easy. Here we were. All in.

Ontario—Yours to discover.

Michigan—Great lakes, great time.

Well Shit

Ohio—So much to discover!

Kentucky—Unbridled spirit.

Tennessee—The Volunteer State.

Georgia—The State of Adventure!

Florida—The Sunshine State. Here we come!

Spin Me Right Round



March 2020—wow, what a time to be alive. I had been living in Orlando, FL, when I had heard rumors of coronavirus. The reality of the next few years was far from my mental realization.

I was substituting at a high school in Nona, FL, which is a smaller suburb of Orlando. You might be thinking, weren't you twenty? Substituting high school? Yes, it was hilarious. You see, all you need to be a substitute teacher in Florida is a two-year post-secondary degree. Boom, you can care for children, yikes.

I had always anticipated teaching elementary school, but elementary students were little terrorists that treated all teachers other than their own as a snack for their fellow hyena classmates. I was simply a steak dinner in their eyes. Mistakenly, I did my first kindergarten class as a three-day assignment. Never again. Middle schoolers were fine, they had a lot of sass, which I thought was funny, but the lesson plans some teachers would leave were far too intricate for the \$10.32 I was making an hour. Yes, you heard that right—don't even get me started on Florida's minimum wage.

High schoolers. They were the golden nugget of that job. Often, when high schoolers saw a substitute teacher come into the classroom, they immediately began acting like idiots. It was kind of like a game. A confidence test, so to speak. There I was again, taking a step out toward something that scared me and seeing how it turned out. Turned out I loved it.

The first few classes I taught, I tried giving them the homework and insisting they did as their teacher asked. Then, when that didn't work, I would tell them my one simple rule. Be quiet.

If they wanted to do the assignment, great! If not, that was between them and their teacher but not me. If they had a test next period, study. If they did not sleep well last night, nap. If they . . . just be quiet. It worked well for the most part and, of course, allowed me time to do my schoolwork along with them. That allowed me to pick up more shifts and ultimately wakeboard more. Win, win, win.

The day before spring break began, a few students were wearing masks, which, at the time, seemed extreme and quirky. We had a full assembly that day with over one thousand students and faculty together. Later that day, I was at the cable park sharing handles and hugs with friends and other riders. That night, I went out with friends, and we tried one another's food and drinks. We certainly were nowhere near six feet apart or aware of the looming situation on our hands.

The following day, I woke up to urgent messages from my father explaining what Canada had to say about the disease. Borders would be closing, and the fear that we would be locked on either side was evident in his tone.

Being separated from my family was not an option. I loved them too much to keep an actual border between us. It would put too much mental stress on all of us. Far too exhausted, far too hungover, and entirely unprepared for the journey, I had no choice but to pack my bag and prepare to travel.

Everything was so uncertain. I thought about what air travel looked like and whether it would be affected. Was it safe to stay in

hotels, and what would happen at the border? Everything was strange and getting stranger by the hour.

Two days later, I had made it home and began the first of far too many fourteen-day self-quarantines. Keeping a safe distance from everyone but my parents, who encompassed me in large hugs the moment of my arrival. Everyone was scared of the “dirty American” who came from a state with loose guidelines and may or may not have COVID-19. News flash, I did not have it.

March slowly passed, and rather than coming out of the fourteen-day quarantine to a normal world, I watched everything continue to close. Canada fell into a paused state of motionless life. Although I was still finishing some school classes online, there was nothing to do. I was not working, nor could I see any friends. Malls were closed, stores were shut down, and even the aisles at Walmart that were not “essential goods” were blocked off.

To pass the time, I began doing what everyone did during COVID—I binge-watched different Netflix series, went for a hundred walks, and FaceTimed with everyone and anyone who would pick up the phone.

Mom would go out to the store and come home with half the things she said we needed. People were hoarding toilet paper and washing the packaging of their groceries with rubber gloves. The fear of that illness was spreading across the globe.

March turned to April, and April turned to May. Florida had already begun to open things back up, so why was I stuck in my parents’ basement when I could get back there? Frustrated and confused, I was sad to not spend my twenty-first birthday with all my new friends in Orlando. It wasn’t like it would be the first time I was

going out downtown. I had been legal in Canada since I was nineteen and was using Laura's old ID since I had moved. What are fake big sisters for other than to help get their little sisters into bars?

It did not have to do with being legal drinking age or going out. It was, rather, missing the rite of passage that every American got to experience. As a CanShmerican, I was desperately hoping to get every ounce of USA loyalty that I could.

Rather than throwing the party I was hoping for with all my new friends, I asked my family to all dress up in their nicest clothes for a lovely dinner together and then bring pajamas to change into for a movie and snacks afterward.

Bryan and Bradley looked so sharp. I was surprised they put in as much effort as they did. They styled their hair, wore nice shoes, and showcased their button-ups and slacks. I bet it had been a while since the last time they dressed like that.

"Hey, Alexa, play Swagger." My dad's favorite Spotify playlist through COVID blasted from the speaker. Seeing everyone in my family gathered together, eating some yummy appetizers Mom placed out on the center island, brought my heart so much joy.

Bryan smiled at me across the table, chomping down on a cracker from the plate in front of him. I loved my brothers equally, but he had always been the kinder twin. While they were similar to the average eye, they were different to me. Bradley was tough and more reserved, but he was so sweet and warmhearted on the inside. Bryan was jollier and more excitable, but patient and forgiving. Bradley was hard to read sometimes. Bryan was not.

Smirking to the side of his mouth, Bryan stepped around the table and approached me with his hand extended. I took it, and he

led me to the middle of the living room. He pulled me in, and we danced.

Bryan had always been protective, keeping a mindset of “protect the princess.” It was funny, too, because on the outside, he looked like he could not hurt a fly. However, the few times that I had seen him get angry, I believed he could do some actual damage if he wanted to.

We swayed back and forth. Dancing with him in front of the TV, careful to avoid the wall at all costs, we stayed close to the couch, and I wished I could dance across the cushions. We twirled in circles around the ottoman, and I dragged my heels across the carpet as we spun. I held my arm around his shoulder and held on tight to him and to the memory I was creating. A moment of love for Bryan where he was exactly who I needed him to be. He was my brother, my Bryan. He put up with my crap and partook in my annoying shenanigans. As he spun me under his arm, the frills on my dress danced up, flowing in the still air.

It was like when we were little kids and our parents would assign us to play with one another as each other’s “toys.” That meant we were to do whatever the other said for a grand total of thirty minutes each, in turn offering our parents an hour and a half of peace. I would typically opt to dress them up in little gowns, dance and sing with me, or get on the floor to play Barbies.

Bryan had always been a typical middle child. He never wanted conflict and always sided with the area of least resistance. What did he want for dinner? Whatever you did. Where did he want to spend Saturday? Wherever you did? What did he want to watch on TV? Animal Planet, because that was one thing he really did want. He

was my Bryan, my brother, my family. My love for my family grew while we danced, as I was reminded they were the only thing that truly mattered when the rest of the world was falling apart.

Right there, right then, with my people, in my place. That was what I cared about. My heart swelled with love for each of them.

Mom and Bradley danced on the side, and Dad smiled as he watched his favorite people.

COVID sucked, don't get me wrong. There is no doubt it changed so many lives for the worse, but the only thing I could do in that moment was try to appreciate what was in front of me. Nothing compared to the peace and stillness of spring 2020. Wow, I am forever grateful for the quiet time we were blessed with through those months.

I was nearly embarrassed that evening as I lay in bed thinking about how desperately I had wanted to be in Florida that day. As I looked at the ceiling and smiled, the only thing I could think about was how grateful I was to wear that dusty pink dress that night and dance with the people I loved and cared about, rather than dance at a club full of people I would have never wanted to meet, anyway.

You Dumb Idiot



Often as a kid, I would become incredibly upset with myself because my friendships did not live up to the unsustainable image of relationships plastered across Disney Channel and all my favorite childhood movies. I had nice friends and all but not like it was on TV. These stars hanging out with their friends portrayed such a closeness that I could not seem to fabricate in my own life.

I struggled with that throughout my whole childhood, and while I have worked hard to overcome that particularly destructive emotion, it does frequently like to edge its way back into my brain.

Have I spoken to Alyssa in the last few weeks? I'd think. No, you dumb idiot. It's been more than a month since you guys talked. You suck, a bad friend. Do you even love her?"

The imposter creeping in the shadows would whisper into my ear, "She doesn't love you anymore. She's over you." A chill would run down my spine, and I would sigh.

Shut up! I scream back internally. *This whole COVID thing just started, and she is working at the hospital an insane amount. She does not have time for you. She is busy.*

That fabricated emotion had no truth and no merit. I repeated that back to myself again and again. Those moments were not bad; they were simply a test of mental strength, separating the human nature of doubt and fear from truth and reality.

Since I grew up in a small town, most of the people I loved as a child lived pretty close by. My parents and siblings all lived under

one roof, my best friends all attended my school, and everyone I had formed close relationships with was right next door.

Alyssa was the first person to teach me that love and distance did not need to coincide. Despite the distance between us, my relationship with my cousin continued to develop. As children, we enjoyed one another's presence a few times a year. When we entered middle school, we began planning trips specifically so we could be with one another. By high school, we were texting and FaceTiming frequently, as well as traveling with one another's families for trips. In university, we would travel nearly monthly to see each other for long weekends, holidays, birthdays, and every occasion we could muster up. At that point, she lived three and a half hours away, so we tried to close the gap at every opportunity we had.

Alyssa was my first soulmate. We have always had a mutual love and respect for one another that was fairly incomprehensible. The piece of magic that really made it special, however, was Alyssa's ability to teach me through those years that love really had no boundaries. No matter how far you went, or how long it had been, love remained.

As we grew older, our relationship faced more challenges. No doubt we all experience this with age. People find partners and buy houses. People move to new cities and travel far and wide. They get jobs and have lives as they grow. Naturally, our friendships and relationships will not remain the same as they felt when we were eighteen. That's an unrealistic expectation.

Change makes those relationships a different type of amazing. The friendships I cherish most are the ones I know remain

unshakable and secure through a duration of time, no matter the communication. People you didn't need to text every single day or week. The ones you could message at any point in time saying, "I need you." And they would be there. The ones who could message me saying, "I need you." And I would be there.

Those types of friendships flourish despite the days or weeks or months that have passed, where the mutual love and respect for one another have grown to such a degree that no matter what, no matter where, no matter why, you would be there!

If friendship lived on a grading scale, I would mark those people with A++.

Having friends you speak to on a daily basis is amazing—don't get me wrong, we all crave the intimacy of daily communication and community. However, understanding that the average human receives eighty-five text messages per day, not to mention personal emails, professional emails, social media messages, and phone calls, we cannot expect people to answer immediately. Keeping this type of presumption of continual communication is not going to set you up for valuable relationships that offer consistency throughout your life.

Learning that after leaving university was a challenging battle all on its own. Those emotions I had struggled so deeply with as a child continued to remain true after some relationships we swore were "so close" fizzled away by post-grad. By no fault of either person, the mutual connection was gone and the bond we had originally been feeding off was over. Situationships. Friendships that feel real and offer immediate gratification but ultimately fade away.

Alyssa was far from a situationship. She was my first soulmate, a cousin, a best friend, an A++. A year older than me, she grew up before I had to, and I had the opportunity to watch her take every step before I even had to take one. She started liking boys first, got her period first, started going to parties first, and graduated first. I had the pleasure of walking along the dotted line behind her on a perfectly planned out path.

Alyssa came from a much different upbringing than me, so she experienced more in her high school and university days than I could have endured. She started dealing with R-rated movie material before she even got to high school. Alyssa gracefully handled more in her twenty-three years of life than I could even fathom in my twenty-two. She is courageous, intelligent, and strong, more so than any person I've ever met. For this, my respect for her is unmatched.

Through different seasons of life, friendships will evolve in different styles. The one thing I thrive to sustain is a fifty-fifty rule. While relationships may ebb and flow through different periods of time, as long as both parties continue to put in about 50 percent of the work in maintaining a relationship, it is worth working to maintain. There had been seasons of life where I held more of the weight of the friendship for Alyssa and me, and in some seasons, she did the same for me.

If you have to back up 60 percent or more of the work in the maintenance of a relationship, ask yourself if it is worth the effort you are putting into it. All relationships are partnerships. Romantic, professional, or simply platonic, relationships are still built up out of two units and, by default, require equal participation. Simple math in my mind.

Alyssa has always been a phenomenal example of that simple rule. She made an effort countless times to be around for birthdays and book time off for family weeks. She drove countless hours to or from my various homes over the years and kept in contact regularly. Currently, she's no different.

She was not only working full time in a hospital but also had a research job that continually stole her precious days off. The days when we would get together monthly for a weekend of girl time were slipping away.

In spring 2020, my first “COVID birthday” slowly rolled into a two-week celebration. Mom was always good for going above and beyond, but within the confinements of legal restrictions, she was overcompensating a little extra and I was loving it. Over that year, everyone chose to do something different for their first COVID birthday. Lots of people did drive-through parties, which included driving in unison and parking in front of someone's house. Large signs flopped in the air as people stuck their heads out of windows, shouting and running noise makers off as loudly as they could. Others would send video compilations, hold Zoom parties, or plaster massive birthday signs across front yards. Celebrations looked different through COVID—the one difference being you got to spend it with the people who meant the most.

A week after my birthday celebrating with Bryan and Bradley at home, Mom, Dad and I headed up to the cottage. In the process of finishing off my final semester of university, I had no physical obligations to anything. My only requirement was Wi-Fi and time to study—so cottage, home, Florida? It was all the same. Creating my own schedule and being strapped to nothing? Good days.

At the cottage, I was typing out some long-winded essay that was ready to surpass the max number of words allotted, when I received a text message from Alyssa.

What are you doing right now?

I sent back, *Nothing, just working on some homework. Why, what's up?*

I wondered what it might be—probably a FaceTime to update me on some hot roommate drama or tell me more about a new fun relationship she was starting to get serious with.

Seconds later, I saw her royal blue Hatchback Ford Focus rolling down the driveway. I squinted my eyes in disbelief—Alyssa's gaze was focused on my face. I jumped up from my bed, dashed through the cottage up to the front door, and swung it open. She smiled wider, catching a glimpse of me again. As she parked her car, I ran out to her in the middle of the driveway with no shoes or care of COVID and the six-foot rule in the slightest. Alyssa opened the door and stepped into my embrace. We hugged and held each other close.

In the midst of COVID. In the midst of graduation. In the midst of starting two new jobs and 101 other things on her plate, Alyssa made the effort to surprise me right before my birthday. She drove the six hours from her home to my cottage and did nothing but shine.

She was the exact person I wanted to see. At that moment, she was working for our relationship and our friendship. She had done that for me, and that alone meant so much more than any birthday gift could offer. She showed up.

Relationships are fifty-fifty, and I remind myself of that time and time again. Alyssa remains a consistent friend because no matter what, no matter where, no matter why, her love is unwavering. She was one of many who have shown this type of love to me, but it all goes back to those two little girls in London and Barrie just trying to be friends.

I have experienced a lot of different relationships in my life. Some good and some bad. But I am thankful for this one. Every once in a while, I would fall into the trap of buying into my situationships more closely than my actual friendships. It was challenging to see the situationships I had created for what they were: situationships. But I grew and saw the value in real friendships.

While I had originally been so upset about not having the opportunity to spend my birthday with friends in Florida, I got something so much better with people who actually put in the genuine work to show up.

Dear Future Me, You're Welcome.



COVID-19 messed with my graduation story a little. Sound familiar? Students all across the world graduated during COVID-19, which altered their plans, perhaps changing their lives forever. That was, at least, my personal experience.

During the summer of 2020, I was living in Orlando and working at Orlando Watersports Complex as their summer camp manager. It was a blast trying to get a group of twenty-something frat boys to play with little kids in the water while six feet apart. That summer, I also completed the last few classes of my degree.

Aka, I graduated. You would think, YAY! But honestly, it was not that big of a deal. I received my cap and gown in the mail and took a few photos with Meagan to commemorate the moment. Four years of school, completed in three. Late nights, tears over papers. Anxiety over exams, enthusiasm over games and friendships. All done, with the click of a button.

That “moment” of graduation was a FaceTime with my family while I handed in my final assignment in my pj’s with pimple cream on my face.

There were no ceremonies, parties, dinners, or celebrations.

To the graduating classes through COVID-19, I am sorry.

Summer was coming to an end, and with my degree completed, it was time to be a big girl. The borders had been closed to everything other than essential travel. After getting a full-time job, I was expecting to have approximately two weeks of vacation a year.

Mandatory isolation was the same—fourteen days upon entering Canada. I would get zero time with my family if I continued to live in the United States, and that simply was not an option.

Preparing to move back to Ontario, I refused the idea of returning to my parents' basement. Honestly, it would have been smarter financially to stay there. However, the personal development from living alone was well worth the investment.

Growing up, my desire to go into the family business had been minimal. I loved what Dad had created, but I did not see its relevance to my life or desired mission moving forward at the time. Then he made me an offer I could not turn down.

A decent salary fresh out of school, with a company vehicle, technology, and a company gas card. I mean, have you seen the price of gas? It was too good to turn down.

In addition, my brothers, parents, and I had all pooled our money while my brothers and I were much younger and purchased a home. With my brothers and I all equally invested, we continually paid our parents back until we were sole owners. That would be another benefit of returning to Barrie. My brothers lived in the upstairs unit, and I would live in the downstairs. The pleasures of being close to family yet not sharing a single square foot of living space.

After a last week in Orlando, my parents came to help me load a U-Haul with my packed things. On the way home, I competed in my first ever Worlds in wakeboarding. Coming in second to last place in my division, I had accomplished exactly what I had set out to do—have fun, stand up through my run, and try a double flip at the end. Wakeboarding had been a huge part of my time in

Orlando, and I was so sad to see it end, as the season in Ontario was nearly over already.

Then we headed to Pennsylvania to pick up Charlie, my fresh-faced fluffy best friend. With my brand-new pup, I was ready for my life to drastically change. Again.

There is something that I say to myself frequently: say no to the good for the great. It sucks sometimes, don't get me wrong, but typically, it is the right advice. Leaving the life I had just created for myself was destructive. Putting a legitimate border between something I had invested an immense amount of time in spun my brain into an incredibly negative mindset.

Back in Ontario, we were thrust into months of lockdown. With essential business being the only viable reason for travel, no one went anywhere. I would work from Monday to Friday in an office with no windows, then leave each day as the sun set into a gray abyss of clouds.

I had a note in my car so that if a police officer pulled me over after curfew, I could show my viability of travel. I had created that note on Google Docs, pasted a letterhead over it, and distributed it to more than two hundred employees scared of being pulled over by a cop for . . . driving.

Thanksgivings, canceled. Christmas, canceled.

Life was weird.

I wanted to go back to Florida desperately. To feel the sun on my face and see a palm tree.

How long has it been since I have seen the sun? I thought. Five, six, seven, maybe even eight days? It was cloudy all weekend. *Seasonal depression sucks.*

One day in late January, I was driving back to my apartment to be alone, again. We had been put back on yet another lockdown. A wave of emotion rushed over me, conflicted by desire to be with my family and return to Florida. An unsettling urge overcame me to drive south with the passport still in my glove box, only sending a text saying, “Sorry.”

Say no to the good for the great, I repeated.

My family is great. That experience was great. What came after that, whatever that might be, was going to be great! But two years at home in Ontario felt like a long time when you didn’t see the sun eight days in a row.

My legs shook beneath me, and my chest was throbbing. My friends, whom I loved so much, were going to move on. Wakeboarding, my amazing new hobby and skill was going to slip through my fingers. I would never get to do it again! Everyone was going to forget, and my presence would be like a blip in time that never happened. Or at least that was how it felt.

With tears streaming down my face, I cried every tear I could, my chest heaving up and down. My dreams of creating a long life in Florida were slipping away beneath my feet, and there was nothing left for me to do but wait. Not my strong suit. Only 6 months had passed.

A year and a half more? I couldn’t possibly wait that long. I had backed myself into a corner that was inescapable and all consuming. Yet, wasn’t that just life? Wasn’t it just hard to grow up? Was my

whole life going to feel like a never-ending cycle of chasing the next best thing and anticipating the forever future that never seemed to satisfy in the moment?

Entirely overwhelmed, I screamed at the top of my lungs and thrust my fist at the steering wheel, three, four and five times, and then the ceiling. How could that be it? My fist throbbed. I must have looked like a toddler having a tantrum for the first time ever.

No. That was not it. Because that was not waiting; it was growing. It was stretching, but it was empowering.

In the two years that followed, I traveled back and forth to Orlando more times than I could count on two hands. Always traveling alone, normally by car, I navigated hundreds of thousands of miles. I changed the way my organization functioned with online employees, allowing us to open multiple branches in other states and provinces. I formed amazing bonds and was taught amazing lessons, all because I said no to the good for the great.

Great comes, but it comes in time and after effort. In those two years, I continually repeated to myself that the thirty-year-old me would be so proud. Yes, I missed a lot of nights going out with friends to pubs or clubs or bars. I missed watching my friends make out with strangers and getting late-night pizza to soak up the alcohol. The times when they lay awake at night afterward having life chats, entwined in cuddle puddles. However, what I gained in those two years was incredibly valuable and still well worth the investment.

I thought I was ending a dream, letting something go and giving up. But I was letting it take the bench so that new players could shine. I said yes to my future self—the person I wanted to become

but needed to put work into that day. Betting on your future self is the best investment you can possibly make.

It often felt like the future me would come back to the present and encourage me to keep going. Sometimes, it's hard to make decisions that go against the status quo. To do the things that you know are right even when they feel wrong. Peer pressure and the fear of missing out are detrimental in my mind, but the power of choice is yours. You can make decisions for yourself in the present or your future self. The peers I wanted, however, were not the university students I was surrounded by. They were not the kids I grew up with, but the ones I once looked up to.

Making your present self happy can be great in the moment, but trust me when I say you can open up remarkable possibilities beyond your current comprehension. Sometimes it is enough to know that what you are doing in the now will simply be good for the plot line of the future. It does not need to be perfect. It does not need to have an exact ending. It needs to stay in process and move forward.

My future self would come back and say to me, "Next time you find yourself not going out to drink with friends so you can wake up early and get fresh food from the farmer's market; next time you see a friend of yours post on social media about being out with friends and having one too many drinks; next time you feel like you are missing out, remember who the real boss is. The real boss is the future you, and what you do today has the power to affect whoever she can become. So, choose wisely."

As much as I hated the future me in those moments, she was right. And when I say I hated her, I mean it. I would fight and cry

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and scream at myself because the future me made choices that were good but not easy for the current me. What you spend your time doing now—the people you hang out with, the media you intake, the songs you listen to, the books you read, the TV you watch—is shaping who you will be tomorrow. You have the power to choose who your boss is; you simply have to put in the work to get them into your power.

Say no to the good for the great, my future self would sing through my head each morning as I woke up. Say no to the good for the great, and make your great wilder than your craziest dreams.

Spidey Senses



One summer in Ontario in 2021, Hannah and I were deeply into the COVID-19 “hot girl walk” trend, so we were frequently taking laps here or there. There was nearly a walk for every occasion. A five-minute stroll around the block to “say we did cardio” and avoid it at the gym. Down by the lake in our hometown just to see faces other than our own. Up the street to the house with a few college guys in it, with the desperate hope they were outside playing basketball. Trust me, Tinder did not get the job done very well through lockdowns.

A typical walk for Hannah and me would both start and end at my apartment, whether it tied into our trips to the gym, involved traveling down a far path, or included a lap around my street. That day, however, was a little bit different.

After packing up my car with my luggage and Mr. Charlie, I ran a couple of errands before picking Hannah up for the cottage. Like any good cottage trip, it required a gas stop, a food stop, and, of course, a liquor store. Then I grabbed two XL coffees and cruised about twenty minutes out of town to pick her up.

When I pulled into her driveway, energy was high, and we were singing at the top of our lungs, having a great time right from the moment she sat down. I iced her, music was blasting, and I cheered so loud as she chugged the Smirnoff in the driveway. It was a vibe!

But in that moment, I made my fatal mistake. I missed the last opportunity to hold on to my dignity before it unknowingly slipped away. I did not use her bathroom.

Well Shit

Hannah and I pulled out and drove a few kilometers down the road. We were casually walking down the longest portage trail on the planet, seeing casual walkers or bikers, surrounded by fields with anything from cattle corn to hemp. I was tired of walking already, and Hannah was not sweating even a little.

Ten minutes into the walk—fine.

Twenty minutes into the walk—fine.

Thirty minutes into the walk—fine.

Thirty-five minutes into the walk—need to poop.

Thirty-seven minutes into the walk—NEED TO POOP.

Forty-two minutes into the walk—squatting in a farmer's field.

Now, you may be wondering, how bad could it possibly be that I really needed to squat in a farmer's field? Desperate.

Beautiful trees rustled in the wind, and UVs were beating down on our faces as we soaked in any tan we could. But all of a sudden, I was hit with the unsettling urge to drop my drawers in the middle of the pathway.

I don't particularly like to be a dramatic person in these types of situations. However, when I tell you I needed to poop right then and there, I mean it. My stomach problems had basically been running my life for two or three years at least, but that was the beginning of right before it got really bad. Case and point, I was about to shit in the middle of nowhere.

After holding off for what was only minutes but felt like a lifetime, I found a cornfield with enough coverage to hide in. I left Hannah to stand as security as I marched fifteen cornrows deep. I

could hear her casually chatting with strangers who asked if she was ok. She was faking a cramp and sending them on their way.

I got out of earshot of Hannah but was still very much in the protection of Charlie, who was standing guard at my feet, back to me, and on the lookout for predators. Cute, isn't it? Then it wasn't anymore because I undid my pants and took a squat to poop to my heart's content.

It was the best fertilizer the farmer's field had ever seen. Cheers to the cow who ate the corn that I personally fertilized. I hope you get superpowers.

Hannah laughed at me when I came out from the field and told me I was absolutely ridiculous for not "just holding it." I told her that was in no way, shape, or form an option, and she giggled before calling me a wimp and leading us down the path.

That wasn't the only embarrassing moment I experienced. Once, I ripped my pants in youth group, and the whole church saw my bright pink underwear. Then a few of my friends saw me have my first kiss, but the guy missed. I accidentally saw my papa's butt when I opened a door I should not have. Embarrassing moments are part of being human, and every single person has them.

Pooping in the farmer's field was incredibly embarrassing. But it was honestly hilarious too. From the time I was a kid, my family would say, "If you can't laugh at yourself, the whole world stinks."

If you can't laugh at yourself, you can't embrace who you are from within, you can't love yourself, all the good and all the bad, then the whole world stinks, I realized. They had something going all along.

Sunshine and Rainbows



Well, shit, get ready for a whole chapter of TMI. As much as I would have loved this story to be all sunshine and rainbows, there really were some really shitty times too.

Fall 2021 came around, and some of those symptoms from post-Liberty returned—randomly getting nausea so intense that I would need to pause in the middle of conversations, close my eyes, and focus on not losing my breakfast on the person in front of me. I was getting so tired that I kept a blanket and pillow in my desk so that I could curl up in a ball on the floor and sleep during lunch. Coffee would not get me through the day. Damn coffee. So good, so useful, but it made my stomach twist in and out of itself, like a huge storm in the middle of the ocean.

So, I was exhausted every single day. Always getting at least eight hours of sleep but often more, upward of ten, eleven, and even twelve. With each morning, I would opt for more sleep and less food. In previous years, I had earlier wake-up calls and would still make an omelet every morning before leaving for high school subbing. Instead, I worked a lot more from home, calling in sick but still well enough to work from home. In COVID times like those, if you even had a sniffle, coming into the office was off limits.

Given that I was getting regular migraines, dizzy spells, and daily nausea, I was less than fit to be in the office regularly. Besides, I was often more productive at home and hit my KPIs on average, so it wasn't a problem.

As months went on, it became more concerning. I had dropped some weight and was starting to really see it. I woke up and looked in the mirror one early December morning to see a skeleton of my body. While I should have already booked an appointment to see my doctor, I had been traveling a ton in and out of the US, so it got put off. Through COVID, getting appointments was harder, and I suppose that was my excuse. In reality, I was scared to learn about the truth. I still had hope it would pass.

I am twenty-two. I should be fine! I would say when pounds shed off and clothing fit differently than before.

One afternoon, my family was getting ready to head to my uncle's wedding in Orange Beach, Alabama. I had been in Naples with my parents for a little more than a month and a half. I pushed all the garments to the side on the clothing rod and reached back to yank out my dark blush floor-length dress. I was so excited to wear it and have my hair and makeup done.

Two months prior, we had ordered the dresses to fit the measurements I took myself. When it arrived, it was stunning and fit like a glove. Perhaps a little long, but nothing a pair of heels wouldn't fix. I packed the dress away in the car and danced with Charlie, picking up my little fluff ball and swirling him around. It was going to be a beautiful wedding, and I could not have been more excited for my uncle and his new wife!

I pulled out the dress and slipped it on over my head, anticipating the grand reveal. My eyes grew enlarged as I looked at myself swimming in the fabric. What. The. Hell. No! How had I been so stupid? How had I not tried it on? How had I lost that much mass?

Recalling specifically how I had looked two months prior, I honestly didn't even recognize my body. My cheeks were sunken in. My collarbone was sticking out. When did that happen? I had massive hip dips, something I had never struggled with. My rib cage stuck out. Who was that?

"Hannah, your pants are hanging off your waist!" Mom would say. "You pull those elastic strings so tight. I am just concerned for you."

Body dysmorphia had been telling me nothing had changed. "I look just fine!" I would say back.

But at that moment, I saw it in my face, in my neck, in my hips, in my ass, in my stomach, and in my legs. I could see it everywhere, and I was so scared. How did one unintentionally lose so much weight? It was not from working out, for I had not been regularly going to the gym. I was hardly wakeboarding; perhaps it was muscle loss? I ate every day, at least I continued to try. Mom's a crazy food pusher, so naturally, I had three meals a day. The weight was just gone. How much, I was not sure, for I had not stepped on a scale since last month.

Tears sprung to my eyes, and I cried over the body no longer before me. I cried at how blind I had been to my own problems and how much it was truly affecting me. I cried because it was right there in front of me. Each inch lost was devastating.

Something needed to change, and it had to be ASAP. I walked over to my parents' bathroom in the Airbnb and checked to see if they had a scale. They did. I was terrified of what the answer might be. Five pounds down? Ten? I had no idea. At the beginning of October, I had been 140 pounds strong. After a winter of

weightlifting and a summer of wakeboarding, I had been more built than ever and at the peak of my weight.

I pulled the scale out from under the sink and tapped it with my toe. The screen lit up bright blue, and little black lines dotted across it, indicating zero.

Stepping onto the scale in only my underwear, I held my breath as the weight adjusted.

118.32.

The scale screamed at me in an obnoxious blinking. As if it were repeating all the comments I had heard from people the months prior. The old friend I had not seen in a while, the coworker who wanted to be nice, anyone and everyone who felt like saying something.

“Wow, Hannah, you look so good right now! What diet are you on?”

“DAYUM GIRL, you gotta eat something. Put some meat on those bones.”

“You’re as skinny as a stick! OMG, I’m so jealous.”

“Have you eaten anything today?”

“Girl, you should probably call a doctor.”

One hundred eighteen pounds. I had not been there since the beginning of high school.

“I’m fine!” I said to the number on the scale. I would get it figured out later. At that moment, it was wedding time.

The rest of the weekend, I wore a shawl around my shoulders and a pink pea coat that covered how large the dress was. I was

Well Shit

terrified how people would see me in it. Aware of my collarbones' ability to cut glass, I wanted to shield them from the world. I would hold a knot of fabric in the back and make it tight fitting through some well-positioned photos. At the end of the day, I didn't think anyone noticed, and the wedding went beautifully.

After the wedding was over, I started toward home on yet another long drive. Once I would arrive home, I was determined to get an appointment with my doctor. I called Grayson and cried on the phone to him. I told him everything about the dress and the weight loss. He admitted he was worried but hadn't wanted to mention it. Then he decided he would not get a haircut for his mop of a head until I got an appointment to see the doctor. Bargaining, I might have met my match. After we hung up, I saw a shooting star floating across the sky through my windshield and wished he would someday be mine.

The following Monday, I set an alarm on my phone every day of the week to call the office. The doctor's office line rang out on Monday and left some long voicemail, only to finish with, "If you cannot get a hold of us, please do not leave a message. All messages left inside or outside business hours will be erased." BEEP.

Great. I hung up and set an alarm again the next day. Ringing through two or three times, I would hear, "All messages left inside or outside business hours will be erased." BEEP. Shit.

Missed a day or two. A weekend passed.

"All messages left inside or outside business hours will be erased." BEEP.

Again.

“All messages left inside or outside business hours will be erased.”

“We will be closed for the holidays, so if you are sick, you can go deck the halls with over-the-counter drugs and go fu-fu-fu-fu-fu-fu-fuck yourself.” Lovely. I was not sick enough to go to the hospital yet still sick enough that I needed help.

The holidays were over, and I was ready to call the doctor again. I finally got in touch with the office in mid-January, but the next available appointment was more than a month away. Through the following months, I fought with doctors to get appointments and book tests. I was desperate for anyone to see me and give me the answers I so desperately needed. I joined waitlists for specialists, which I have been on for nearly two years now and have yet to receive a call. I did all the tests, bloodwork, urine samples, stool samples, endoscopies, and colonoscopies. I tried diets and different eating habits. Everything came back normal, until one day, countless months later, my doctor suggested I might have anxiety.

“Well, shit,” I said out loud, intending my voice to be internal. “Anxiety?” I glanced up with a questioning look. She gave me a patient and soft smile, and I was ready to explain my emotions.

She explained my brain may not be processing my anxiety well and affecting the nerve endings in my stomach. IBS and . . . anxiety! I did not believe it at first; how could I have anxiety when I had been able to accomplish so much? An ignorant thought at its finest. I functioned—all right-ish. Not true in the slightest.

I did not understand it was not normal to lay awake at night through my youth desperately terrified the house would burn on fire or my family would be brutally murdered while I got tied to a chair

and forced to watch. I was terrified of being kidnapped and hauled across the world far, far away. I imagined they were just normal nightmares, and it was common for others to think that way. Just a seven-year-old's thoughts. Perhaps that should have been a cue.

I did not understand my body starting to shake and tremble during nerve-racking moments was a sign of anxiety. My body occasionally feeling numb from fear and its inability to control convulses—*anxiety*. I always just hid it and thought, *Perhaps it's normal, so best to not say anything.*

I did not understand other people did not feel as tired as I did every day. That no matter how much sleep I was getting, an internal battle was raging on that I had no control over!

I did not understand normal people did not break down hysterically from time to time. Not being able to breathe properly or form functional words was anxiety. Excluding myself from everyone and everything with hopes of miraculously pulling myself together and appearing fine was not normal. Everyone got overwhelmed. I chalked up my panic attacks to "I was just having a . . . MOMENT. But I'm fine now."

I did not understand my own emotions and what they meant as they boomeranged through my brain. I won't pretend to understand them now, but first acknowledging their existence would make strides in the right direction.

Lots of "moments" occurred through that experience. Moments of sorrow when I lay on my couch at home because I was not up to seeing anyone or doing anything. Moments where I suddenly grew nauseous and threw up on myself and on my window of the car door because it would not open fast enough. Moments of embarrassment

when I shit my pants in the elevator going back to my hotel room. Moments when I lay in the fetal position with a tube in my mouth, with a full team of doctors ready to sedate me.

Many moments during those few months made me hate everything about everything! I was twenty-two, dating an amazing guy, working a job I loved, and traveling all the time. My life should have felt amazing. Yet, for some reason, my body betrayed me every day and was quaking beneath me. I continued to fight an invisible battle, but I didn't even know who I was up against.

It was impossible, until it wasn't. My doctor prescribed me anti-depressants that targeted the imbalance in my body. From there, I built back up an energy I had not felt in a long time. I reignited a better relationship with food, introducing gluten into my diet more than three years later, hallelujah. I was far from the finish line but very happy to be in the race. I would encourage you to never stop fighting for yourself. Never stop advocating. YOU are the best judge of what you need and best advocate for those needs.

The people around me believed something was wrong. My parents, friends, boyfriend, coworkers—they all showed concern and wanted to help desperately. However, as we grow and mature, it is no one's responsibility other than your own to fight the battles that must be won. Doctors did not believe me and told me it was a second puberty or to wait it out because nothing showed up on tests. Samples and bloodwork tried to prove me wrong. If the proof was in the pudding, I was screwed, because everything seemed like it should be perfect. It was anything but. I needed to keep pushing because no one else could. I was not a kid anymore, and that battle was my own.

Well Shit

After all was said and done, I am thankful I kept pushing and fighting. It was easy as a kid to get back up after trying something, like skiing or another fun and frivolous escapade. However, as an adult, I must learn to get back up each and every day despite how defeated and shaken I feel. Those days taught me about a strength I did not know existed, and I could never possibly give away.

Even without the sunshine and rainbows, a pot of gold was still to be found.

The Butterflies



Prior to moving back to Orlando in the summer of 2022, I was living just outside the city with my boyfriend, Grayson, and his parents for a month. We had been dating for about half a year at that point and rocking the long distance, but I was so excited to spend a month with them and get to actually see and be with him every day!

Being in someone else's house for an extended period always offers such a unique view into their life. That was such a special month for us, as I got to be with his parents and partake in family dinners. They made me feel like one of the family, and I got juicy stories from his mom about when he was little, so it was a win-win! The first day I was there, his mom whipped out the basket of photos from his childhood, and the stories never stopped coming.

Grayson's dad had just gotten a motorcycle. What kind of motorcycle, you may ask? I wish I knew, but it was beautiful, brand new, and shiny red. Nonetheless, Grayson loved it, and it sparked his desire to get a bike as quickly as possible.

At first, I did not particularly love the idea of a bike. When I was a child, someone said it is more of a "when" you fall off and less of an "if." He could be going around the corner and hit another car going in the wrong direction of the road—smushed. He could be in total control of the bike, but a truck full of chicken coops could swerve and knock him off the road. Or maybe . . . anxiety's a bitch.

Don't get me wrong, the appeal of the bike was great. The minute he put his gear on and stepped on the bike, it was so hot. But damn, the man I had fallen in love with was riding around on a

motorcycle. It was like letting someone take my heart and run through traffic with it. Although, I suppose that is a little like what love is too—trusting someone so deeply with your most vulnerable emotions.

The first day, we went for a little ride around the neighborhood. Since I didn't have a helmet, my willingness to leave the subdivision was subzero, but I had already begun to understand the joy of it. The smile on his face when I told him I would ride with him brightened my whole day.

Later that night, he bought helmets and gloves online, and they arrived within the next forty-eight hours! The helmets were great because they had Bluetooth in them and we could talk to one another or listen to music. Ready to go, I quickly learned a few things.

1. Motorcycles were ridiculously fun to ride on.
2. After a half-hour on the back, my ass would throb.
3. It was not as scary as I thought.

On July 4th, a few weeks later, we were riding after sunset for a late ice cream run. We drove down the beautiful streets in Orlando and little side neighborhoods with mossy hanging trees up and over the road. Old lanterns looked like night lights lining the streets, and picturesque houses scaling two or three stories were on either side. I kept my arms wrapped around his waist and snuggled in.

Comfort. Grayson brought me an immense amount of comfort from the moment I knew him. Why I thought the bike would be any

different, I don't know, but he drove so carefully that the only thing I remained worried about was the people around us.

As we headed into the city, passing farmer's fields, fireworks shot off all around us. The sky lit up in a masterpiece of light as they exploded to my left and popped on my right. Pinks and purples danced back and forth through the air. They reminded me of the sparkles my mother so carefully painted across my bedroom walls when I was younger. The memory fell over my heart and pressed on it.

Then the color scheme switched to hot reds, oranges, and yellows, looking like a continuation of the sunset I had seen not long ago.

Breathing in that precious moment, I squeezed Grayson tight to me. As some lo-fi house music played over my helmet, I felt like I was in a movie.

If we are being frank, I often fantasized about the concept of my life being a movie. I have never participated in the status quo of my peers. In elementary school, I ran clubs and became valedictorian. I graduated high school and university early and adopted online learning far before COVID came around. I went on mission trips in other countries at seventeen and moved to a different country at twenty because . . . I could? I have never done things the way we are taught, and I took pride in that.

Sounds great and all, but who was I to have my life as a movie? Nobody. I was no one. The thoughts rippled over my head in self-doubt. I shrugged them off and looked up at the sky, rethinking the statement. Who was I to *not* have my life turn into a movie? I was

little and the world was huge, but maybe, just maybe, if I could share my story, it could mean something to someone else.

I had never particularly been a romantic. To romanticize my life in all areas felt a little bit like wearing someone else's shirt at first. A borrowed sense of confidence. However, the more I held tight to the concept, the more each little moment meant to me. The mashed potato food fight with Dad in my childhood home. Or the time Mom got me to play hooky for my birthday and go to a Scandinavian spa. When you take the little moments for full value, they mean so much more.

On the back of Grayson's bike, I really leaned into the idea that every day was made up of moments. Your subconscious is in charge 95 percent of the time, which means only 5 percent of our days, we are fully checked in. Coming out of the past few years of COVID, I was determined to make every moment matter moving forward.

In the fairy tale movie that ran through my imagination, riding with Grayson was the perfect ending. Clinging to one another, they rode away into the horizon with the ultimate search for the best ice cream in town. Sounds like a movie, right?

Grayson and I arrived at the ice cream stand, but it was closed with a

Happy 4th! We are out for the fireworks! sign on the door.

We continued toward a park attached to the little subdivision and hopped off the bike, leaving our helmets on the back. At the amphitheater, benches ran along the edges of the semi-circle stage. I jumped up onto a seat, remembering a scene from *The Sound of Music*. Grayson grabbed my hand to steady me.

He skipped to the end of the benches and opened both arms for me to jump into. When I launched, he wrapped his arms around my waist, and I draped my arms around his neck and koala-hugged him. I kissed him softly, and he lowered me to the ground.

Hand in hand, we walked to the edge of the stage and over to a patch of grass. Bursts of fireworks were still flying off in random directions in front and behind us. When we sat, we had some of the first more serious conversations about our future. How we saw and valued one another and what that might look like moving forward.

I would have expected my stomach to have butterflies and to be worried about each response and to hang on every word. But not that day, not with him. Each word felt more and more like a soothing cure to any worry of the unknown question marks hanging between us. The butterflies were losing their place in my life. I was finding comfort and ease, for their presence was finally flying away. That was an evening to remember for sure.

We went home a little while later, driving back down that same road and watching some Netflix shows on the couch. It was simple. It was comfortable. It was everything I needed and more.

Imbossible



“What do you mean? *You* struggle with imposter syndrome?”

Cynthia looked over the table at me with her jaw hanging a little looser than I had ever seen it before. She was an industry friend I had known for two years, and we were part of The Inner Circle, which was a group of staffing agency owners from across Canada and the US. The ten of us would meet once a month over Zoom and once a year in person. We loved staffing, cared about one another, and always wanted to learn.

“Move to a different country, start her own business . . . Hannah MacDonald gets imposter syndrome?” she added.

In her late fifties, Cynthia successfully ran a minority-owned, medical-based staffing agency, in the state of California, no less. She was doing the IMBOSSIBLE, and I was in awe of *her*.

“I mean, yes! Don’t you? Doesn’t everyone?!” I said.

She looked me dead in the eyes and said, “No. I don’t. Everything I do, I have the ability to do because I put myself in that situation. No one else. Don’t give credit where it is not due.”

I wrestled with that statement on and off for the rest of the afternoon. *Isn’t it important to give credit to others?* I thought.

Later that afternoon, we ended up in the largest event room for the keynote speaker. Magic Johnson popped up on stage and gave a presentation on who knows what. As question time came and

microphones were given out to strangers in the crowd, I heard a very familiar voice. Cynthia's voice piped up on the microphone.

As she stood in front of thousands of people and her picture was blasted across the stage, she asked one very simple question: Would he do business with her? An initiative he had spoken about aligned specifically with an initiative she was pursuing. They had the potential to make amazing partners, and she knew it.

I nearly peed my pants just watching.

The guts it took for her to step out and ask that were immense. Maybe she really didn't have imposter syndrome because I would never have been able to fathom doing that. She saw something she wanted and ran for it. Then it worked! They met up later and began working together.

Every opportunity I have created, I have created for myself. I stewed on that idea for a little while longer. It was true. No one else had stood up and asked for his business. Thousands of people were in that room, and she was the only one. Then and there, I knew that would change my perspective on imposter syndrome. Little did I know how quickly the opportunity would come.

That very next day, a book editor came on stage in the same room. She spoke beautifully about the power of telling your own story and the importance of putting it on paper. She encouraged everyone to write books, not unlike the one you are currently reading. With my memoir nearly finished, I knew the next step was to find an editor.

Damn, I didn't want to stand up in front of the crowd and ask her to work with me. I didn't want to be rejected in front of a massive room of people. The crowd had dropped from a few thousand to a

few hundred for that session, but there was still no chance I was taking that risk.

Could it be worth it? When she said, “Everyone’s voice deserves to be heard,” she meant the older generations who have already experienced life and know what to say, right? I could not possibly have anything worth of value to say, could I?

Negative emotions boomeranged through my brain, and I was brought back to reality when I heard the words, “We have time for one more question.” I looked up, and someone else already had the microphone and was about to speak. I missed my opportunity.

I shifted into problem-solving mode. My time was not done. She was not gone. As the crowd applauded, she stepped off stage and headed toward the sound booth to give back her mic.

Without thinking, without questioning, I hopped out of my chair and marched to the back of the room. I locked in on my target and approached her. Speaking to a speaker after being on stage would be a tricky game. Sometimes, they were friendly, and sometimes, they were . . . not.

Do it. Don't think, just do it. I repeated.

“Hello? Stella?”

She turned around with her fiery red hair wisping behind her. The lengthy woman in heels towered over me.

“Hello?” She looked at me with a questioning expression.

Oh my goodness, she thought I was a twelve-year-old. What does a twelve-year-old have to do talking to a successful author, a business owner, and a public speaker like her?

“Hi, my name is Hannah MacDonald, and I was hoping to catch your attention for just a minute. Is this a bad time?”

Her expression grew softer. “Sure, Hannah MacDonald, what can I do for you?”

“I am working on a book right now that may be a little different from your average novel, but I would love to connect and see if it would make sense to work together.”

“That sounds good to me. Here is my card.”

She reached in her pocket and passed it over, and I had to double-check it actually had a phone number and an email on it, that it was not some lame marketing piece or something. But it did! Her contact information was right on the front, and I was in disbelief my question worked.

I said, “Ok, great. I will send you an email with a few times next week that work to meet. I will look forward to connecting!” Then we shook hands, and each of us turned around and walked away.

Holy shit. I couldn’t believe it was that easy!

An opportunity I created for myself and no one else. Hm, maybe she was on to something. In those moments, I felt so accomplished and proud of myself.

Imposter syndrome felt like a horrible doomsday event. Something that happened while I was underperforming. That day, however, it transformed into an amazing alert that reminded me of something.

Now, when imposter syndrome shows up in my life, I thank it! I thank it for the reminder that what I am doing is hard. I thank it for the reminder I am learning and learning takes time! I thank it for

the reminder to take it easy on myself when things don't end up perfectly, and then I move on.

Later, I found out the editor I was once so extremely excited to work with was a fraud. While I was tempted to fall back on the same track of thinking, I decided to express gratitude for the new information coming to light. I accepted it as it was. There was more to learn, and I moved on. She was the first of many editors I spoke to, and I was thankful for what I had learned from her.

Imposter syndrome always snuck up on me, but once I addressed why I was feeling that way, it helped me not only move on from it but also use it to my advantage. Not years but mere months later, I published the book *and* held the exact credentials of author and public speaker that I was once so impressed by someone else to hold.

Water Birth



Being in Orlando is such a magical thing. From Disney Parks to water slides and every show you could possibly want, it's a dream.

Well, in reality, all that tourist trap crap sucks. The only thing Hannah and I wanted to do on her vacation was sit by the pool with a drink in hand and get a tan. My best friend from home was in town to visit, so nothing could possibly dampen the mood.

We played in the sun by the pool all day long, only taking breaks to run back to the room for another round of cold drinks. We lounged in the sun, did cannonballs into the pool, and received side glances from husbands and wives all afternoon.

It was amazing. It was about to get so much better.

In Florida, there are heat storms that have intra-cloud lightning and cloud-to-cloud lightning. Intra-cloud lightning can also be called sheet lightning because, when it goes off, it lights the sky up with a "sheet" of light. Meanwhile, cloud-to-cloud lightning connects two different clouds. While this does not light the sky up as much, it certainly is a pretty sight.

One of those heat storms was about to invade us at Disney Springs. But before then, the sun was setting in one of the most picturesque ways I had been fortunate enough to witness.

Hannah and I watched it set over the bridge, then decided to stop for a drink. After trying to carefully navigate through the maze of Disney tourists to the back of the restaurant, we arrived at our

seats, with waters immediately in hand and menus to follow. Taking a load off a fifteen-minute walk in the ninety-five-degree heat was well welcomed.

The drinks, conversation, live music, and photo shoot were all fairly average. We chatted on and off about the increased level of hot men at Disney Springs compared to our resort, the ridiculous price of the drinks we were ultimately going to buy regardless, and how the poutine on the menu could not possibly compare to poutine from home. The pending storm, however, would be the real highlight of the evening.

As the conversation flowed, the clouds grew concerning. The guitar player's face contorted when he witnessed the forming black wall. That was our signal to ask for the bill and get a move on. It would be a race against time, for I was terrified of flashing the Disney Springs population with my soon-to-be white wife-beater and no bra.

Due to Hannah's lack of concern, I asked, "Are you seeing all of this lightning behind you?"

"I mean, I can see the reflection in your sunglasses."

"Oh, babe, there is so much more. You need to watch from over here."

We switched sides, and she sat in silent amazement as the sky lit up every ten to fifteen seconds, with bolts of lightning shooting from one cloud to the next.

"Seeing this makes me wonder how much of the world I have really yet to see," she said.

I admired how her brain worked. Mine looked more like spreadsheets and file folders, but I imagined hers as a mosaic of art and music swirling together.

We slurped the drinks until they were just ice, and then we exited and beelined to the car and the hotel to see Charlie.

The drive home was quick. Despite the rain and vicinity to Disney, the traffic flowed nicely from the time we left Disney Springs to sitting at the traffic light outside the resort.

The left turn lane, however, was about a football field long with red taillights confirming it was going to be a while. We cranked the music louder and sang in unharmonized perfection. As the anticipation of turning left built, so did our excitement.

We finally got through the light and turned onto the property. After whipping through security, I looked to my right and saw a grin on Hannah's face, which told me I was in for something. What that was, I had no idea, but something nonetheless.

With the click of the seat belt freeing her from the confinement of the seat, she rolled the window down and crawled out of it. She secured one hand on the roof handle, and the other grasped the window. Her entire upper half was outside of the moving vehicle, and rain was beating down on her and me. That lasted about two whole seconds before Hannah withdrew from the window looking like a baby emerging from a water birth.

As we pulled up to our building, I knew one of two things was about to happen. One, we get out and dance and have the best time ever. Or two, we get out in the cold rain and run inside, which would be short-lived and over before it stamped a place in my memory. Luckily, it was not the latter.

I put the car in park and spun the volume dial all the way to the right. Hannah turned on “Umbrella” by Rihanna, and we left our phones, shoes, and worries in the car to get out and dance. Holding hands, spinning, and laughing louder than the surrounding thunder, we were living in pure bliss.

After the song ended and our breaths became strained, I turned off the car and booked it to the elevator. Charlie had probably been dying to go out all evening, and I was sure he would be his wiggly, fluffy, Muppet-looking self and thrilled to join the adventure.

I saw Hannah in the full light of the elevator, and she wore a smile on her face. She was enjoying acting like a kid again as much as I was. As we got closer to the room, a buzz of energy radiated through the air, and I knew my favorite puppy was about to add only more to it. We flung the hotel door wide open, greeted Charlie with a huge smile, and, in return, received sloppy kisses.

With no leash, wet hair, and goofy grins, we all collected into the elevator and headed to the ground floor. The elevator took forever to ding from floor 5 to 4 to 3 to 2 to 1, like a line of Formula 1 engines waiting for the gun to go off.

When we hit the ground floor and the elevator doors opened, the race was on.

There are two different types of running.

1. Calculated running
2. Carefree running

Calculated running is every kind of run you measure, track, plan, or begrudge. It includes sprints during gym class and running during a soccer game. It is calculated.

Carefree running is more like running as a kid. You are doing it because you are equivalent to a puppy with the zoomies. There is no other logical place for the energy to go but out. This is like running to a loved one after waiting months to see them. You can do nothing to stop the urge. All there is left to do is run.

Hannah, Charlie, and I were having the longest and most carefree run I can recall in my adult life.

The storm screamed overhead, and the thunder and lightning were desperately begging for our undivided attention and would accept nothing less.

BOOM

The lightning looked like pictures I had seen on my desktop background. Begging to be seen again.

The lighting was bright and blinding, but the thunder came with a one-size-fits-all energy. It wanted nothing more than to be noticed and respected for its roar.

CRACK

As the storm grew louder, there was absolutely no pathetic fallacy involved because our energy remained high, regardless.

FLASH

Because Hannah ran track and field in high school, along with other sports, her stamina was far better than mine, and it showed as

we ran. The only exercise I did was ride the bench all season my freshman year after a soccer ball and my head got mixed up by the opponent.

BOOM

Hannah and I ran what I assumed was a half-mile before slowing down long enough to feel the forming pond between my toes. We entwined our hands and held on for dear life as we inevitably spun around.

Between very slippery fingers and the previous layers of lotion applied to solve the tomato-red faces we earned that afternoon, it was impossible to hold on. We tumbled to the ground with our limbs draped over one another.

Then I caught a glimpse of the nearby playground.

“Playground?” I suggested.

FLASH

“Playground,” Hannah confirmed.

We continued our race forward with the next leg of the trip as promising as the last. Our tanks were full, and before I knew it, my subconscious had already brought me to the top of the jungle gym. The carefree conquest continued. From the top of the playground, I scouted my target, swung from the handlebar, and slipped down the slide like a seal. When I reached the bottom, a large puddle enveloped every already soaking-wet surface of my body and splashed off the sides. Hannah was speeding down a taller slide to my left and looking for her next target.

BOOM

From the patio above, loud shouts cheered us on. The guests clapped as we put on a show.

Hannah, clearly energized with the task to entertain, said, “Pool?”

“Pool?! Oh, I am down, bitch,” I said, wanting to feed into it more.

We opened the gate blocking access from the playground, and with three large leaps, I plunged into the death trap in front of us.

Because the rain temperature was cooler than the pool water, I felt like I had jumped into a heated bath that was carefully set up with an appropriate bubble-to-toy ratio via Mom.

A warm sense of calm rushed over me as the water engulfed every inch of my body. But my sense of ease only lasted a split second because my feet hit the bottom of the oh-so-scary five-foot-deep end and my instincts came into high gear. Perhaps a thought I should have had on the metal playground moments earlier.

Once I had both feet planted firmly on the bottom of the pool, I pushed back off toward the surface. I reached a ladder and scurried up it to the safety of the concrete. Hannah, fast on my heels, and I ran back to the room in the rain.

As we ran, I knew that moment would be one of my favorite moments ever! The simplicity of it. No phones, no distractions. It was just us, being present and with one another, enjoying the simple act of running in the rain. Right there, right then with Hannah. Despite the distance between us, we continued to make it work. No matter what, no matter where, we were there for one another. We

tried our hardest to put in 50 percent, and it meant the world to me when she took the effort to travel down and visit.

Later that night, when we were snuggled up in bed, I vowed to not let those moments pass without offering them the respect they're due, rather than immediately whipping my phone out and taking pictures or worrying about what was next or tomorrow. Moments can come from anything and anywhere, but frankly, they really are what you make of them.

After graduating, I had been overwhelmed by that next big "moment" being too far away. The promotion you have always wanted, the amazing wedding, having a child, or buying a house—they had all felt like massive goals I was reaching too far for. While "big" moments are important and so much fun, an immense amount of joy can be found in daily life even if you intentionally seek it out.

We could have run inside and complained the trip to the Springs was cut short. Or we could have made the best of an occasion and ended up having one of our favorite friendship stories together.

Life is a series of moments all tied together. What you make of them, however, is completely up to you.

PSA: Jumping in a pool or playing on metal playgrounds in a lightning storm is probably not going to kill you, but ... you still should not do it.

Fairy Land



Sunday nights have always been a bit of a sacred time in my week. Right before the new week really kicks off, I would rest and refocus for the week ahead. I would fold some laundry and put it away, or perhaps apply a face mask or a hair mask, then crawl into bed early and get a good night's sleep before the week's adventure. Never have I been one to go out on Sunday night. Not to a bar, not to a restaurant, and probably not even to the corner store if I ran out of my favorite snack.

One Sunday in late March, the heat was already beginning to take a whole new form in the Florida spring. It had increased nearly ten degrees since the week prior. Now if that was Fahrenheit or Celsius, I have no idea because I had been living back in Florida for seven months and the measurement systems were a confused mess in my brain. Between kilometers an hour versus miles and the spelling changes in random words, I was really a CanShmerican at that point. A beautiful flag with twenty-five stars and half a maple leaf blending together in a mirage.

Grayson and I were getting ready to go out for the evening. I wore a mid-shin length sundress I was pretty sure was supposed to go to my knees, but oh well. My cute pair of flip-flops matched my new purse. As I looked in the mirror, I feel so grown up. *Hardly recognize myself.* I blinked the thought away and layered gold rings across my fingers.

Grayson had dressed in long black pants and had laid out three shirts for my approval. He looked at me in the mirror and raised an eyebrow.

“Banana?” he asked. “Which one do you think works best with these pants?”

“Definitely that one,” I said, pointing to the middle.

He smiled at me and put the others away in the closet.

“Where do you want to go?” Grayson asked in reference to what neighborhoods I was interested in exploring.

“I have no idea. I don’t really know the area. I just want to get a feel for it, I guess,” I said as he buttoned the shirt I had chosen for him.

“Ok, sounds good. We can go to the restaurant first, then just drive around the downtown area.”

We were meeting up with Meagan and her boyfriend, Guenther, who we had not seen in forever. I handed Grayson the keys to Dad’s Mustang. Normally, I like to drive, but with him around, I would pick the passenger princess.

As much as I was excited about that night, I could not shake the pending doom sinking my mood. I had so much to do. From creating a new employee guide, to the speech I desperately needed to memorize for my first public speaking event, to all the edits for the book sitting on my desk, I felt guilty about taking the evening to have some fun.

All those projects were amazing, but man, they were exhausting. In addition to starting a business with my dad, personal projects continued to pile up on my desk. Recently, my safest place was

Grayson, so I needed a night out with him to release some of the anxiety running through my veins.

As we entered Winter Park, I knew instantly it would not be a fit for that time of my life. However, the town was adorable, looking like a fairy land taken out of an old-fashioned Hallmark movie. Droopy moss from the trees fell across the gazebo in the center of a park we passed. It was pollen season, so everyone was sneezing, but beautiful flowers were perking up and out of the trees lining the street. There were adorable little light posts, and I dreamed to own and work out of one of those store fronts lining the Main Street one day. Even the houses fell into the category of “one day.” Some of them were larger than schools, probably with fifteen to twenty bedrooms, riddled with internal bowling alleys, wine cellars, mini movie theaters, and massive pools.

While they might have been my “one day,” Grayson and I were much more interested in a couple bedrooms and two baths. The only must on our list was a backyard for the dogs. We chatted on and off about the homes as we passed them, giggling about the someday.

We reached the restaurant where we were going to grab dinner with Meagan and Guenther. As we stepped onto the sidewalk, Grayson swung me from the left side bordering the road to the right along the shops.

“No, Silly Banana, that is my spot.” I smiled at my shoes, thinking how much I loved him for those little things.

We said hi to Meagan and Guenther, then opted to sit inside and away from the heat of the day. Over the course of dinner, we ate a lot of food. We talked about old times, current worries, and

hopes for the future. When you can share your past, present, and future with people, you know they are keepers.

After eating, we hugged them goodbye and went on our walk down the path. That time, the air was cooler and the town was louder. An orchestra was playing in the gazebo, which was amazing for a random free show. We split an ice cream and joined the gathering crowd. We had no folding chairs, so we found a wide-open spot in the back and sat.

The grass was plush beneath us. Clearly, the town had a massive landscaping budget. As we ate our ice cream, we chatted on and off about houses again. It was really our dream to end up at the beach. Learning to surf, going for bike rides down to the pier, and eating at a favorite local diner every weekend. Becoming locals to a beach town sounded like a change of pace I could stand for.

Grayson teased, “Just imagine, waking up before the sun and going out to surf for an hour, then coming home and still having time to take a shower before you have to hop on your eight a.m. morning meeting.” He had a sparkle in his eyes I could not help but melt into.

Sighing deeply, I memorized the moment. My heart warmed as I pictured our future together. Long-distance relationships were fun and all, but after a year and a half of flying and driving, I was ready to settle down. Maybe that was why I loved him so much. He was my grounding force, a sense of calm in any storm, and the balance that my chaos so desperately needed.

After finishing the ice cream, we lay on our backs. Crossing my legs, I put my head on his chest, and he wrapped an arm around my shoulders.

With his other arm, he pointed up at the stars and said, “That one is Venus. Right there.” I followed his pointed fingers and saw the brightest one above us. Then, pointing in a completely different direction, he said, “And that one is Jupiter.”

My spaceman. I looked up at him and smiled, feeling more at peace than I had in weeks. I nestled in closer and let the music playing over us enchant me deeper. That was exactly what I needed that night. Not a face mask or an early night in bed, but quality time with people that I cared about. A moment outside of my brain so that I could actually experience life again.

After I started my business, work had been running my life for months. While everything I was pushing for was valuable and important, my capacity was also wearing thin.

As we drove home that night, I had a perspective shift. Just because I could do everything did not mean it was good for me. I had been blinded by the potential of “what if” on so many projects that my attention was drifting away from the ones who truly mattered.

I have never been great at waiting for things, nor do I like to give up. Therefore, I found amazing employees whom I could share responsibilities with and take tension away from my brain.

Balance. Work-life balance was a bit of a myth in my life. Being in a family business, and then both living with and working with Dad, I had minimal boundaries. Sometimes, we would work until midnight on spreadsheets in his office, and sometimes, we would discuss business in the hot tub. But balance? Just balance, I could do. Some months, it meant personal stuff. Some months, it meant

Well Shit

professional stuff. It all melded together, but if you get just enough of everything, perhaps you can make it out alive.

Alexa, Play “Mastermind” by Taylor Swift



I pulled up to the front of the office to pick up Bradley.

“Ok, I just texted him to tell him we are here,” Bryan said from the passenger seat. We were about a thirty-second drive to the closest mall, and all three of us were looking for a good new book and a tasty meal.

“He says to come up.” Bryan gave me a side glance.

I countered, “Say no. We are ready! Come down.”

I already knew what was happening. Dad had finally gotten Bryan, Bradley, and me to the office at the same time, which had never happened.

Cheeseball, I thought. Why didn’t I just park the car and head right up? But I wanted to see if Dad would let Bradley go.

Rover red rover, we call Bradley over! I texted Dad.

Bryan followed it up with a new text to him saying, “Olly olly oxen free, set Bradley go!” We laughed in the car and mocked Dad and his quirky needs for sentimental moments.

A minute later, we gave in, as we all knew we would, and parked the car to head upstairs.

“How long does it take before he has his arms around us all?” I said to Bryan.

“Less than two minutes,” he replied.

It was less than a minute before Dad wrapped his big arms around us and pulled us in for a bear huddle.

“My kids!” he said with so much excitement I was thankful he had forced us to come in. He smiled so big!

“Look where we are!” he exclaimed with even more excitement than the last burst. He was wiggling his butt back and forth, a given sign of his enthusiasm. With the same hereditary gene, my brothers and I did the same wiggle in our brand-new Florida office.

Looking like an excited litter of dogs, we continued barking on about the new business my dad was buying and Bryan and Bradley would head up. We barked about all hopes and dreams for the future. In those moments, my “why” stood strong. Not money, not business, not success, nor fortune, but family.

About a year ago, my perspective on work had shifted. I had always seen going to work with the purpose to collect a paycheck I could take home each day to then purchase an experience, product, or service. However, after coming into my family’s business, I learned anyone can take home a paycheck. Not everyone, however, can make a difference.

What would life be if all I did was show up at work for the gratification of affording the cost of living? Nothing. That could not be the goal of why I went to work every day—it would crush me. However, I was incredibly blessed to have been given the opportunity to work and take home that paycheck. I was given the stability that most were not, and I will forever be grateful.

My perspective shift created a desire for legacy, to help others get that same sense of stability. To help others get the job they

needed and create the life they wanted. Something a family staffing agency would align with time and time again.

Laughing in that office with Bryan, Bradley, and Dad was special on the first day. We talked about the grandchildren that might someday sleep under our desks in pretend forts just like we had. We talked about the employees we will hire and the jobs we will find staff for!

As we headed out the door, Bradley yelled, “Meeting adjourned. Now everyone go get lunch on your company cards.”

We laughed as Dad nodded his head and said, “Only fair. I pulled you into the office on a Saturday of a long weekend.”

In the car, Bradley was gnawing on a pretzel in the back seat.

“Bradley . . .” I said with a drawn-out tone.

“Yes?” he asked. No drool that time, but he held the same facial expression of pure hunger.

“Is that the big pretzel from the floor of my car?”

“I don’t know?” he said with a mouthful of pretzel dust, sounding like Scooby Doo.

“Oh, no,” Bryan said from the front seat, making eye contact with Bradley in the back through the rearview mirror.

“I didn’t know it was on the floor!” Bradley barked.

“At least for three months now. I always forget to throw it out,” I said with a laugh.

“Yes, I can taste the staleness now,” Bradley said while Bryan and I turned into laughing hyenas in the front. He still ate the whole pretzel.

“Hannah, you have a car garbage right there!” Bryan argued, pointing to the back seat.

“And yet . . . it still never gets there. I don’t know why. It is just one of those stupid things I never do.”

After we got our books and ate lunch, I dropped Bryan and Bradley off to take Mom and Dad to an open house around the corner. I had a few errands to run, and we were meeting up again later for dinner.

When I sat with the four of them around the table at a nice restaurant, they told me the good news.

“We are putting an offer in tonight,” Bryan and Bradley said in unison as smiles grew across their faces.

“You are?” I said in excitement yet disbelief. My brothers, Bryan and Bradley, were going to join us now in Florida. All five in the same country again, in the same state, nice and close by. My five.

“Yes, they sure are,” Dad said. “They have offer letters to sign tonight, but in twenty-four hours, we should know if they get the house.”

Wow. I couldn’t believe they were doing it.

“I am so excited for you guys! You must be thrilled!” I exclaimed.

“This might just be our last vacation to Orlando. You never know,” Bryan said.

“Are you sad?” my mother said, looking across the table at me. “That you aren’t in a new place of your own yet?”

“Are you kidding?” I said. “I am so excited for you guys and the adventure that will come. My time will happen eventually. Besides,

anything you can do I can do too.” That made my mother smile, but Bryan and Bradley just shook their heads.

Looking across at my Dad and the big smile caked on his face I said, “Is your master plan all starting to really work out?”

He chuckled and said, “Yes, I think it just might.”

Mom turned to me. “I don’t know. Have you seen where we are? I think this master plan was yours all along, Hannah.”

It was the end of the beginning of the movie that was my life. Not the end of a chapter, but the end of the book. The sequel, I simply could not wait to find out.