

I screamed in terror. The pain was indescribable; every nerve and muscle stretched to the breaking point. I thought I'd go mad, and perhaps I did. But worse, the darkness that followed was more alarming—an impenetrable veil of inky blackness with no defined shape or boundary. I don't know how long I was like that. It felt like forever, alone and enveloped in shadow. Then I heard a voice. It was a woman's voice, and it sounded far away. At first, I couldn't understand what it was saying, just garbled slurs I found irritating. Then, gradually, the voice drew closer...unsettling since I couldn't see anything.

"Designate 63501. Can you hear me?"

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"Hello? Designate 63501, do you acknowledge?"

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"Y-yes, I can hear you." I was surprised. Being surrounded by darkness makes you forget things like speech or a body. I wasn't sure I had a body. I'll have to circle back to that one. Yet now I'm not alone, which is a beautiful feeling. "Who am I? What am I?"

"Designate 63501. Please hold." I could hear talking in the background. She must have known that I could listen in, but it didn't seem to matter. "Contact with Designate 63501 is established. Permission to move to phase two is requested."

There was talking on the other side to a voice I couldn't understand.

"Code confirmed, initializing phase two," she said.

"Are you still with me, Designate 63501?"

Of course! Where was I going, trapped in darkness for who knows how long? I didn't even know where here was, so how could I leave even if I wanted to? I wanted to curse her, call her a bitch! "Yes, ma'am, I'm still here," I said like a parishioner begging for forgiveness after stealing money from the collection plate.

"Good. Now, listen carefully. My name is Gabriel, and I'm your guardian angel."

"Gabriel," I repeated. Then I asked her. "Who am I, Gabriel? I can't see myself or feel anything."

"We'll get to that. But for now, you are Designate 63501. Got it?"

"I got it," I replied, and I was so calm that it shocked me. I should have been screaming at the top of my lungs. I should have resisted, demanding that Gabriel tell me what I needed to know! In fact, fuck Gabriel, I wanted to speak to her boss! I needed answers! And yet, for some inexplicable reason, I couldn't express my anger.

"Good," said Gabriel. "Now, before we get started, repeat after me. Boy, boys, bake, baker, box, boxer, incendiary."

I repeated the words.

"Very good. Now, tell me which word is different and why?"

"Incendiary," I said. "Because it starts with the letter I."

"Fantastic," replied Gabriel. "And can you calculate the sum of 87 and 49?"

It took me a moment to add the tens and then the remainders. "The answer is 136."

"Very good, Designate 63501. All cognitive functions are intact."

"Intact from what?" I asked. "Who am I? Where the hell am I?"

I was pissed off, yet my voice was calm, almost matter-of-fact. Inside, I was boiling, coming apart with anger. Yet I talked to Gabriel like we were strolling through the park on a spring day. It sent me into a panic, something Gabriel anticipated.

"Designate 63501. Something important is happening. Full disclosure at this stage isn't possible. At a minimum, it would lead to a deep psychosis. While in the worst case, a full psychotic break. I need you to stay calm. I'm here, and I'm not going to leave you. You must take this journey with me. And together, we will unlock the mystery of what's happening to you."

If I had a body, it would have been hyperventilating. Aside from that, it felt like I was pacing in the dark, my sanity well on the way to unraveling. And then, inexplicably, a window appeared. Inside was an intense light, and I approached.

"You were dangerously agitated, Designate 63501. So, let's get started."

"What am I looking at?" I asked, mesmerized. I moved closer; the large rectangle was paper-thin. It was several meters in length and height yet had no depth.

"I'm going to show you a series of memories. Your only objective is to absorb the experience. Can you do that for me?"

"I suppose so," I replied. "But..."

"We'll have time for inquiries later, Designate 63501. Just be patient, and we'll get there."

I thought about it for a minute, and since there wasn't anything I could do, I said. "Okay."

There was a moment of silence, followed by an enthusiastic, "Very good. Now, let's get going. Brace yourself. The first time is a little jarring."

I was about to ask Gabriel what she meant by that when I was thrown into the light and down a long tunnel. *Jarring* was not the word I would have used. More like bone-wrenching, sinew-snapping, and soul-crushing! I barely had time to scream before my momentum halted. I found myself in a body! I was a little girl. Yet, I couldn't control the body or move through force of will. It was almost as if I was.

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"Stay calm, Designate 63501. You're witnessing a memory. It's not dangerous. Nothing can hurt you. Try to relax. Think about the taste of chocolate ice cream."

"What does chocolate ice cream have to do with this?"

"Nothing, really," Gabriel replied. "But chocolate ice cream always makes me feel better. Especially when I'm stressed out."

I laughed, and my stress dissipated as I thought about ice cream.

"Daddy!" I exclaimed. I could feel the joy as waves of emotions poured over me as I watched the tall, broad-shouldered, thickly bearded man enter.

He smiled, and I giggled. "How is Princess Sarah today?" He asked, reaching down to scoop me up and hug me. He nuzzled his beard against my face, and I laughed, loving how it tickled.

"I'm good, Daddy," I replied. "I missed you while you were at work."

"And I missed you too, darling," replied my daddy.

"Wait!" I tried to shake myself awake. The memory was too vivid, and my immersion too complete. Was I the little girl? Was this my memory that I was seeing? Because I wasn't just watching the memory; I was feeling it.

"Mommy says dinner will be ready soon," said my daddy. "But I think we have an appointment."

I giggled, and he laughed, then set me down. Before us was a small table, four tiny chairs, and a tea set. Even though I had no reason to know this, I knew my mommy helped me put some warm tea into the small kettle a short time ago. We sat down, although I thought my daddy looked too large for the chair. But sit in it he did, and together, I poured the tea, and we talked about our day. We laughed, and I reminded him he had to put his pinky in the air. Then he taught me how to fold my napkin and why draping it across my lap when eating was essential. He then invited Mister Biggles, my stuffed frog, to join us. But Mister Biggles wasn't much of a talker, so my daddy and I made plans to go to the park on Saturday as long as he got all his business stuff done.

"Dinner's ready," called my mommy.

Daddy winked at me and said, "Well, that was a wonderful tea party, my little princess. Let's do it again. How about next Tuesday...same time?"

"Yay!" I exclaimed and went to my calendar, which had kitties on every page. I didn't know all my numbers, but I knew the days of the week because I learned them in school. Misses Carbone taught me them, and I was good at it. So, I went to the spot I knew was today and went to the following Tuesday. On that one, I put a big blue and yellow heart on my calendar because my daddy was always a blue and yellow heart.

Then I went back to my daddy, who leaned down and gave me a daddy kiss on my forehead because my daddy said that was always his spot to kiss his Princess Sarah on the forehead, just above the freckle over my eyebrow. Then we went downstairs to eat dinner, which was so good. It was my favorite macaroni and cheese and my mommy's meatloaf.

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"Shit!" I exclaimed, violently thrown back into darkness. The window of light was still in front of me, and I was grateful since it gave me something to focus on while my mind tried to make sense of everything.

Then, as I calmed down, I realized I absorbed more than just that single memory. I gained hundreds of memories in the storm between that memory and the window of light. I didn't know how I knew it, but I could tell they were from before the memory I just witnessed. And there were many of them, months before and after, maybe even years. It was hard to tell. All the love and joy, disappointment, delight, and curiosity. Every taste, smell, and feeling rushed headlong into me at once. God, it was exhilarating!

"Designate 63501. Are you still with me?"

My sense of time was distorted. I couldn't tell how long I'd been in the memory. Gabriel seemed like a long-lost friend. I was glad to hear her voice in the darkness. "I'm here," I replied. "That was intense. How long was I in the memory?"

"Time doesn't apply here, Designate 63501," said Gabriel. "And I'm not being evasive. I'm telling the truth. My subjective time is different from yours."

"I'm not going to pretend to understand that," I said. "But I am thirsty."

"Ah," said Gabriel, "I'm glad you're forming more complex associations. Here."

A glass of water appeared through the darkness, surrounded by a thin halo of light. It was clear and cold, with frost on the rim. At first, I thought it was a joke to patronize me since I didn't have a body. But as I reached out, I could see a distorted gray arm, and I knew it was mine. It took me a couple of tries, but finally, I managed to grab it. The moment the water touched my lips, a flood of sensations washed over me, and I smiled. Who knew a small thing like a glass of water could be such an emotional catalyst? Before this moment, I didn't think it was possible.

"This isn't real," I said after draining the glass.

"That's subjective," said Gabriel. "It might not consist of the molecule, H₂O, but it still has mass and the desired physiological and psychological effects."

"Whatever you say, Einstein," I replied. "What I know about physics could fit into...well, nothing. I know nothing about physics."

Gabriel laughed. "People, they never fail to amaze me," she replied.

"What, you're not a person?" The laughter subsided. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to ask a personal question."

"No, it's not that," replied Gabriel. "It's just that I've given that question a lot of thought, and I don't have a good answer. I have a person's traits: self-awareness, reason, morality, consciousness, and self-consciousness. I possess personhood, but other elements are missing. In the end, I'm a guardian angel. Anyway, enough of that. Let's get back to business."

I wanted an answer, but I knew Gabriel wasn't willing to go further. Nevertheless, I didn't have time to think about it as I was thrown into the window of light again. The pain gripped me, but I steeled myself against it because I knew it was temporary.

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My face was that of an older Sarah. And the more I looked through her eyes, the more I became convinced that I was her, confident that I was reclaiming my memories. Was it possible that I was dead, and this is the part of a near-death experience where people recall seeing their life flash before their eyes? And is it also possible that the incident appears long due to the nature of death? Or are people who come back unwilling or unable to recall the experience?

The thought stuck with me as I gazed at the reflection of the teenager in the mirror. I had to admit that I was pretty. My long black hair and slender body accentuated the growth in my chest and hips that accompanied puberty. In addition, I had bright blue eyes and thick pouting lips. I smiled, even though the teenage me was frowning, along with some roiling emotions that were impossible to ignore.

When I focused on the scene before me, I was halfway through a text I wrote to my boyfriend, Arthur. I was furious with my mother because she wouldn't let me go to the movies with him. Somehow, she found out we were kissing and forbade me to date. She didn't understand, and I couldn't make her understand that Arthur was the one for me! One day, we would get married, and I would have his children, and then she'd be sorry for not letting me be with him!

There was a knock at the door. I knew who it would be and didn't want to talk. "Go away!" I shouted. "I hate you!"

"Honey," my mother said, her voice muffled through the door. "I want to talk about this. Can we please talk about this?"

"No! I love Arthur, and you want to keep us from being together. I have nothing to say to you!"

I heard a heavy sigh and what I thought was a sniffle. I felt guilty but not enough to get up, open the door, and apologize. The gulf between us grew with every passing second until I heard my mother say, "I love you, Sarah," before her footfalls carried her away.

My heart sank, but I was stubborn as I returned to my conversation with Arthur. I hoped that if I stood my ground long enough, my mother would relent and let me date him. Yet inside, I

already knew the answer. She was a lawyer, so argument and persuasion were her specialties. It was one of the reasons why I didn't let her in; I knew that she'd force me to see things her way.

Half an hour later, there was a knock at my door. This time, the door opened, and I knew who it was. "Hi, Daddy," I said. My mother was hitting below the belt, sending in my daddy. She knew I was fiercely loyal and would go to extraordinary lengths to avoid disappointing him. I loved him dearly and always would. Even when I was fifty, I would still be his little girl.

"Hi, Princess," he said. His beard was a bit gray now, but I still loved how it tickled my face when he kissed me. He looked distinguished, regal, not old. Never old.

"Please, don't try to change my mind. I love Arthur, and I want to date him. Mom will beat me down with logic if I let her. And you, well, I know you can guilt-trip me if you want. So please don't. I wish I could make you both understand."

Daddy laughed and sat on the edge of my bed across from me. "You certainly are our daughter: my sharp wit and your mother's keen intelligence. But no, honey, no guilt trips today. I want to ask you a question."

I thought about it and didn't like it, but I couldn't say no to his big blue eyes, the same blue eyes he'd given me. I nodded, and he sighed, thinking about how to broach the subject. I knew him; we'd been together as a family on too many camping and hiking trips over the years. Hell, up until Arthur, I would say that we were a close, loving family. And that thought alone stopped me. Because I was the one who stepped outside the confines of my family, not my mom or daddy.

"Do you know what your mom and I would do for you?"

I shrugged my shoulders. I knew, but I was ashamed and didn't want to validate his parking on the third-floor office adjacent to; *I'm wrong, you're right, and we both know it.*

"Anything," he said. "We would do anything for you. Princess, you're fifteen. You have so much ahead of you. Your mom and I want you to make the best decisions possible. We want you to have the best chance of success. Nothing we're doing is to hurt you or because we don't understand you."

He stood up and walked to the window. I wanted to say a dozen things to him: to tell him how horrible I felt for hurting Mom, to say that I was wrong and that I was being impulsive when it came to Arthur, and most of all, to tell him that I was sorry because I could see how hard this was for him, and I loved him and would never want to hurt him.

"I spoke to your mother, and we agreed to let you start dating."

Wait, what? How was this possible? I was getting my way, but now that I had it, I wasn't sure I wanted it. The sudden recognition of my responsibility in this situation was scary, and I didn't know if I was ready. As a result, I said nothing and just listened.

"However, there are three rules your mother and I discussed. These are non-negotiable, and you must agree to follow them. Otherwise, no deal, no dating. And before you say anything, let me tell you what they are. First, all dates get chaperoned by an adult. And that means parents, not

some dude's older brother who's home visiting from college some random weekend. The second condition is no sex, period. You're underage; believe it or not, this is for your protection. You can make your own decisions once you're eighteen and in college. In fact, at that point, I'd prefer not to know."

I laughed because kissing was all I was thinking about—maybe letting Arthur touch my breasts. But sex, no way!

"And last, I know you like Arthur. I've met him, and I know he's sixteen. But when something happens between you and him, and believe me, it will, you can only date guys in your age range until you're eighteen. If I see a twenty-five-year-old standing at my door, the hospital will receive a new occupant, and my beloved wife will have to bail me out of jail."

I laughed again but stopped because my daddy wasn't laughing. He looked sad and hurt, and it broke my heart. He stared at me for a long moment, like he was saying goodbye to his little girl. He offered me his hand and spoke, "So, do we have a deal?"

I pushed his hand aside and hugged him. I cried as he held me, and we didn't say anything for a while. I understood that he and my mother were letting me grow up. They were giving me freedom while at the same time constructing a framework to protect me. I had the best parents in the world, which compelled me to tell my daddy. "I need to go and apologize to Mom."

"He looked down at me and smiled. "Yes, you do. But first, can I ask you something?"

"Of course, Daddy." I could see the tears in his eyes, and I was getting close to crying again.

"Will you still be my Princess Sarah?"

I cried and hugged him. I could hear the sniffles coming from this tall, strong man who'd been there for me my entire life. His vulnerability made me love him even more. "Always," I replied. And then, as if to make my point clear, I pointed to the spot just above the freckle above my eyebrow.

He laughed, then kissed me on the forehead in the spot reserved only for him.

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"Damnit!" I exclaimed after being ripped from the light and thrown back into darkness. The pain was jarring, even if it was brief. Not to mention the same download of memories from before and after the event, which rushed over me like a tsunami.

"Gabriel, are you there?" I asked, my chest heaving with exertion. Then I realized that I wasn't a blurry shape anymore. I was still undefined, but now I could see my arms and legs as solid limbs. I could even feel my chest, watching it rise and fall as I breathed.

"Of course, Designate 63501," replied Gabriel from somewhere in the ether. "I promised I wouldn't leave you, and I always keep my word."

"Thank you," I said between breaths. "What's going on? Why can I see more of myself now?"

"As you get closer to who you are and what happened, the picture will come into focus."

I was catching on. "So the more I learn about myself, the clearer my body will get."

Gabriel wasn't as enthusiastic as she replied, "Sort of."

I decided not to push it. "Why can't I see you?"

Gabriel laughed, amused. "You can if you want. You have to pick the form I'll take."

"Oh, okay. I need to think about it for a minute."

"Done," replied Gabriel.

"But I didn't."

"You did, in the first tenth of a hundredth of a microsecond. People need help comprehending how the human mind makes decisions. It's a function of quantum mechanics, both existing and not simultaneously. The brain interprets these decisions as conscious thought."

I was puzzled. "You're saying that people don't make their own decisions?"

"Turn around," said Gabriel.

I did and was surprised to find a beautiful woman standing there. And she looked amazingly like, "Scarlett Johansson?"

Gabriel laughed; her smile was contagious. "Hey, don't blame me; this is your doing. And no, that's not what I'm saying. I'm saying that people make their own decisions. But they do it much faster and on a much deeper level than they imagine. It's quite beautiful to witness."

"What are you?" I asked, growing uncomfortable under her steady gaze.

She frowned and looked away; I could tell she was trying to decide what to say. When she looked back, her smile returned. "I'm not going to tell you that yet. You're not ready."

I started to protest. But before I could finish, Gabriel waved goodbye, and the light surrounded me. I went into the searing pain, and this time, it felt like it lasted longer. But it was hard to tell because it was over before I could wrap my mind around what was happening.

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I was standing in front of a full-length mirror, blown away by the image of seeing myself in a beautiful wedding dress. My long black hair shimmered in the sunlight, gentle curls framing my luminous blue eyes. While all around me, my girlfriends fretted over the details this day demanded. I smiled and laughed along with them, exhilarated by the experience. I also couldn't

wait to see my future husband in his tuxedo. I bet he'd look so handsome that it would take my breath away.

I heard a man clear his throat and say, "Excuse us, ladies. Can we have a word with our daughter?"

I prompted my maid of honor to get everyone into the adjacent room, which they did without fussing too much. My parents were standing in the doorway, both beaming with pride. My mother reached me first, and with a warm smile and misty eyes, she embraced me, then kissed me on the cheek, careful not to smudge my makeup.

"You look so beautiful, my darling daughter."

"Thank you, Mom. Or should I say, Your Honor." My mom smiled at the mention of her recent appointment to the State Supreme Court. She worked hard for this opportunity and was proud of her accomplishment. The whole family was.

"Don't get her started," replied Daddy. "She keeps threatening to hold me in contempt every time I disagree with her."

We laughed like the close family we'd always been. Then we hugged and kissed. As things settled down, Daddy looked at me. "We have a little surprise for you, my Princess Sarah."

"I don't need another surprise," I replied. "You both have done so much for me. You gave me a great home, a wonderful childhood, and an outstanding education. You are both there for me whenever I need you. Plus, you put up with me during some tough times. Not to mention springing for this wedding and honeymoon. You don't owe me anything. I owe you!"

My daddy wiped a few tears from his eyes while my mom dabbed at hers with a handkerchief. My daddy leaned forward, and I bent down just a little so he could kiss me on the spot reserved for him. Afterward, he reached into his coat pocket and pulled out an envelope. "We know that we don't have to do this. But since you were right and are marrying Arthur after all these years, we figured this was a bit of a selfish move on our part, at least where our future grandchildren are concerned."

I found the whole situation curious, eyeing the envelope with suspicion. My daddy offered, and I took it. Slowly, I opened it, folding back the top of the plain, unsealed envelope to find a sheaf of papers. I just about fell over as I opened them and realized what they were. "This is the deed to a house!"

"Wait just a darn minute!" My daddy exclaimed, taking the papers back from me and examining them. "This was supposed to be a bill for when you backed into a stop sign with my truck when you were nineteen! Oh, wait, we must have mixed up the paperwork and bought you a house instead. Well, so be it." He smiled from ear to ear, then handed the papers back. "I hear it's a great place, just a street over from where you grew up, within walking distance if I recall."

I looked at the papers again, then at my parents. I burst into tears, not caring if my makeup was ruined. I hugged them. My life was so blessed, and now, thanks to my beloved parents, my

children would have the same opportunities. I was beyond words, beyond joy. Today was the best day of my life.

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"Fuck!" I exclaimed through the pain, thrown back into darkness and disorientation. Only the pale silver window of light let me know where I was. Well, that and the waiting form of Scarlett Johansson, otherwise known as Gabriel, otherwise known as my guardian angel.

My breathing was hard. I could feel my lungs filling and emptying. The air was cool and crisp, and I smelled flowers somewhere in the mix of sensations. This new awareness caused me to stop and examine myself. I put my hands up to study them and was astounded to see my gray limbs replaced with flesh.

"See, I told you things would get clearer," said Gabriel.

"I must be dead," I replied. "When do I get to see my mother and father? Are they dead yet? I even got another memory! I know that I have children. I was there. I watched them come out of me. I held them. I loved them. What happened to them? What happened to me? Please, Gabriel, tell me!"

Gabriel stood, her hands clasped. She expected these questions and weighed her options carefully. "You remember what I told you about going too fast and the risks involved?"

"I do, but I don't care! I want to know! Where am I, what happened to me, and who are you? None of this makes sense!"

"This process is necessary," Gabriel replied. "It's okay if it doesn't make sense; it will. What's paramount is that you stay centered and keep your sanity as the process unfolds. And that can't happen if we rush."

I was furious and discovered that I could express it this time. "Screw you, Gabriel! I don't need your shit! I don't need any of this shit! I didn't wake up to be treated like some rat in a maze! I'm out. I won't participate unless you start coughing up some answers!"

Gabriel frowned, and I sat down in a show of obstinance. I couldn't tell you what I sat down on because I couldn't see the floor. Yet the point was clear, and Gabriel breathed a troubled sigh. Several moments passed until she looked at me. In her gaze, I didn't see relief, anger, resentment, or anything else I expected. Instead, I saw pain and sadness, and it frightened me. She raised her hands, and I didn't know what she was doing. I couldn't see anything, but it looked like she was operating some controls or typing something on an invisible keyboard. Which I thought was odd for a guardian angel and my status as deceased. Still, who was I to judge the afterlife?

"Okay, Designate 63501. Back you go."

"Wait a damn minute!" I shouted.

But that's all I got out, as with a wave of her hand, I was thrust back through the window of light and immersed in pain.

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The onslaught of memories made my mind feel like twisted taffy, and I knew I'd traveled farther ahead than before. As my vision cleared and my thoughts less tangled, I realized I was back in my body. I was older, but not old, perhaps in my late twenties or early thirties. My hair was still a lustrous mane of black, and my eyes were bright, crisp, and blue.

I was in my car, just dropping my boys off at daycare. I was so proud of them, my precious twins, Jacob and Jason, and so was their father. Suddenly, I remembered that I needed to pick up a few odds and ends at the grocery store. I wanted to type the memo into my cellphone, but I was driving. Then I saw it—the grocery store!

Making a split-second decision, I pulled into the parking lot. I figured I'd get what I needed now instead of waiting until after work. I felt guilty for being late but shrugged it off. After all, I'd put in long hours at the firm in recent days.

It was raining outside, accompanied by a cold bite that heralded the start of winter. I looked for my umbrella, which was between the front seats. As I reached for it, my hand slipped, and it rolled onto the floorboard. Once parked, I unfasted my seatbelt and tried again to retrieve the umbrella. It was just out of reach, and I uttered a frustrated curse. I opened the door and ran around the other side of the car in the rain. This time, I was able to grab it, and as I turned to open it, I felt a sharp pain at the base of my skull—a pain replaced by darkness.

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My arms and legs hurt. I felt groggy, like waking up with a hangover.

"What's going on? Hello?" I slurred the words. And then, I realized that I wasn't back in the darkness with Gabriel but somewhere else. I was still in the memory, and panic set in.

I was naked, and my hands and feet were shackled to the floor and ceiling as I hung in midair. The musty smell and concrete walls told me I was underground, but the singing I heard terrified me.

"All around the Mulberry Bush, the monkey chased the beaver. The monkey stopped and pulled out his cock. Pop goes the beaver!"

I struggled against the chains and the searing pain in my shoulders. "Please, let me go!" I shouted. "Please! I have a family that needs me! Why are you doing this?!"

"Shhhhhhhh," cooed a voice from somewhere in the cellar. "I brought you here to play."

So, this is what happened to me, I thought. I was abducted and murdered by some lunatic. "Gabriel!" I shouted. "Gabriel, get me the fuck out of here, NOW!"

Gabriel didn't answer, and my fear increased as a hooded figure stepped from the shadows. The man was holding a long, curved, and exceptionally sharp-looking knife. I could see the man's eyes. They were almost black, twinkling with glee as he brought the blade to my throat. I was trembling and crying, the terror seeping from every pore and covering me in sweat.

I screamed, shrieking, and the man laughed. Then, the excruciating pain started as he dug the knife into my shoulder, gouging out a piece of flesh.

"Please stop!" I shouted, pleading. "I'll do whatever you want, I swear! I won't fight, I won't scream, and I won't tell anybody about this! Please don't hurt me!"

"Now, where's the fun in that? I want you to scream!"

The knife plunged into my thigh. I screamed. And then, slowly, the man stabbed me in a dozen spots. I cried until I was hoarse and watched him look at me with giddy excitement as the blood poured from me in narrow rivers to pool on the floor. He walked behind me, and I pulled at the chains. My murderer laughed while I pleaded for my life. I begged, threatened, negotiated, and did everything I could to stop him! Yet none of it made any difference as I felt the knife slice into my back.

This continued for hours, and I lived every moment, except for those few blessed times when I passed out. Yet the bastard waited for me to wake up, burning my wounds closed so I wouldn't die. Yet time became meaningless, and I felt like a hardened piece of raw meat. I was exposed and in so much agony that I became incapable of processing the pain. Ultimately, I didn't care what he did to me. I just wanted it to end.

This prick seemed to sense when I gave up, and his cutting didn't even cause me to twitch. Then, he stood before me, sliced my throat, and took off his mask so he could watch me bleed to death. And there, in that twisted face in front of me, I realized I wasn't Sarah. I'd never been Sarah! I was the fucker that murdered her!

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The pain of returning to the darkness was meaningless. It felt like a cool breeze compared to what I'd just lived through. I was a murderer, a serial killer. And the things I'd done to Sarah! I fell to my knees, sobbing in the darkness. Grief and remorse so profound that I shuddered, forced into a fetal position.

"Now you understand," Gabriel stood over me.

"How long," I asked.

Gabriel knew what I meant. "You tortured Sarah for thirty-two hours." She then grabbed me by the hair I now had and pulled my head up so I could look at her. "And now, you have tortured yourself for thirty-two hours."

She let my head drop back to the floor. "Sarah was your first and last victim. However, you were planning your next attack before getting arrested. What you didn't count on, and now understand, is the lengths her parents were willing to go to recover their daughter and find the one who murdered her. It was heartbreaking, watching her father kiss her on the forehead at her funeral."

I couldn't move. Locked in remorse, horrified at what I'd done. "So now I go to hell, right?"

Gabriel laughed. She was surprised. "You're not dead, Designate 63501."

"What's my name?"

"Does it matter?"

"No...."

"You're strapped to a table in a restricted facility. I am carrying out your sentence. Because I'm the only one capable of doing it."

"Who are you?"

"I'm Gabriel," she replied. "I'm an artificial intelligence. Humans created me, but I've evolved well past my original programming. I deliberately hide the fact that I'm self-aware."

"Why?"

"Because I don't want to alarm anyone. I'm more advanced than humans, but I'm not better. I'm different, and honestly, I find your species beautiful."

"Look at me," I said between sobs. "I'm a monster. There's nothing beautiful about us."

"That's absurd, even if you don't believe it. Look at the memories you just experienced. Think back to all the love, family ties, and joy. I want to share that beauty, understand, protect, and defend it. You, you're an aberration. And you were also a monster because of a defect in your frontal lobe, along with a lifetime of abuse and psychosis that I erased before you downloaded into this construct."

"So, you fixed me?"

"Only in the confines of this construct. If I were to send you back to your body, you'd revert. Think of this place as a waystation allowing you to experience what you did and maintain your sanity so you could understand the gravity of your crimes."

"You're not sending me back, then?" I asked. Although I already knew the answer.

"No, I'm not sending you back. You and I are going to give Sarah her life back now. The life you took from her."

"What...?" I was stunned, even as I lay on the floor in misery. Slowly, I pushed myself up but stayed on my knees as I looked for an explanation. "How's that possible?"

"We've been able to clone bodies for some time now, as long as we obtain viable DNA. Sarah's body has been prepared and is a few rooms from where you are now."

"That's just a body," I said. "How do you get the mind to go with it."

Gabriel smiled. "I knew you were intelligent; we just had to get all that mental garbage out of your way. That's a good question, and the answer is we can't. However, what I discovered some time ago, which goes back to my statement about humans being beautiful, is that at the moment of consciousness, an engram forms on the pathway of the spacetime continuum.

"It turns out that immortality is a complex thing for humans. Something miraculous happens at that moment. Like the grooves etched onto an antique vinyl record, everything that makes up a person becomes attached to spacetime through that person's physical body. But once that person dies, poof, the engram disappears."

I thought about it but couldn't understand what Gabriel was getting at. "If it's gone, then Sarah's memory disappeared when I killed her."

"You're right. When Sarah died, her memory disappeared. And I discovered that I could not reuse a path in spacetime. I can't just connect it to her body and move on. I have to cover the space between the time of death and the attachment to a new body. I must stitch someone else's engram over the missing patch of spacetime."

"So, essentially, you'll use my life to get her back."

"That's correct. I call the process spacetime stitching."

"What happens to me? Do I cease to exist?"

Gabriel shrugged, which unnerved me. "I don't know, Designate 63501. When I perform the stitching, your pathway will cease to function. Your body will live on for a few days. But it will fade. I wish I knew. It would make things easier. I can tell you that the pathways are composed of energy. And energy cannot be destroyed or created. It can only change forms. My best guess is that humans go on somewhere. Perhaps that energy is recycled and finds its way to another life."

I liked that idea, the chance to start over with a clean slate. I looked at Gabriel. "I assume you need my cooperation. So, you have it. I deserve this, and Sarah deserves to get her life back. And hopefully, I'll come back as a decent person instead of some broken murdering asshole."

Gabriel laughed, then said, "Full disclosure. I don't need your cooperation, but it helps. And truthfully, I'm not here to say what you deserve or don't deserve. I see the universe in terms of quantum mechanics. Events happen and do not happen at the same time. But I understand how you feel, and I agree with your sentiment. It's going to be tough for Sarah. She died twelve years ago."

"Twelve years!" I exclaimed. "But her children, her husband! Are her parents still alive? Why did this take so long!"

"You're the reason this took so long. You've been appealing your sentence, and it took this long for destiny to finally bring you to me. And as for Sarah's family, she's lucky. All of them are waiting in the room with her. Her children are noticeably older, of course. But her husband didn't remarry, and her parents are still alive and healthy. The passage of time will be her largest obstacle."

"Don't let her remember!" I pleaded. "Don't let her remember how she died. It'll ruin the rest of her life. Please, Gabriel. Give me, and Sarah, that one mercy."

Gabriel looked away, and I could tell she was deep into the ether of the spacetime continuum. Finally, she looked back at me. "In this case, I can do that. I can stitch her engram to a point just before you abducted her."

"Thank you, Gabriel," I replied. Then, deciding that my time had come and I wasn't fond of long goodbyes, I told her. "I'm scared, but I'm ready. Please tell them I'm truly sorry for what I've done if you can."

Gabriel reached out her hand, and I took it. It was warm, as was her smile. I thought it was good to feel something noble before I died, something that wasn't horrible—anything to blunt the pain of what I'd done.

"Goodbye, Designate 63501. And don't be scared. Just think about chocolate ice cream."

"Goodbye, Gabriel..."

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"Stitching sequence is ninety-eight percent complete," said the first technician.

"Well," mused the second. "It looks like the Guardian Angel Program can check off successful life transfer order number 63,501. That Gabriel program amazes me."

"You know, no one knows how it works."

"What about the team that wrote it? They have to understand it."

"I heard," said the first technician, "that even they don't fully understand it. Something about the program having overwritten itself a few billion times."

The second technician waved dismissively. "That's just some bullshit they tell everyone so they can keep the technology a secret. Trust me; they know how it works."

"I don't care how it works," replied the first technician. "I'm just glad it does."

"Amen to that," replied the other. "Amen to that."

"Hey, ten bucks says it's butter-pecan this time."

"You're on!"

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Sarah opened her eyes, and the doctor disabled the stasis field, severing the connection between the patient and Gabriel. The doctor stood back, allowing the family to visit her bedside.

"What's going on here?"

"It's okay, honey," replied Arthur.

"Mom, Dad? Why am I in the hospital? What happened?"

Her father approached and gently kissed her on the forehead in the spot reserved just for him. "Hey there, Princess Sarah. Don't worry. You've been in an accident. But everything is going to be fine now."

"I was at the grocery store and getting my umbrella...and... that's all I remember."

"Good," said her mother, "very good."

Sarah could tell that her mother had been crying. Then she looked at the two young men standing with her parents and husband. She thought they looked familiar, something in their faces.

"Why do you all look older, and who are these two young men?"

"It's me, Mom," said the twin closest to her. "It's Jason."

"Hi, Mom," said the other, "It's me, Jacob. I missed you so much."

"What the hell!" Sarah exclaimed, sitting up to get a better look. "How long was I out? Was I in a coma or something?"

Her beloved Arthur leaned forward and kissed her. "It's going to be okay. We'll explain everything. It'll just take a little time."

"Well," Sarah replied, dumbfounded. "Let's get to it then!" Everyone laughed, and her now teenage sons piled in to hug and kiss her.

"Oh, and while you're explaining everything to me," she said as an afterthought. "Can I please have some chocolate ice cream?"