

Mandy & Merv
World Building and Plot Outline

Story by Nikki Ziolkoski, Iván Plouganou, and Jasper Chao

Mandy & Merv is the narrative design for the pitch of a third-person, action-adventure horror game where you play as Mandy, an insecure and unpopular high school senior.

After being in a terrible car accident at a young age that took her mother's life, Mandy has never felt welcomed in her own home. She fights against her dad's ridicule every day and only finds solace in cheerleading. Mandy is desperate to become a head cheerleader and find her place on the team.

With the support of her one and only friend, Chelsea, she spends hours practicing her cheer routines in her bedroom, hoping that, one day, she'll finally feel like she belongs. But things take a turn on the day of the tryouts...

Characters

Mandy Williams



17 / she/her / High School Senior / "Cheerleader Extraordinaire"

Mandy was born and raised in Davenport and spent her early years being active with her mother. The two were very close, and it was her mother who pushed her to pursue her dream of being a cheerleader. Attending every cheer practice, her mother was her biggest fan.

Until an accident in 1985, when the two were walking along the sidewalk to the gymnasium. Mandy's father pulled up beside them, offering a ride. Unaware that he had just come from the bar, Mandy and her mother got into his car and could do nothing as he swerved into oncoming traffic. The resulting crash was a tragedy, taking the life of Mandy's mother.

Since then, Mandy has grown reserved and quiet, an outcast at school and in her own home. Belittled by her father, she drowns in insecurities and self-doubt, unsure if she'll ever be able to achieve her dream of being a head cheerleader.

Merv (Morghom Eurogum Rogumon V)



Unknown Age / he/they / Contract Demon / "Asshole"

Merv was brought into existence millennia ago, the exact date unknown. His family is full of powerful demons, their strength known and feared all throughout Hell. They can get whatever they want, whenever they want.

Despite being surrounded by such power, Merv is the opposite of his family. He is weak and small-statured, unable to conjure up any deals with humans despite trying over and over. His family calls him an embarrassment to the Rogumon name.

Having been given one final chance to grow powerful, Merv resigns himself to doing whatever it takes to make a deal with an unwitting human. When he hears a plea from a young girl, a kindred spirit, he jumps on the opportunity.

Chelsea Hill



17 / she/her / High School Senior / “Bestie!!”

Chelsea was born in a neighboring town, her family moved to Davenport due to a job opportunity when she was ten. She quickly bonded with Mandy due to their shared status as outcasts.

Unlike Mandy, however, Chelsea is good at handling conflict and fitting in. Her gentle nature and kind disposition allow her to establish close connections with others with ease. Before long, she integrated herself as a member of Davenport.

Despite her having other options in friends, she never abandoned Mandy. She sees Mandy as the one who saved her when she was at her lowest and would never betray her under any circumstance.

Tom Williams



45 / he/him / Cop / “Father”

Tom has lived in Davenport his whole life, striving to join the police force since he was a young boy. Achieving his wish, he’s gotten greedy with power, making petty arrests and yelling at his staff. When he’s not working, he spends hours at the bar, drinking until he’s full and watching whatever sports game plays on the television.

But he wasn’t always like this, having once been a loving father and husband. He had cared for his wife and wished the best for his daughter, only drinking after a long shift on Fridays.

One afternoon, he left the bar and drove past his wife and daughter walking on the sidewalk, heading toward cheerleading practice. He had pulled over, offered a ride, and proceeded to crash into oncoming traffic, too inebriated to swerve away or control his speed.

Tom blames his daughter for the crash, wishing desperately to bring his wife back. He began to dabble in the occult, trying to find a way to reincarnate her until his brother, Ted, put a stop to it. Harboring a grudge, he waits impatiently for his daughter’s 18th birthday and the opportunity to reincarnate his wife into her body.

Ted Williams



43 / he/him / Retired Medic / “Uncle”

Ted is a hard worker, dedicated to his job and his family, despite having never married. He cares deeply about his brother and niece and enjoys being a part of their lives when he was allowed.

Working as a medic, Ted was one of the first on the scene during the crash, pulling Mandy’s body from the wreckage and being the one to state the time of death of her mother. Since then, he’s had to watch his brother, Tom, sink into despair.

When Tom began delving into the occult, talking nonsense about bringing back his wife, Ted tried to put a stop to it, but to no avail. He was estranged from the family and told to never make contact again, with Tom drafting up a restraining order at the police station. He lost access to Mandy, unable to watch and help her grow up.

He’s a smart man and worries deeply for Mandy’s well-being, keeping a careful eye on her from afar.

Daniel Smith



42 / he/him / Cheerleading Coach / “Creep”

Daniel was a man with great ambitions. During his time in high school, he was admired for his great athleticism, skills in basketball, and good looks. He was fast on track to leaving the small town of Davenport to play in the big leagues. It all came abruptly to an end with a torn hamstring.

Since that time, he has settled for what he claims to be a mundane life. He married his high school sweetheart and started work as a gym teacher at Davenport High. He lives vicariously through the students that he coaches and is extremely controlling of them.

His fragile ego and narcissism often cause issues with the other faculty members, and none of the students really like him. He makes creepy advances on the girls in an effort to relive his glory days. He also sees Jessica as an extension of his legacy and forces unrealistic expectations upon her.

Jessica Smith



17 / she/her / High School Senior / “Head Bitch”

Jessica grew up in a strict household, her mother pushing her to follow in her footsteps and go into cheerleading. While enjoying the sport, the pressure has turned her bitter. She takes it out on those around her, making fun of everyone outside of her immediate friend group—especially Mandy.

Her bad self-esteem is deep-rooted but hidden well, with her personality coming off as entitled, proud, and stuck-up. She skips classes, pays for copies of tests, and always gets the head cheerleader position (and *not* just because her dad is the coach).

Jessica is rude and snarky, her words always having a bite to them. She talks behind people's backs and prays for their downfall. Her hatred toward Mandy is unwarranted, though intense; she's vowed to do everything in her power to keep the head cheerleader position, making sure Mandy doesn't steal it from her.

Backstory

Located in a flyover state, Davenport is a small town of roughly 800 people. It's a place where nothing really happens – people go about their days in blissful serenity, largely disconnected from the rest of the world. People are expected to follow the law to the letter, and they do not enjoy any surprises.

In 1985, an incident took place and threatened the peace of the town. A family of three was involved in a vehicular accident, resulting in the death of the mother. This event caused a massive stir in the community, as this has never happened before in the history of their town. People looked upon this as an attack on their way of living and ostracized the surviving members of the family, despite the father being an authority figure.

Fast forward to 1993, when one of the surviving members of the family, Mandy Williams, makes a decision that will disturb the peace of Davenport once more.

1. A Family Dinner (written by Nikki Ziolkoski)

Her muscles are sore from overexertion, but Mandy still practices. The carpet of her bedroom floor is rough against her bare feet, and the tight fabric of her uniform itches her skin. Mandy's breaths are labored as she runs through her routine over and over, only stopping when she hears heavy footsteps on the staircase.

Without knocking, her father pushes into her bedroom, a disappointed look Mandy's all too familiar with on his face. He takes in her cheerleading outfit and frowns. It's the same story he always tells, the same hurt he always brings up.

Mandy's mother had a car crash. A horrific scene, a hole in the family. How Mandy ruined everything, and how she continues to ruin everything. She'll never make the team; she'll never fix the family. An embarrassment.

He leaves as easily as he enters.

Mandy still practices.

*

It's later in the evening when Mandy finally thinks she's nailed the routine, spare for that one tricky jump—she doesn't have space in her room to practice it, and she's too afraid to do anything out in the family room, where prying eyes can watch her every move.

And while she could keep trying, keep knocking her ankle into her bedframe and slapping the back of her hand against the wall, the sun has set outside and her stomach rumbles, egged on by the smell of food wafting up the stairs.

So she calls it a day and assumes that this is the best she can do for now. There's time to practice tomorrow; she should get a good sleep, anyway, so she's got as much energy as possible for the tryouts.

Her feet are light on the stairs, a contrast to the heavy ones she had heard earlier.

The smell of the food grows stronger, and her stomach grows louder. She pads through the hallway and into the kitchen, where a pot sits on the stove.

It's rare that her father cooks anything, being so busy at work and so distraught at home; his days are spent drowning in petty theft case files and terrorizing those taken in for questioning, while his nights are filled with alcohol bottles and harsh words thrown her way.

In the pot is a clear soup, bits of vegetables floating on the surface. It smells... *good*, she tells herself, as she spoons some into a bowl and grabs a spoon.

Her father is sitting at the table, his own bowl in front of him and a near-empty glass of whiskey in his hand. He doesn't raise his head when she sits down opposite him.

Mandy eats to be polite, to fill her stomach, and to energize herself for the next day. She tries to be as quiet as possible, scared to disrupt whatever thought her father is stuck deep within.

She almost makes it through her whole bowl of soup without a conversation.

Droplets of liquid hit the table, and splash onto her skin, as her father throws his spoon into his bowl with his free hand; with the other, he drinks the remains of his liquor and sets the glass down harshly.

His voice is deep, raspy with alcohol, and the force of his yells from earlier at work. He still doesn't raise his head, but he speaks directly to Mandy.

It starts the same as it did earlier: the story of her mother, of the crash, of the days that followed. He talks of her failures, her disappointments, and her inability to be a good daughter.

He tells her to give up before tryouts, and that he hopes she fails. He tells her that he *knows* she'll fail.

Mandy eats her soup, spoonful by spoonful, trying to not let the words get to her. She breathes deeply, evenly, and blinks against the tears stinging her eyes.

Her father pushes his chair back from the table, splashing more of his soup over the wood finish. The chair clatters to the floor and he snatches his glass, grabbing it so tight Mandy flinches, expecting shards of glass to shoot toward her.

Instead, she's stung by the harshness in his tone as he says words he never has before.

He tells her that she better not go to tryouts the next day, that she better not make the team. She'll be kicked out, lose her home and any finances she might have. He hopes she hurts herself, he tells her—hopes she fails. Her father wishes pain and suffering on her, the same type of pain and suffering she's caused him.

Mandy eats in silence as her father points directly at her, muttering words about how he wishes it were her to die in the accident instead.

And with that, he leaves. Footsteps heavy down the hallway, heavy on the stairs. Mandy is left in silence, a spoonful of soup halfway to her mouth.

2. A Rewind (written by Nikki Ziolkoski)

The pavement sends shocks up her legs every time she lands on it, but Mandy keeps practicing. There's one jump she can't ever get right, and she's running out of time. If only Chelsea were here to help her, but her friend is nowhere to be found. Still, Mandy keeps going.

Her hair falls in her face with every kick, every twist, every jump. She worries she won't have the routine down by the time it's her turn. After missing a step for what feels like the thousandth time, Mandy huffs out a frustrated breath.

Just as she's about to begin again, she hears footsteps behind her, a chorus of voices and laughter. Mandy doesn't turn around, knowing who she'll see. The other girls were scheduled for tryouts before her, they must be finished; it must be her turn.

An annoying voice calls out to her, a venomous sweet tone hitting her ears. Jessica calls her name again, repeating it until Mandy finally turns around.

The girl stands there with her arms crossed over her chest, the others behind her mimicking the stance. Jessica smiles at her, her head tilting condescendingly.

Mandy is nice, and civil. She asks how the tryouts went, and tries to get them to wish her luck on her own. But before she can finish her sentence, Jessica cuts her off.

She tells Mandy that there's been a change of plans, that the basketball team needs the gym for something so tryouts are in a different location—they sent out an email, she says. Mandy must not have gotten it.

So she follows the group of girls, trying to forget what her father had told her that morning. She's so caught in her own head that she doesn't pay as much attention to the cheerleaders as she should; but why would they lie to her? They're all chasing the same thing—a spot on the team.

Jessica leads her around the back of the school, the pavement cracked and crumbling under their feet. She says something again about the tryouts being moved, how Mandy's lucky to have run into them so she didn't embarrass herself.

A gasp from one of the girls, followed by a suggestion to practice her routine one more time for them so they can critique and help. Mandy agrees, letting the girls position her in front of a door. The girls crowd around her, Jessica right in front.

With her father's words running through her mind, Mandy begins with a deep breath. Her arms raise above her head, and her legs bend. She counts the beats in her head and doesn't hear the creak of the door behind her.

Just as she's about to do the jump she always messes up on, Jessica's hands shoot out and connect the square with Mandy's chest. The push is hard, makes the breath catch in her throat, and then she loses her balance and falls.

Mandy loses all sense of direction as she falls, confused about where she is until her back connects with the hard edge of a stair. She tumbles, falls, rolls down the steps, and lands painfully on her leg, a disgusting cracking blending in with the thud of her body. Her vision is blurry from tears, she can barely see the girls laughing at the top of the staircase, and can barely register the small sliver of light leaving as the door she fell through is closed.

Hands stinging with scrapes and her leg throbbing with a white-hot pain, Mandy tries to catch her breath. She throws her arms out as she lies on her back, hands searching for anything she can grab onto to help herself stand up.

Mandy tries to breathe through the pain, hoping to convince herself that it isn't as bad as it feels. She grabs around, finds the edge of something, and pulls it closer to her. Fumbling, Mandy drags a board toward her, the edge full of splinters that dig into the skin of her palm. Tears stream down her face as she pushes herself up into a sitting position.

With extreme effort, she manages to stand on her left leg, leaning heavily on the board tucked under her arm. She hobbles, hops, and cries out in pain as her toes stub into a concrete wall. Mandy sobs, sniffles, and steels herself. Her foot drags along behind her and sends shocks of pain up her entire body.

Finally, she finds the foot of the stairs.

Mandy hauls herself up the stairs one by one, reaching the top after what feels like hours. The door opens with a heavy push, and she squints against the late afternoon sun.

She doesn't know where to go, doesn't have a phone to call anyone on. Chelsea lives too far away, Jessica and the girls are nowhere to be found.

So she begins hobbling on a leg she'll never be able to cheer on again.

3. *A Vengeance (written by Nikki Ziolkoski)*

Having somehow made her way back home, grateful that she lives close to the school, Mandy throws the board she was using to support herself down beside the front door. Her hands fumble as she unlocks the front door.

The house is empty, the silence broken by the closing of the door and the drag of Mandy's foot over the carpet. She stumbles through the living room, and the kitchen. Without conscious thought, she finds herself in front of her father's study, remembering something he'd said about a distant uncle, estranged from the family. He had been a paramedic before he retired, his stuff stashed away somewhere in the house. It's her best bet; the hospital is too far and too expensive, and there's no phone in the house where she can call for help.

Mandy tries the door, knowing it'll be locked—it always is. Except, this time it's not.

The door opens without a hitch, and she drags herself in.

There's a messy desk in the centre of the room, books and papers strewn all over it. Mandy pulls herself closer, leg aching.

All of a sudden, she hears a voice, loud and shrill and coming from right behind her eyes. It makes her fumble and she trips, catching herself on the edge of the desk. The voice whispers words to her, incomprehensible. She grips onto the desk, crumpling some of the pages; looking down, she sees a photograph of someone familiar—he looks like her father, but older. It must be her uncle.

Mandy flinches against the voice again, its words easier to make out. It tells her to read the book on the desk, to flip the pages, to follow the instructions. It's loud and ringing, and she follows its instructions.

The book on the desk is large, flipped open to a page with symbols. She reads.

It tells her to recite something, that, if she does, all her problems will be healed. She'll be healed.

The pain in her leg is overwhelming, the hurt in her chest overpowering. When she recites the words, she squeezes her eyes shut and hopes for the best. All the while, the voice in her head is getting louder, easier to understand, screaming, until— Silence.

When she opens her eyes, she sees a figure standing in front of her. It's shadowy, vaguely shaped like a human. The voice she heard before emanates from it.

It speaks to her, telling her they're the same. Hated, misguided, abandoned; it can help her. Merv, the thing introduces itself as, can heal her. He can help her get revenge on those who wronged her. All she needs to do is help him out—a simple deal, he says. He can trust her.

Mandy looks down at her leg and sees the swollen and bruised flesh.

She thinks of the other cheerleaders. She thinks of Jessica and her hands on her chest, the force of her push.

She thinks of the thud of her body against the stairs and the floor. The fact that she'll likely never cheer again.

Merv speaks again and tells her that her pain doesn't have to be permanent. He can help her. Her end of the bargain is simple.

Mandy takes a deep breath. She looks once more at the picture of her uncle, at the symbols in the book.

Sticking her arm out to shake the hand of the shadow figure, Mandy seals the deal.

4. A Plea (written by Nikki Ziolkoski)

Merv shakes Mandy's hand and a chill runs through her.

All at once, the pain in Mandy's leg disappears. She stands upright and tests her weight on it. Relief floods through her.

Inside her head, Merv tells her that he can do so much more for her. She can trust him, he's on her side. He wants revenge on those girls just as much as she does. He tells her how wrong it was of them to do that to her.

But first, they need to get her a second chance at tryouts.

Mandy agrees, filled with a newfound vengeance and desperation. On her newly healed leg, she walks out of her father's study, being careful to close the door behind her so as not to alert her father that she was breaking his rules.

It's a quick walk back to the school, with her leg feeling great and Merv's voice in the back of her head. He sounds excited and happy to be working with her. He keeps telling her that they can help each other.

The sun has set as she steps back into the school, the hallways are empty. She heads toward Coach Smith's office, ready to get a second chance at the tryouts she missed.

Coach Smith's door is open, and he sits behind his desk, always one of the last to leave the school. Mandy knocks on the doorframe, hesitant. The man gives off a horrid energy, creeps, and is disturbed. But he's her only hope, so she plasters on a smile and steps inside when he gestures for her to.

The coach stands from his desk and walks around it, asking her what he can help her with while going behind her to close his office door. Mandy hears the lock click.

Merv tells her that he can help her, she just needs to let him; he can take over, and make sure she gets what she wants. But Mandy refuses, too caught off guard by the coach's hand on her shoulder to respond to the demon she's made a deal with.

Shivers run down her spine as the coach speaks in a grimy, soft tone. He tells her that he was sorry to see she missed tryouts and that he's assuming that's why she's in his office now. He can get her another one easily, possibly even promise her a spot on the team regardless; he tells her she can be a head cheerleader if she wants. If she does what he asks.

Mandy's skin crawls, her eyes squeezed shut and hands balled into fists at her side. Merv tells her he can take care of the coach if she lets him take control, it's as simple as that.

But the coach interrupts and tells Mandy that she'll never get a chance to be a cheerleader if she refuses. That she's worthless if she refuses.

He sits back down, elbows on the desk and hands clasped together. His smile is sinister and toxic, and Mandy feels a chill run down her spine. She cringes under his gaze, listening as he continues to lay out her options as calmly as a teacher discussing the contents of an assignment.

It's a deal, a contract she doesn't want to sign—a far less appealing one than what she's already gotten herself into. She can still feel his hand on her shoulder.

Merv talks in the back of her mind, reminding her that he can help. That the man before her isn't a *man*, but a *monster*. A creature, a devil in disguise.

Mandy begins to believe him, as the man sitting before her begins to change, morph into something undistinguishable. His skin appears to melt, waxy, dripping down his face and stretching his features. His cheeks sag, his fingernails stretch into claws; his voice is garbled, deep. She can't understand any of the words it says.

Heart racing, panic sets in, Mandy listens to Merv's direction. She spins on her heel, grabs at the door handle, and fumbles with the lock.

The *thing* behind her makes a noise, a squelching, disgusting sound.

After a few tries, she finally clicks the lock open and yanks on the door, practically falling out of the office. Without looking behind her, she runs. Her feet echo as they hit the linoleum, and she runs until she's out of breath, doubled over, and heaving, unsure of how far she's gone and what part of the school she's ended up in.

Taking a moment to compose herself, she raises her head and looks around.

Mandy finds herself alone, the hallways dark and empty. The silence rings in her ears as she frantically turns her head left and right, searching for the... the *thing* she knows is following her. But it's not there.

A voice speaks to her, loud and shrill in her ears. She still wonders if others can hear it; it echoes around her head the same way it would if the speaker were beside her in the empty space. It tells her to go into the next room, the science labs. That the door will be unlocked—or *can* be unlocked. It promises to help.

With no other option, Mandy listens to the voice and grabs at the door handle to the classroom. It doesn't turn, the rattling getting louder as she grows more desperate. All of a sudden, like magic, the door unlocks. The voice tells her that she can trust it; it won't let her get hurt.

But the classroom door doesn't close behind her, and when she looks over her shoulder, she's met with the same grotesque figure she was running from in the first place. Its body is disfigured, tall, and lumpy, as if it's made of melted candle wax. Claw-like hands reach toward her, followed by a gurgling noise. Its footsteps squelch against the linoleum.

Mandy screams.

The voice urges her to listen, and she feels a tug on her limbs pulling her in the opposite direction. Shaken back into reality, she turns and runs, dodging desks and knocking over chairs. A beaker falls from a counter, shattering. The squelching gets louder.

Her leg hurts, still sore from the aftermath of tryouts earlier, but a surge of adrenaline keeps her going. Racing through the classroom, she reaches the other side and flings the door open, finding herself in another science lab, pale moonlight filtering in through the slats in the blinds.

She can hear the figure behind her and she wastes no time in rushing toward the exit, slamming her shoulder into the door and practically falling back into the hallway. The voice urges her forward, urges her on. Mandy listens and, as she runs, she hears a crashing behind her. That shrill voice promises the door is locked, but it's shaking in its frame as the figure throws its body against it.

Mandy's breath catches as she turns the corner. The same moonlight as before pools on the floor and bathes the stairwell in its light. Squelching as the thing follows her.

With her back pressed against the wall, Mandy steels herself; the voice speaks to her, tells her that she knows what to do and that she's strong enough to do it. The squelching gets louder.

All at once, the figure steps into the moonlight and Mandy pushes off the wall. Her fingers dig into the wax-like flesh as she uses all her strength to shove it down the stairs. It lands at the bottom with a resounding, echoing thud.

She opens her eyes.

The man—the *thing* before her is no longer the coach. It's some figure, humanoid but melted, made of candle wax globed together in the form of a body. Its mouth opens, a wide, gaping hole where its face should be. Sharp teeth stretch from bloodied gums and a loud, moaning noise echoes around the office as it grips its waxy fingers harder into Mandy's skin.

She screams, horror racing through her as she fights to escape its grasp. A surge of strength rushes through her and she's able to pull herself away, fumbling with the lock on the door for a few seconds before flinging it open.

In the back of her mind, Merv tells her that he can do so much more, she can be so much stronger. He can keep her safe.

Mandy runs through the halls, through classrooms and clusters of desks. She runs and runs as the creature follows her, footsteps squelching against the linoleum floors. Her chest heaves with her breaths and she loses her stalker every once in a while, only for her moment of reprieve to be cut short by the sounds turning the corner.

She runs until she comes upon the stairwell. With all her might and the help of Merv, Mandy pushes the figure down the stairs.

All at once, it's no longer a monster.

Before her, at the bottom of the stairs, lay Coach Smith. His limbs are bent at odd angles, a pained look on his face. Blood pools slowly from a gash Mandy can see on his head. He twitches once, twice, and then falls still. The stairwell fills with the stench of blood and death and Mandy gags.

Holding back tears, she turns from the scene and runs back into the hallway, heading toward the other stairwell to return home.

5. *A Crime Scene (written by Iván Plouganou)*

Mandy's mind is a twister. The images of the distorted monster spin around her head, mixed with snapshots of the day, forming a grotesque painting. A cold and empty feeling chills her to the bones, intoxicating her. She lays on her bed for what feels like hours, held by an overwhelming dread. Something is deeply wrong, something bad is stuck deeply within her.

She closes her eyes hoping that the dizziness will go away, yearning to wake up from this nightmare. As he tries harder, squishing her eyes to the point of pain, the lifeless face of Coach Smith pops taking over everything. Mandy stands up from the bed, eyes fully open, embraced by the darkness, frozen to the bones. The realization strikes her. She's ready to give in to hopelessness.

The cold, unsettling voice in the back of her head nudges her. There's still time, better hurry,

Mandy is in the back side of the school. Even in the complete darkness of the night, she knows exactly where she is. The tall trees rise above the fence on the other side of the volleyball court. She climbs in without any effort, moving freely like a shadow. Frictionless. Agile.

The schoolyard lights leave no spot hidden, but that's not an obstacle. She knows what to do. Aiming her open palm at the lamp on the top of the post closest to her, the light turns off following her command. She moves quickly and gets in range to the next light; the darkness slowly takes over.

The back door is locked, but just like the lights, the knob turns, and Mandy makes her way in without resistance.

Inside, complete darkness welcomes her. She feels comfortably protected. The freezing chill in the depth of her bones intensifies, and she keeps moving.

The hallways show the remnants of a chase. The mess becomes a trail that leads her to the door on the other side of the building. The door is open, and behind it, a long and narrow set of stairs leads into a pitch-black hollow. At the bottom, a body lies still.

Mandy resists looking at the face, but her eyes don't obey. Time stops when the pale and lifeless face of Coach Smith takes once more the frame of her mind. She's once again taken by hopelessness and despair, crushed by the overwhelming weight of the darkness surrounding her.

A violent push from within snaps Mandy out and pulls her back to the surface. The body lying on the floor is no longer Coach Smith's. The distorted beast that chased her just

hours before, lays in front of her. As if she's following a command, she grabs the creature by the arms, and pulls it upstairs, leaving a new trace of blood.

Mandy gets the body back to the office and lays it on the main chair, at the other side of the desk. The room is clean. No signs of a fight can be found. Covering her hands with her sweater, she carefully rearranges the items on the desk, pushes the other chair to the floor, breaks a cup, and forces the door. Every action requires no effort. She is powerful.

Back in the hallway, Mandy traces her way back to the basement cleaning and rearranging every trace of the fight. Every stain of blood on the floor and wall is cleaned until she makes it to the basement.

The task is done, and when she is ready to go back to the yard, an internal push tells her to stop. A decoy needs to be placed.

As Mandy walks, an abrupt flashback shows her an image of a group of football players, laughing and excited, in the middle of the group, Jack, leader of the pack, shows a gun stolen from his father. It's perfect. These are Jessica's grunts.

But the sudden thrill is turned down as she realizes she will have to shoot the body, picturing the sound it would make and the risk that entails.

Mandy reaches the lockers and reads every tag as she passes by, thinking. She finds her own locker, and right next to it, she feels a nostalgic feeling of comfort when reading the name of Chelsea. She stops for a moment, wanting to turn around and run away. A beam of light shily pops from the window behind her. Her heart starts pounding, as she realizes the sun is starting to rise.

Right in the middle of the row, Jessica's name stands out. Without thinking, Mandy aims her hand at the lock, popping it open like a nut. Pink-covered books and notebooks, a box of school utensils, and magazines fill the space. Nothing of interest. Nothing but a sports bag pushed to the back. Mandy pulls it out without any care, opening the zip with rage. Her eyes reflect poisonous anger as she takes out the pair of pom poms and a skirt. Without thinking twice, she puts the empty bag back in the locker and as she's about to close it, a silver object peeking out of the side of the books catches her attention. She pulled the necklace out as she smashed the door closed.

Mandy starts heading back to the office when the same push from within prompts her again. She needs to find one last thing, to piece everything together. The sun is almost completely out, leaving almost no time left. She remembers there are sleeping pills in the school's infirmary, but that's too far away. She may not make it in time.

The voice in her head calls again. In panic, she rushes back to the lockers and heads to Chelsea's name. She picks the lock and pulls it open. She opens the door and grabs a bottle of pills from within. Chelsea would do anything to help her, Mandy tries to convince herself.

Back in the office, after carefully arranging everything, Mandy starts to hear voices. Movement. School time is close.

Everything is lit up by the morning's sunlight, so Mandy snakes through the last dying shadows, to make it back to the trees by the court. She climbs and runs. She runs faster than she's ever run before.

6. *An Unpleasant Evening (written by Iván Plouganou)*

Mandy rushes to change her clothes. Her eyes open wide and her heart stops for a second when she sees the blood all over them. She quickly hides them under the bed and runs to the bathroom. She holds a deep breath and pictures her body diving into a cold river as the water splashes over her skin. She holds the moment as long as she can, but the peace is crushed by the bitter despising voice screaming from downstairs.

As Mandy walks carefully down the stairs, she hears the car wheels burn the railway yard, followed by the sirens' screams.

Mandy rushes past the kitchen and heads back out. Somehow, she feels colder than hours before, as if the world was upside down, the day is cold and the night warm.

Running along the road, she realizes how many times she's made that path on the last day. The weight on her backpack becomes almost unbearable. She can't breathe, but she doesn't stop. Her legs start to feel weak, and her joints burn.

As she turns around Norway Street, the uproar becomes clearer and clearer. Red and blue lights dance, painting a creepy sight of False Creek's giant letters above the school's main entrance. There are half a dozen police cars around the entrance blocking the way in. A bunch of people stand at a close distance. The chatter takes over the peaceful sounds of the morning, with a mix of mourn and curiosity.

Director Holley stands between the barricade and the crowd. A subtle, red-tinted face confuses signs of sobbing with the typical burn of a forced wake-up. As new groups of parents approach, she repeats a now memorized speech, telling of an unfortunate event involving a teacher, and sending everyone home for the day.

Mandy decides to stand away, searching at a distance. Looking for the only face that could make her feel hope, but there's no sign of her. She must have left already; she is normally one of the first to arrive.

Mandy's legs are weaker, and she can no longer hold the backpack on her back. She's about to pass out, but just when the exhaustion feels most unbearable, something pulls her attention.

A strange bitter-sweet wave of hope floods her body, making her warm and cold at the same time. It's Jessica. Her mother screams at a couple of cops taking her into one of the police cars. She feels guilt. But the guilt is quickly taken away by a weird sense of satisfaction, revenge.

She feels glad. In her mind, she can only hear a repeated phrase saying she deserves it, she deserves everything bad coming at her.

With a renewed boost of energy, Mandy turns around and heads back home.

Blood, darkness, and screams twist around the room. The outdoor lighting deems down slowly as the sun caves and the night rises. An echo of dark voices screams her name at the same time, making Mandy wake up and rise with violence. Soaked in sweat, she hears nothing but her frenetic breathing.

She hears her name again. Her dad is calling.

Mandy gets down the stairs, wanting to find the first window and escape. She walks slowly, shaking. The freezing chill in her bones remains. The room spins and she feels out of control. Merv's eerie and vomiting voice crawls from within, laughing. Mandy feels drunk. The intoxication is stronger with every step.

Mandy enters the dining room. Even with the lights on, the space feels dark. She walks to her usual chair avoiding her father's gaze. His hands hold a fork and a knife, firmly cutting a piece of meat covered in gravy, but his eyes remain fixed on her.

As she sits down, he puts a big chunk in his mouth and chews loudly. Mandy hears every piece of the steak crushing in her ears. She cringes.

The room is uncomfortably warm. Everything moves sneaking away from the view and getting violently back to its place. She stares at the plate. The man stares at her. She feels sick and weak. She can't remember when the last time she ate something, even less, the last time when she wanted to eat something.

Her father speaks, but she's falling into a void. A laughter crawls from within, filling the room. Dropping the fork, Mandy crushes her fists closed. She puts all her energy into stopping herself from doing anything. She's out of control.

Her father's fist smashes on the table. A fork flies off and a glass drops. It shatters. The paintings on the wall start shaking. The shelves move, and the lights flicker. Mandy stands up covering her ears. The laughter is uncontrollable.

She needs to get out.

7. *An Unsafe Place* (written by Iván Plouganou)

Mandy runs down the road. The streetlights turn off behind her. Merv's voice is louder and clearer than ever. He wants more.

As Mandy runs, a feeling of danger and vulnerability floods her. She feels the warm cold of the night once more.

She's lonelier than ever. The darkness, the emptiness, the weight in her legs. Suffocating.

Her power has suddenly vanished. She's weaker and more tired than ever. She has to stop to breathe but feels no air passing through her lungs. She bends forward grabbing her knees with the last remains of strength. She pulls the air harder. Nothing.

As she stands back up in desperation, a silhouette appears down the road. Fear burns every inch of her skin. Merv prompts her to run away.

The man starts walking and Mandy pulls energy from within, pushing everything she can find around to block the way.

Mandy finds something familiar in the face, as the man raises his arms and prepares to speak. The world around Mandy blurs and a grotesque shape takes over his face. There is danger in his eyes.

Mandy pushes everything in her way, and sneaks away from the streetlights, turning them off and delving into the darkness.

After the trepidatious encounter with the enigmatic figure, Mandy finds herself running toward the only person she feels safe with. A bolt of lightning illuminates the sky as water starts pouring. Her hands shake as she wipes the rain away from her forehead. Filled with anxiety and adrenaline, she approaches Chelsea's front door.

She plants her feet shakily on the front porch and knocks on the door. Each drop of heavy rain splatters against the ground with a thundering impact as each agonizing second passes. After a moment's hesitation, the door swings open and she finds herself face-to-face with Chelsea's friendly face.

As she sees her, Mandy feels like herself again. She's back in control, for a brief moment. Chelsea's face greets her with anguish.

Mandy breathes heavily, her hands clenched into fists by her sides. She can't look Chelsea in the eyes. She finds no words. Chelsea carefully reaches a handout toward Mandy.

Her feet are glued to the porch, and she can't move. Shivering from more than just the rain, she wraps one arm around herself and digs her nails into her skin.

Chelsea grabs Mandy's hand and pulls her over the threshold.

As soon as she steps in, Mandy feels a wave of warmth and calmness. Hope, at last.

For a second, the light feels warm again, and the chilling of her bones gives in. But the intoxicating voice crawls back flooding her mind, crushing every positive feeling, pulling her back away.

Mandy stares into the void while Chelsea approaches with a towel and a cup of tea. They sit down on the bed. Chelsea waits for Mandy to speak, but the room is filled with nothing but silence. A sudden feeling of distrust takes over Mandy. Merv's voice is back, loud and clear.

Mandy fights back and pushes the voice down. She pulls out all of her strength and starts talking.

As she tries to talk, the memories of the past day strike her like thunder. Beating her down over and over. She explains what happened on the tryouts, but as she does, anger, rage, and thirst for revenge flood her.

Mandy tries to keep talking, but pain, loneliness, and fear begin to draw her away. Slowly, Mandy feels unsafe.

She keeps pushing against it, but it drains her down. A hell within herself is loose. Merv is back. He's taking over.

Chelsea is visibly concerned and tries to get Mandy to say everything, but as Mandy talks, she says less.

A Mandy brings up Coach Smith, she's pulled back to the darkness and freezing loneliness of his office.

She sees the monster. Mandy tries to step away from that image, but she's not in control. Her mind is not hers anymore, she relieves every second.

Merv reminds Mandy how he saved her. Mandy feels lonelier than ever. Not even Chelsea can help.

She has to get out. She wants to quiet the voice as Chelsea tries to sympathize. She snaps and yells, then storms out. Leaving the room in a cold, bitter silence.

8. *A Demon Within* (written by Iván Plouganou)

Mandy sits on her bed, grabbing her legs with both arms and hiding her face within her knees.

She can't remember when was the last time that she didn't shake, but she can't stand feeling any heat.

The only visible light is a beam that sneaks through the blinds. She extends her arm and feels the shape of loneliness.

A gaseous shape starts to materialize in front of her. The room gets darker and colder. Her bones freeze and the air seems to disappear. The nasal obnoxious voice speaks.

Mandy wants to scream at it with all her rage, but nothing comes out of her. She listens.

Merv speaks in a fraternal and comforting manner. It makes Mandy cringe, but as she tries to pull away, she accepts the truth. She's all by herself. There is nothing but the void, the cold, the darkness. And him.

As he talks, Merv's slippery words sneak into Mandy's ears, slowly poisoning her mind. Mandy wants nothing but to feel safe again, and Merv explains the way to make that happen.

Merv reminds Mandy how he healed her broken leg. How he helped her escape the predatory approach of Coach Smith. How thanks to him, she can move whatever is in the way to escape.

Jessica's group of cheerleaders interrupt Mandy's twisted sense of hope. Every gram of anger and hatred in her body rises to the surface. Merv smiles.

If Mandy makes those who wronged her pay, she'll finally be free of that pain.

Her first target is Heather. Merv points out how she's always trying to catch Jack's attention, and also reminds Mandy of the gun.

She'll have to lure Heather into a trap, pretending to be Jack, by either learning his handwriting style, getting access to his e-mail account, or manipulating him too. Mandy will also have to steal the gun to make him look guilty or make it look like everything was an accident.

The second target is Barbara. A girl obsessed with her looks and getting her hands on every possible beauty accessory. She's especially crazy about skincare. Merv nudges Mandy into realizing how little the chemistry lab is used. School security will be an obstacle due to the recent events, but Mandy's new abilities and agility in the shadows become an overly exciting challenge for Merv.

Mandy will have to steal substances and materials to create a deadly mix that can be passed as a product that Barbara would kill for. Then, she would have to make sure she and only she receives it and uses it.

The third target is Ashely. She's the only girl in the group that Mandy barely knows. She's a new student and became a cheerleader right away due to her skills, catching Jessica's attention and envy.

Mandy will need to find out more about Ashely as she gets rid of the other targets.

Thinking about her, Mandy feels a strong sense of guilt. Even though she was there when they threw her down the basement, Mandy felt she didn't want to be part of that.

But the feelings of guilt and remorse are quickly crushed by Merv. Mandy starts to see a smile drawing on Asheley's face as she is lying on the floor, frozen by the pain. She didn't do anything to stop it.

The final kill would be Jessica. Still being held by the police on suspicion of the murder of Coach Smith, she can't be targeted at first.

As Mandy starts to work on the tasks, the feeling of intoxication intensifies. She is less and less herself as if the Mandy before the tryouts was a blurred fake shadow.

When Mandy finds herself in the dark alley with Heather waiting, scared, Mandy tries to stop and run away. She can't do it.

But as she turns around, the shadow crushes her down, freezing her, asphyxiating.

Merv's angry voice pierces Mandy's ear. He blurs into the so-familiar feeling of desperation and despair. He joins her in her agony. The world is a dark, cold, and lonely place. She doesn't want to feel it anymore. Merv convinces her that the only way to get out of it, the only way to get rid of the excruciating pain in her bones, and the lack of air in her lungs, is to finish what she started.

The second kill becomes increasingly hard. Not only does Mandy feel weaker and less in control of herself, barely eating and not sleeping, but also the police are now all over the town and False Creek Elementary. Everyone is alert.

Ashley becomes an even harder target. Her parents won't let her back to school due to the recent events. The only options are to sneak into her house, disguised as a delivery person, or sabotage the energy and security system.

Avoiding being seen by any of Ashley's family members inside the house becomes a hard challenge even for Merv's abilities.

Mandy finally kills Ashely, breathing out the last slip of her soul. Crushed. Defeated.

Merv's voice is louder, sharper, and unbearable. Mandy starts to follow his command with the hopes of not hearing him again. But he is there, closer, stronger. In control.

While Mandy lies on her bed covered by the veil of darkness, Merv turns on the TV.

A newscast shows Jessica being released from prison. Mandy's body stands still as her eye slowly turns to the screen.

9. A Conclusion? (written by Iván Plouganou)

Mandy stands up from her bed, overwhelmed with anxiety. A part of her wants to stop, to turn herself in. But her mind is flooded with all the years of painful bitterness towards Jessica. She's always been there, making sure that her lowest moments won't pass without the worst possible pain. Making her feel small, alone, and powerless.

Mandy closes her eyes and grabs her hair strongly. She hurts herself, but she doesn't feel the pain. Her will pushes her to steer away from those memories, but the harder she tries, the clearer they become. Jessica's proud smile, looking down the stairs of the basement is all that Mandy can see now.

The cold blurred cloud covers her and Merv's figure manifests. The nasal voice pierces Mandy like a dagger loaded with slow-burning venom. She wants it to get away, she wants it over. She's willing to do what it takes to make him vanish.

This time, Merv waits. He doesn't propose anything. He lets Mandy come up with the plan. He can't control the laughter. He hasn't felt that strong in centuries. Alive.

Mandy stares aimlessly into the screen. The static noise gives more signs of life than herself.

Then, a spark strikes her mind like a bolt. She sees the skirt, the pom poms, the necklace. With Merv's power, she can recreate footage of that night. She can make it look like Jessica really did it. She'll use that to lure her or send her back to jail.

Merv's powerful presence shocks Mandy bringing her to her knees. The TV screen switches back from static to the newscast footage of Jessica's release. What first looked like tears, now shows as a proud smile, looking past the screen and staring directly at Mandy.

A deal is a deal, Merv insists. There's no way back.

One last kill, Mandy thinks. She deserves it, says a quiet but clear voice echoing from the depth of her mind.

Her muscles find fuel thanks to the anger. She pulls herself up to leave the room. She delves into the now familiar and comforting darkness of the night. The final hunt begins.

Mandy breaks into the school once more. Using Merv's power, she manipulates the cameras to create a new recording.

Everything stops in a snap. The world around Mandy suddenly looks grey, as if she was inside an old movie. Things around her start to get in violent motion. A crowd of students and teachers parade walking backward in front of her. The classroom doors open and students get in and out in groups faster and faster. A bunch of police officers get in from the main entrance, pasting and removing the yellow cord. Then, everything stops as abruptly as it began. Jessica is standing in

front of Coach Smith's offices. She's wearing her cheerleader outfit, holding the pom poms in with one arm pressed to her side, and a silver necklace on the right side. She's covered in blood. Red tinted tears roll down her face, to her chin, dripping to the ground with violence. Everything is death-silent.

Mandy leaves the school with two VHS tapes in her hand. She puts one of the tapes in an envelope, along with a cryptic letter containing instructions, and goes to Jessica's place.

Sneaking through the shadows, she leaves the envelope on Jessica's room window frame and gets back to school.

Once in the school, getting in from the main entrance, she walks to the left down the hallway until she reaches the familiar wooden door at the end. She walks down into the pit and waits.

To her, the time was no longer perceptible. She could've waited for seconds or hours and wouldn't have made a difference. But the cracking noise of the door lets her know that her victim is here.

Merv is excited like a kid on Christmas day. Even though Mandy is used to the nauseous feeling, it still strikes strong. Everything spins and blurs. Her heartbeat rises and the urge to run away starts to crawl in.

Jessica's face pales as if seeing her worst nightmare. Her lips tremble as a mute shriek escapes her throat. The only word she manages to gasp is weak and hollow "Please...".

Mandy is about to stop, but a wave of boiling blood rushes through her body pushing her muscles forward. She stomps fiercely towards Jessica with every step faster than the previous. Following the momentum, her right arm lifts up towards the shocked blonde girl, only stopped violently by the knife's blade meeting the victim's torso.

Time stops for an instant pulling Mandy back, out of herself, realizing for a moment what she's doing. But the dark cloud within her unleashed the strongest force she'd felt, forcing her to repeat the action over and over.

Mandy breathes heavily dropping the knife to the floor, staring at Jessica's lifeless face pouring blood from her mouth.

She crumbles and lets her weight crush her legs. It's over. She won. She's totally defeated.

The voice quiets and the freezing chilliness disappears. Mandy feels a void in her head and it brings her a weird relief. It's finally over.

A couple of days pass. Jessica's disappearance forced the school to close for the year. The sun shines stronger than ever and everything looks sharp and clear. Mandy rolls on her bed. She's slowly getting used to the silence.

Her house phone rings. She's tempted to let it be, but she feels a boost of energy by embracing her freedom. She rushes down the stairs and picks up the phone forgetting what she's supposed to say.

She's greeted by a sweet familiar voice, one she feels has not heard in years. Chelsea stutters as she says hello, while Mandy's eyes fill with tears. She closes her eyes and realizes she can finally breathe.

Chelsea invites Mandy to her house, to catch up and make peace. She apologizes for letting her pride win and not looking for her before. She reminds Mandy of her 18th birthday happening the very next day.

Mandy laughs and rushes out the door enjoying the warm touch of the sun over her skin. The sun shines bright and everything looks sharp and clear. The muscles in her face stretch to the limit as she spins and shouts letting everything go from within.

Mandy decides to take a long slow walk to Chelsea's house, but first, she wants to stop at her favorite bakery to buy a cup of tea and some sweet breads to share.

As she walks appreciating life, contemplating every bird, rock, or tree, a new phone ringing interrupts her peace. Longing to hear Chelsea's voice one more time, Mandy picks up her phone and as she's about to speak, a deep familiar voice cuts her clean.

Her father talks to her as he has never done before. A strange sympathizing tone tells her to go back home. He knows about her role in all the killings, he knows the police are on her trace. He offers to help.

Mandy's heart stops and the brightness fades. The dark cold void comes back as she feels empty. She turns back and heads in the opposite direction.

10. A Long Time Coming (written by Jasper Chao)

Mandy steps into her familiar home, yet the scenery before her eyes is anything but comforting. The first thing she notices is the dimly lit nature of the interior and the eerie decoration. The walls are covered with occult symbols that shine a sinister blood-red where the flickering lights of wax candles meet.

A shadowy figure stands before her, and upon closer inspection, she can make out the contours that make up the shape of her dad. In the darkness, her father's cold, blue eyes gaze upon her as if she was nothing but a piece of meat, the piercing look lacking in warmth and sympathy. Mandy is used to such a look from the man, but there was something more disturbing this time, something unsettling. It is in the twitch of the eye, the look of eager anticipation, and the way he seems to be staring past her.

Mandy's head twists as the door behind her slams shut with an unnatural force and the lock clicks into place, as if the door had a will of its own. As she turns back, she is momentarily disoriented by the shiny glare coming from a wicked sacrificial dagger that her dad wields shakily in his right hand. The dance of the blade's shadow is seductive and sensual, threatening to lure her into a trance.

Mandy's dad welcomes her home with a bright smile that juxtaposes the sinister atmosphere. He walks toward Mandy slowly, taking careful and gentle steps as if trying not to spook a small animal. Every step sends yet another chill down Mandy's spine. Mandy's dad speaks, but does not seem to be addressing Mandy. He talks about how he has suffered in agonizing solitude, waiting for this day to finally come – Mandy's 18th birthday: the day that his beloved wife finally comes back to him. All he has to do is sacrifice Mandy's soul.

Paralyzed by fear and confusion, Mandy does nothing as her dad winds up to strike her in the heart with the menacing blade. Every fibre of Mandy's being screams at her to move, to fight back and survive, yet all she can do is stare with wide eyes at her would-be murderer. The man who looked at her with such apathy throughout her life, now looking at her with emotions that she thought he had long lost – glee and passion.

An unseen force shoves Mandy out of harm's way just inches before the dagger could lay claim to her life. The shrill voice that she hoped to never hear again screams at her, panicking. Merv tells her to get a grip and fight back if she has any hopes to survive.

Still, Mandy hesitates. She can't kill her dad, and she tells Merv as such.

Suddenly, Mandy's mind is bombarded with all the hurtful comments made by her father over the years since her mom's death. Merv reminds her of the times that he has made her feel worthless. He makes her recall the loneliness and helplessness she felt in her own home. She can fight back. She *will* kill him.

Something in Mandy snaps. A flood gate opens as years of repressed emotions burst forward. Longing. Guilt. Hatred. The negative feelings flow freely through Mandy, empowering and rejuvenating her. Her mind now set on a singular goal: killing her father.

Mandy quickly pivots her foot with the grace of a practiced cheerleader and darts away from the living room. She needs to create distance between her and the dagger and play the surroundings to her advantage. She enters the kitchen, making sure to keep quiet as she picks up a kitchen knife and ducks behind the kitchen aisle to hide.

Mandy's dad stumbles his way into the kitchen as a drunkard would, the glint from the dagger in his hand taunting Mandy to make a move. He speaks once more to himself, and talks of his brother Ted. Things could have been different, he claims, if Ted didn't leave. He curses Ted for giving him hope for the future by letting him in on the world of the occult, for prolonging his suffering – a suffering that never ends.

Merv proposes a plan of attack: he will distract her dad as she sneaks up behind him and stabs him in the neck. Simple and hard to mess up. Mandy nods, and begins to creep up to her dad, ready to execute the plan.

The sound of shattering ceramics draws the attention of her dad and Mandy wastes no time to plunge the kitchen knife into the soft flesh of his exposed nape. Her dad's body immediately crumbles as the dagger drops to the ground with a pathetic clatter.

Unsatisfied with how anticlimactic and quick his death was, Mandy picks up the dagger and stabs his lifeless body over and over again. She grunts with effort with each stab, remembering the trauma that he had caused her. Hysterically, she screams out the words that she wishes she had the guts to say. Her mind filled with rage and sorrow, she lets out the tears that she had been holding back for all this time.

In the corner of Mandy's mind, Merv smiles sadistically as yet another hollow thud echoes throughout the kitchen.

11. A Last Hope

A voice calls out from behind Mandy, distorted and far away. Another threat, Merv cautions. Acting on instinct and fueled by adrenaline, she quickly turns to stab the figure behind her with the dagger in her hand. The blade cuts through flesh like butter and sinks deep into the target's abdomen. Mandy's vision clears as Chelsea's visage appears in front of her, confused and in shock. Mandy promptly drops her dagger and looks around for something – anything – to stop Chelsea's bleeding.

She begs Merv to help and heal Chelsea like he did with Mandy's leg. Yet her pleas fall on deaf ears. Sure, Merv can help out if he wanted to, but it would be so delightful if Mandy were to kill Chelsea to grant him even more power. In fact, she can do it right now. She **will** kill Chelsea.

All of a sudden, Mandy loses control of her body. She can still feel each of her limbs, yet they refuse to respond. She feels her hand gently caress the curves of the dagger as she picks it off the ground. Now towering over a barely conscious Chelsea, Mandy begs Merv to not go through with this. Yet all she gets in response is a hysterical laugh that shows no signs of sympathy.

Her only friend. The only one who cared. Gone before she can apologize. Done in by her very own hands.

No, she refuses for it to end this way.

Mustering up all her remaining strength, Mandy pushes back against Merv's control right before the dagger sinks into Chelsea's chest and violently tosses the dagger to the side.

Merv clicks his tongue in annoyance. He was so close to gaining full control. Just a little bit and it would have been all over.

Cursing Merv out, Mandy runs to the garage and grabs the first aid kit. She fumbles through the contents of the kit and notices a stack of letters addressed to her father in there from Uncle Ted. Putting that aside for now, she grabs the bandages from the container. She has no clue what she's supposed to do in this situation, but common sense dictates that she needs to stem the flow of blood.

Mandy returns to Chelsea to find her in a critical state, dipping in and out of consciousness. She haphazardly wraps the bandages around Chelsea's abdomen in a desperate attempt to save her. Every laboured breath that Chelsea takes weighs heavily on Mandy's conscience – she needs to get professional help.

Mandy realizes that she can't go to the hospital, drenched as she is in blood, she will definitely be questioned and taken into custody. She will be able to save Chelsea's life, but her own will be over. Then she recalls another option. Uncle Ted. Her dad's brother used to be a medic before the accident. He'll be able to help.

She runs back to the garage and sifts through the letters she saw earlier, hoping and praying that there would be some sort of clue to finding Ted. Mandy notes that the letters are quite old, going back roughly eight years – when the accident took place. Pushing that thought to the side, she tosses yet another letter to the side.

Then she spots it. The worn and folded letter stained in ink with clumsy writing describes a move after Ted's discharge from medical practice. With it comes an address and an invitation for a visit.

Now with the knowledge of where Ted is living, Mandy clumsily carries Chelsea on her back and shoves her into the backseat of Mandy's now-deceased father's car. With shaky hands, she puts the car key into ignition and drives off towards her last lifeline.

12. A Ritual

Arriving at Ted's home, Mandy rushes to get out of the car. She stumbles her way to the front door of the house and knocks hard on the door, each desperate pound fueled by fear and anxiety.

A man in his forties opens the door with a startled look on his face. Uncle Ted, just as he looked in the picture, albeit with more grey in his hair and a more sullen disposition that oft comes with age. He stares at Mandy with wide eyes as she explains Chelsea's condition to him. Ted takes a moment to take in the situation as he contemplates what to do, but Mandy is having none of it and demands that he helps Chelsea this instant. Ted agrees to do what Mandy suggests and asks for her help to bring Chelsea into his home.

Chelsea lays on the living room couch, her skin pale-white and breaths shallow. She has lost a lot of blood. Ted asks Mandy to leave them alone as he can't afford any distractions. He also takes this moment to suggest Mandy to clean the blood off herself. Mandy's first instinct is to argue, but knowing that there's nothing she can do to help, she leaves. With every step she takes, the weight of her actions threaten to crush her into the ground.

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Having cleaned the blood off herself, Mandy finally gets a moment to breathe. Sitting alone on the bed of the guest room, or at least she would be if not for Merv, she thinks back on what had happened. She had lost control of her body completely to Merv back at her house; she almost killed Chelsea because of it. Merv assures Mandy that it was a mistake, a momentary lapse in judgement – it won't happen again, he promises. At this point, Mandy can easily see through Merv's lie and decides that she needs to get rid of him once and for all. Merv insists that she's being dramatic, but she disregards him completely.

A gentle knock on the door interrupts Mandy's train of thought. She lets Ted in, her heart gripped with fear and anxiety as she braces for news on Chelsea's condition. Ted quickly assures Mandy that Chelsea will be fine, but will definitely need time to rest and recover.

A huge weight is lifted off Mandy's shoulder as she allows relief to flow through her. She can't imagine what she would have done if things had turned out poorly for Chelsea.

Now that the immediate danger has passed, Ted asks Mandy to explain the whole situation to him. Mandy takes a deep breath in an effort to get her thoughts in order and begins–

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Ted sits there in silence, listening without judgement, as Mandy finishes her recount of everything that had happened since the fateful day of cheerleading tryouts. She mentions the fact that she needs to get rid of Merv before it's too late and begs Ted to help her out.

With a heavy sigh, Ted gets up. He asks Mandy if she feels any remorse for the people she killed.

Mandy thinks for a moment. The people she killed hurt her badly. Surely they deserved it, right? Then she thinks back on Jessica's last moments. On how she cried and apologized to Mandy for everything she did.

She starts, but ultimately decides that she doesn't have an answer to that question at the moment. She considers lying to Ted, but decides that he deserves to know her real answer after what he's done for Chelsea.

A beat passes after Mandy gives her answer. Mandy fidgets with the bedsheets as she nervously awaits Ted's response. Yet another beat passes as Ted ponders in silence.

Finally, Ted responds. He knows a way to get rid of Merv, he says. He has all the ingredients necessary for the ritual as well since he once dabbled in the occult. He asks her to follow him down to the basement, where the cleansing ritual will take place.

Merv protests violently in Mandy's mind as she heads down to the basement with Ted leading the way. This has to work for her, there's no other option.

Mandy watches in silence as Ted begins setting up various occult items in a circle. He draws symbols on the ground and walls with practiced elegance. Merv tries all sorts of methods to persuade Mandy not to follow through with this.

He begins by telling her that this ritual is dangerous and that Ted's lying about what it will do. Mandy ignores him.

Then he moves on to a sympathetic approach. He claims that they are a team, he promises that he won't try to take over her body anymore. She continues to ignore him.

Frustrated and desperate, Merv moves on to threatening her. He tells her that she's nothing without him, that it doesn't matter if she tries to cast him out of her mind – he will destroy her resolve, he will win this battle. Mandy's eye twitches slightly at his shrill yelling, but is able to act unaffected otherwise.

The ritual is finally set up. Ted gestures for Mandy to lay down in the middle of the ritual circle. She will need to go into her own mind and confront Merv there. Should she kill Merv, he will be banished forever. However, if she fails, her consciousness will fade away forever as Merv takes over her body. If this happens, Ted will be the one who ends both Merv and Mandy's life.

Merv laughs and tells Mandy to bring it on. Once he wins, the old man will stand no chance against him.

Clenching her fists to steel her resolve, Mandy walks towards the center of the ritual circle and lies down.

13. A Final Confrontation

Memories surge past Mandy as she stands at the crossroads of her mind.

She is confronted with a joyful memory. A faint smell of lavender. A warmth accompanied by a cheerful laughter. She feels herself drawn to this memory, her hand reaches out, hesitant but hopeful.

Suddenly, the memory is torn away from her with the harshness and violence of a raging storm. Replacing it is the feeling of despair. The recollection of a desperate time. The overwhelming presence of loneliness.

Mandy takes an involuntary step back before shaking her head to steady herself. She can't let something as trivial as unpleasant memories stop her from moving forward.

She takes a deep breath and stares directly at the memory in front of her. It shifts and contorts, as if mocking and taunting her. If she wants to defeat Merv, she has to defeat her own demons first, and she's been letting them dictate her life for far too long.

With renewed determination, Mandy sprints toward the memory head-on, hoping that the momentum of her steps will outweigh the hesitance in her heart.

*

After confronting the ghosts of Coach Smith, Jessica, and her dad, Mandy finds herself in an unfamiliar hallway. This isn't a place from her memories.

The fancy decor, the grandiose lighting, and the gold and burgundy of the interior reminds her of a fantastical interpretation of a royal palace. Yet the feeling she gets from the surroundings is not one of grandeur and awe, instead, she feels small and helpless.

Mandy is about to take a step forward when she hears a sob from behind. She turns around quickly, ready for a confrontation. But instead of a threat, she sees a juvenile demon in front of her, transparent as a ghost. She must be in Merv's memories.

The demon looks to be Merv's younger self, and she watches as he stands off to the side, body turned away from the other demon ghosts who pace the halls. The demons whisper to each other, giving Merv side-eyes filled with contempt and arrogance. Merv lets out another sob as all the ghosts fade away, the memory having now passed.

Mandy's footsteps echo through the empty hallways as she continues to navigate her way to where Merv is located. She feels an invisible tug leading her to Merv, she knows exactly where he is. The confrontation is inevitable.

She spots a grand spiral staircase in front of her, and it seems to go on forever. Suddenly, an adolescent ghostly version of Merv appears by her side. He seems angry, his brows narrow in frustration. He outwardly vents about how the other demons treat him, as if he were beneath dirt. Morghom Eurogum Rogumon V, the weakest and most pathetic that they have ever seen. They mock him for being disowned from his family. They'll see, he claims, they'll understand the greatness of Merv one day. Once again, the memory fades and Merv disappears.

Mandy, unsure of how to feel about what she saw, distracts herself by beginning her ascent up the stairs.

*

Mandy stands before the throne room, the imposing doors tower over her. It acts as the final barrier between her and Merv, the final threshold. Once she opens the door, there will be no turning back. Cautiously, she pushes against the heavy handles as the door slowly creaks open.

The throne room is well-lit with multiple impressive chandeliers hanging overhead, the opulent and rich decorations fill the air with a sense of pompous majesty.

Merv sits alone on the throne, his legs crossed and leaning back. His hatred-filled ruby eyes are fixed on Mandy. He looks down with flared nostrils in an attempt to showcase superiority and confidence.

Mandy begins to cross the length of the chamber, step after reassured step in the fact that she will win this exchange. She has been through too much and has come too far to lose here.

Merv tries to unsettle her by poking at her insecurities. He tries to belittle her by attacking her character. Hurtful words are hurled at Mandy like daggers, but she remains calm and proud as she gets ever closer to Merv.

Frustrated at his failed attempt to unnerve Mandy, Merv finally stands up from his throne. If she wants a duel to the death, then she will very much have it. Using the powers of the dreamscape, Merv conjures up a fiery suit of demonic armour that covers him from head to heel.

Mandy stands there, unimpressed, and gets ready to use the powers of the dreamscape herself to banish Merv once and for all.

*

After a bloody and brutal battle, Mandy alone stands victorious as Merv is banished forever from her mind. She feels a heavy burden lifted from her soul, a sense of freedom that comes only with ownership of one's mind.

Suddenly, the ground beneath Mandy starts shaking violently. With the owner of the memory defeated, the world that she is in is starting to collapse. A pillar nearby cracks under the pressure and falls right next to Mandy. She is propelled into action and starts running, hoping to escape the palace before it has fully collapsed.

Mandy frantically runs out of the room, flying through winding corridors and jumping down staircases. She uses what little remains of her powers to create pathways where there are none and eventually gets to the entrance.

The palace has all but sunk into the void at this point. Exhausted both mentally and physically, she makes a desperate attempt to fling her body out the doors by pouring all of her remaining strength into a final, powerful blast.

14. A Happy Ever After?

Mandy finds herself floating alone in darkness. Despite the emptiness, she feels weightless and free. It is a familiar yet alien feeling, like meeting an old friend for the first time in years. She briefly entertains the idea of staying here forever – it wouldn't be the worst thing. No more getting hurt, no more uncertainty, no more fear.

Then her thoughts drift to Chelsea. Chelsea, who had been by her side the whole time, supporting her when the whole world was against her. She never got the chance to apologize for the things she said, never thanked her for everything she's done, never told her what she meant to her. Mandy needs to go back.

A light appears, warm and welcoming. She feels herself getting gently pulled in and provides no resistance.

*

Back in the real world, Mandy struggles as she forces open her heavy eyelids. The first sight that greets her is an alert Uncle Ted holding a rifle in his hand, pointed straight at her head. He looks her in the eye and seems to be looking for some kind of sign, some sort of resistance. When Mandy provides none, Ted lowers the muzzle and tells her to go meet up with Chelsea – she is waiting in the living room for Mandy.

Mandy grumbles something that resembles appreciation and runs up the stairs as quickly as her legs allow. Chelsea lays on the living room couch, her back propped up by cushions. She manages a weak smile as Mandy runs up to her side.

Mandy starts to speak, but Chelsea interrupts her, stating that she got a rundown of what happened from Ted.

Before she's able to stop them, Mandy's tears come pouring out. She apologizes to Chelsea for what she did, for what she said, and how she acted. Every word comes straight from her heart, yet Chelsea can barely understand any of it through her sobbing and sniffing. All Chelsea can do at this point is to give Mandy a comforting hug.

The heartwarming moment is interrupted by the blaring of police sirens from a distance. Mandy and Chelsea look at each other in concern as the screen fades to black.