

I sheepishly walked up to the front of the classroom. I put my blue posterboard on the highchair that functioned as a makeshift podium. It was covered in silver glitter and pictures of oxen, hares, ptarmigans, and lichens. The header was written in white craft pipe cleaner that read TUNDRA.

I stood as straight as I could in front of the twenty-something kids that were in my class, my teacher straight ahead of me. My hands felt warm and clammy, and I wiped them against my thighs. My mouth felt dry, and I didn't know what to say.

"Hi, guys," I said. "I am presenting on the tundra, which is close to the arctic. But not there. It's a bit lower than the arctic, so it isn't as cold. Um, this is a musk ox..."

"Mrs. Riffe!" A student's hand shot up. "I can't hear her! Can she speak up?"

The teacher sighed. "Emily, you have to speak up. We can't hear you."

My chest tightened and my cheeks grew warm. I wrung my hands together and took a deep breath. I smiled and said louder, "I am presenting on the tundra!" I was squeezing my voice out of my throat, and I felt like I was choking on air.

And that was how it always was. A student saying that they can't hear me. The teacher telling me to speak up. Me bracing myself to just belt out my presentation.

Until I met her.

Abby was boisterous, loud, and confident. People thought she was a bit over-dramatic and maybe annoying, but to me, she was everything I wished I could be. She had no problem standing in front of the class and telling people what was on her mind. She was an avid reader, and she was often praised for it (which may or may not have sprouted *some* jealousy in me as a competitive student). She always had an interesting book in her hands and so many more to recommend. Maybe that's what drew me to her.

"What's that book you're reading?" I asked her one day. She was holding onto a small, maroon-colored book. The illustration on the cover had two girls, one with blonde hair and another with brown hair. The brown-haired girl was blowing into something that looked like a pan flute. In the foreground, there was a wolf arched backwards, standing on its hind legs, fingers in menacing claws, and its mouth mid-howl. To me, the book looked a bit scary.

"It's the *Sisters Grimm* series," Abby replied. "It's a really good series. You should try it!"

She later donated the rest of the series to the class, so I gave the books a shot. It was about these two sisters, Sabrina and Daphne, descendants of the Grimm brothers, and learn that fairy tales aren't just stories—they're *real*. I *loved it*. I quickly went through the series, and I was utterly disappointed when I learned that the last book was yet to be released. But I learned so much about the world of fairy tales. I never knew that the old lady in the story of Hansel and Gretel could have a name: Frau Pfefferkuchenhaus. I also learned about the Slavic Baba Yaga, whose house that stands on giant chicken feet. It was terrifying but exciting. I read about Puck, a mischievous fairy, and the relationship problems between Snow White and Prince Charming. It was an awesome retelling of the bedtime stories my mother would read to me as a child.

Another day, while perusing through the shelves of the school library, I asked Abby what I should read next.

“Try Rick Riordan,” Abby said while we were in the school library. “He wrote those Percy Jackson books.”

We headed to the R’s and I searched for *Rio*.

“What about this one?” I asked as I pulled out a book. On the cover were a girl and a boy on top of a wooden boat on a river. The background was orange and purple, as if they were bursting forth out of the breaking dawn. The title said *The Throne of Fire* in gold lettering. It looked adventurous, and to a nine-year-old, it looked *cool*.

“Yeah, that’s good!” Abby said. “But that’s only the second book of the series. So you might want to wait, maybe.”

It was the only book available, and I thought, why wait? I went ahead and borrowed the book. It took a few pages—maybe a few chapters—for me to get a grasp of what was happening, but once I did, I fell in love with Rick Riordan’s works. I ended up getting the first book for Christmas, which still holds a special place in my bookshelf. Through Rick Riordan, I learned about Egyptian, Greek, and Roman mythology. These topics remained an interest of mine for years and has never quite gone away.

I stuck by Abby through all my years of elementary, middle, and high school. She was my best friend, and we did everything together. We were an unstoppable duo and maybe a little unhinged while we were at it. For years, Abby and I would read the same things. She would read something and recommend it to me. I would read something and recommend it to her. We finished the *Twilight saga* together. We read the *Vampire Academy* series together. We raved over the *Harry Potter* series together.

She not only helped with my reading, but also helped with my public speaking. I took her confident personality and applied it to myself. Anytime I stood in front of people, I would think to myself, *Okay, what would Abby do?* and I did exactly that. My voice grew stronger, and I was no longer fighting to raise my voice. It just came out. I had no fear of what I had to say, and I felt true to myself. In middle school, I joined the Speech and Debate Club with Abby. At first, my voice would waver, but I knew Abby was with me whenever we debated. When I read poetry and prose, I would think to myself as always, *What would Abby do?* I don’t think Abby ever fully understood the impact she had on me.

When it comes to writing, the best way to start is to read a lot of books. I took inspiration from everything that I read and wrote stories about elves and fairies and assassins. In my early teenage years, I would wonder why every story I read had a happy ending. Thus, I wrote my first short story, *Death to Everybody*, a story about a boy who wanted to solve the mysterious deaths of residents in a small kingdom and in the end, it cost him his life, never uncovering the cause of the murders.

In late-middle and early-high school, Abby and I discovered the world of Wattpad. We would read fanfiction about all sorts of things, like Harry Potter, Percy Jackson, or Dan and Phil just for fun. Wattpad then became my outlet for writing. I loved the idea of having my works published for others to read and would write stories about us when we would ultimately live in London together (we had a strong British obsession). I would write about sad teen girls who were fated to be with the cool-kid childhood friend. In high school, I wrote Voltron fanfiction. Unfortunately, I have since deleted my Wattpad account, so these works are no longer available, but those stories have shaped me.

I am now twenty years old, a junior in university, and a proud English major. I have grown to love reading even more since starting college, and I take reading and writing very seriously. I started to work at Books-A-Million because it was a safe haven for me as a child, and it brought me closer to books. I still write from time to time, and I'm always creating stories and worlds in my head. My only fear is trying to figure out where to start.

I don't talk to Abby much anymore since graduating. We attend separate colleges and have grown apart with time and distance. But I'll never forget the impact she had on me and my life. I attribute my passions, my studies, and my personality to her. She led me out of my shell through the world of reading and writing so that I could be the person I am today.