

One.

Present Day

I have always believed in magic. I believe in good triumphing over evil, I believe in love prevailing, I believe all the other tired cliches I've read in thousands of books, but most of all I believe in magic.

Unfortunately, magic tends not to believe in me. This lack of confidence was currently manifesting in the stalling of my Beetle's engine, on the way the worn-down tires skittered over icy patches of road as I steered white-knuckled toward the Blue Ridge Mountains. I'd finally decided to take the L after a rocky post-college decade, to give up the fairytale of running away from my problems in search of a happily ever after, and was returning to my hometown in the hopes that the job offer I'd accepted would soon launch me toward bigger and better things. If I could only coax magic out of its shell and convince it that my love was pure and worthy, perhaps the next stop would finally be New York or Chicago or anywhere but North Carolina.

When the mountains finally appeared on the horizon, my heart seized up in my chest and I *knew* that despite every bad thing that had happened there, despite how thoroughly I'd tried to forget and move on and make a different life for myself, seeing that jagged skyline let me know beyond any chance of deniability that I was doing the right thing.

This was around the time the heater gave out. I was only halfway through the first song on my specially curated "Asheville Vibes" playlist when my breath began to come out in bright white clouds. Leave it to me to choose mid-winter to head for higher altitudes.

Ignoring the protestations of my GPS, I took the Bat Cave exit and felt my heart leap into my throat at the sight of the convenience store where I had always stopped for gas and snacks on childhood roadtrips to the coast. Between the cold and my exhaustion following a solitary, three-hour drive, I was ready for a break and an enormous cup of too-hot coffee. I didn't know if I was ready to re-immense myself so thoroughly in my childhood memories just yet, but I

convinced myself that easing into my past would be better and I was quickly running out of time if I wanted to dip my toe rather than cannonball in.

The chime over the door was an electronic sensor now, and a whisper of disappointment brushed past me as I entered without the expected fanfare of the old brass bell. I kept my feet moving even as my eyes grew wider and wider as I took in the new beverage coolers, the new layout of the aisles, the lack of a soft-serve machine. What had once been a wall of cigarettes was now overrun with vape pens and hookahs, and CBD products littered the counter.

What hadn't changed, though, was the quality of the coffee: it was as burned and bitter as ever, and not quite hot enough at midday for my Splenda to fully dissolve. I considered popping it into the microwave for a few minutes, but anxiety was creeping up on me, urging me to press forward, to see what other personal landmarks had been marred by time.

It was a relief to drive past the second-hand store where I'd traded old books for new ones at least a couple of times a month for years, and that the mall was still up and running, if not exactly thriving in the age of Amazon. I browsed through my memories of teenage shenanigans set in that mall, blurring out any trace of the other participant: he remained "this one guy", "my friend", all the nonchalant descriptors I'd been using for my former best friend on the exceedingly rare occasions when I'd mentioned him to anyone.

Funny how the most important person in the whole world can become nothing but a nameless figure in the stories you tell.

And then there it was: downtown Asheville, with its gridded, hilly streets and impossibly engineered parking garages and eclectic array of public art. Every inch of those streets held a thousand individual happy memories for me. Suddenly, I was too caught up in nostalgia to keep those landmine memories locked away in the deep, dark cabinet where they'd been waiting since I was eighteen years old and everything fell spectacularly apart. A pair of teenagers walked out of Woolworth Walk with paper cups full of Coke floats, and it could have been *us*, being asked to leave because we had laughed too loudly and too long at the nude photo series of wrinkly, liver-spotted old men someone was trying to pass off as art. The glass door of Malaprop's Bookstore caught the light when I stopped to let pedestrians cross the street, and all it took was a glance to put me right back in the YA section on the night the last *Percy Jackson* novel was released, when I stood in line for hours with *my friend*, when we went home and I sat side-by-side reading all through the night with *this one guy*.

It would have torn me apart to remember those things if they still mattered, but they hadn't mattered for a long time. I shut him out again, and focused instead on the vast mix of people on the other side of my window: dreadlocked hippies in baggy tie-dye, business women bundled up in Burberry scarves and tailored wool suits, a small army of dogs on a rainbow array of leads held by a tophatted man on a unicycle. I wasn't sure if Asheville would still feel warm and familiar anymore, all things considered, but they made me doubt. They made me smile. I was home.

My low-sitting car bottomed out, scraping against the gravel, as I pulled into the parking lot beside my new apartment. I sat behind the wheel staring up at the plain brick building, a post-war efficiency housing block where I managed to score a first floor one-bedroom for a halfway decent price. I stared at my corner window through blurry eyes, breathing through all of my excitement and anxiety and disbelief.

When enough emotion had been exorcized, I dug my earbuds out of my bag and cut the ignition. It was time to get to work hauling boxes. I started with the box of kitchen wares crammed into the passenger seat, juggling it and my keys as I strained to enter the passcode that would let me into the vestibule. The stairs to the upper floor were steep and unwieldy, and I was thankful to have that particular struggle off my plate.

With a sigh of relief, I saw that my landlord had kept her promise of accepting the delivery of my new furniture the previous weekend. Walking into a totally empty apartment would have broken my spirit; seeing my bright purple couch waiting for me provided the illusion that this was already my place, that I belonged here, and that by extension I wouldn't be sad and lonely forever. Sad and lonely people don't have bright purple couches.

The landlord had also left a welcome note and a bottle of locally distilled bourbon on the spacious kitchen counter. I dropped my first load of boxes in the corner and read the note. It was a boilerplate thank you/welcome combo with her phone number scrawled across the bottom, and I dug through my box for a magnet to stick it to the fridge. *See, Rory? There are people here who care about you!*

It only took a single song before the car was emptied of everything I'd considered worth holding onto. Most of what I owned was books or book-related memorabilia, and most of that was a product of my obsession with urban fantasy author J. Edward Michael. I had spent the long, quiet summer between high school and college rereading the *Witches of Eranstru* series.

After every break-up I turned to one of the *Soul Chronicles* installments, and there was *Grim* to bring me through difficult goodbyes. Because of J. Edward Michael and in spite of everything, I had never truly felt alone.

Sitting down on the edge of my plastic-wrapped mattress, I looked around at the handwriting scribbled on the boxes and ground my teeth together. I owned so few things anymore. Almost everything that once meant something to me had been left behind in a room in a house that was currently less than two miles away; because, yes, I had agonized over that not-so-distant distance once I finally found a livable apartment in my modest budget.

Sam wouldn't be there anymore, though. He moved away before I did. He moved on before I did.

Sam.

I let those three, unassuming letters ricochet around my brain for the first time in a long time. My heart twisted in my chest when I conjured his face, the constellation of freckles across the bridge of his nose that became distant stars as they spread over his cheekbones, the silver glint of his braces, his overly gelled spiky blond hair. His big, goofy laugh. The exaggerated scrunch of his nose when something was gross. The way he snored like a freight train with his mouth wide open. The fury in his turquoise eyes the last time we saw each other.

He had been the gangly, dorky, zit-prone center of my universe since the fourth day of second grade, right up until that moment when he wasn't anymore, the moment when my best friend chose someone else over me and forever altered the course of our lives.

But he was gone, had followed that same someone else all the way to New England, so it didn't matter anymore. How much we meant to each other and all the things we promised didn't matter anymore. There was a substantial part of me that didn't believe a Sam-free Asheville could still feel like home, but the more logical remainder of me knew I never would have taken the job if he was here, if there was any chance of having that particular scar ripped open and turning my entire body into a fresh wound.

I wasn't going to think about Sam now. I wasn't going to think about him ever. I tossed my pink dip-dyed hair over my shoulders to remind the universe how little I cared about the first eighteen years of my life.

I was forced out of my melancholy by Kendrick Lamar blaring through my earbuds. He gave me the audacity to disregard the task of unpacking, put on my imperturbable cool kid face,

and head out in search of a bar and people to talk to. It was a level of self-confidence I'd learned to fake by observing Ava, who had been my roommate from freshman year of college until just a few hours ago. She loved people and dancing and casual drinking, exchanging stories, trying new things, meaningless flirting. She had a truffle pig's keen sense for sniffing out the most malleable person in any given room and then charming them into submission. This, I realized, included me. She was easily the most charismatic person I'd ever met. She could make anyone feel like the most special person in the whole world, even if that person had chronic anxiety and a shitty attitude.

I had been much more of an introvert before her, and now there were times where if you caught me in the right mood I had no trouble whatsoever chatting with strangers in elevators or the grocery store. I still preferred curling up in my papasan chair with a book and a blanket, but every now and then I could be lured into social situations without mean mugging everyone who caught my eye.

I now lived a very easy walking distance from the downtown hub, something I'd only dreamed of as a kid. It only took a couple of songs to find the speakeasy that internet strangers recommended. The solid wood door was unmarked and easy to miss if not for the single lantern hanging above it. The secret must have been out, though, considering the size of the crowd in the dimly lit space beyond, the overlapping jumble of their conversations all but drowning out the jazz standard playing throughout the space. Light from the dim Edison bulbs dangling from the ceiling caused the hundreds of liquor bottles behind the bar to twinkle like stars. Bouquets of dried flowers hung upside down in the gaps between the top shelf liquors. The remaining space was filled with taxidermied crows and extremely realistic human bones. It made it impossible to tell if the cobwebs in all the corners were intentional or not.

My smartwatch buzzed on my wrist and I looked down to see a Dexcom alert that my blood sugar was high and still rising. Every Type 1 diabetic knows the struggle of trying to bolus for anything with tomato sauce, and this notification marked yet another losing battle in my body's war against pizza. If nothing else, the spike in my blood sugar explained why I had to pee so bad.

As always, there was a line for the bathroom. I shuffled to the back and whipped out my phone, because god forbid I give my brain a second alone. I was the mod on the J. Edward Michael sub on Reddit, so I opened that app first. Ever since I created this subreddit, all the way

back in tenth grade, the traffic patterns had been predictable: from the time a new book was announced until about two months after its release, there was an explosion of activity in the group, but then things would go more or less silent, allowing the cycle to begin again.

It's not that his fanbase wasn't dedicated—best of luck finding a modern fantasy author with more rabid fans—it's that he never gave us much to work with. Jem, as he was known amongst us diehards, had been a severe recluse since before the start of his writing career, and next to nothing was known about him. This also meant he didn't have any sort of social media, and he had never given a single interview. It never mattered; anything with his name on it had been an instant bestseller for as long as I could remember.

“Big J. Edward Michael fan?”

I turned to the woman in line behind me, her dark hair gathered into a messy bun on the crown of her head, her eyes partially obscured by the warm light reflecting off her glasses. Caught off-guard by the disruption and her easy, friendly smile, I could only manage an awkward, “Hi.”

“Sorry,” she said, gesturing to my phone and revealing a small heart tattooed on her wrist when the sleeve of her sweater slipped back, “I'm insufferably nosy.”

“Oh yeah, same.” I tucked my phone into my back pocket and crossed my arms over my chest, before remembering that it made me look standoffish and letting them hang at my sides like awkward salamis instead.

Relief rippled across her face that I wasn't going to get pissed at her for reading over my shoulder. She smiled and shifted closer so we could hear each other over the music. “Do you come to trivia night often?”

“Trivia night,” I said, glancing past her to where a man dressed like a hipster lumberjack was setting up a microphone. “No, first time. I guess that explains the crowd on a Thursday.”

“It's pretty competitive,” she agreed with a nod. “Do you want to join our team? We're in desperate need of diversifying our knowledge.”

I blinked at her, wondering how much of Ava's charm had worn off on me when we hugged goodbye. “Sure, sounds good.”

The music had switched from old school jazz to modern blues by the time we emerged from the bathroom. I trailed my new companion to a table full of loud, chatty people with varying degrees of funky hair, each and every one of them wearing a cardigan of some

description. “Hey, guys,” she announced, gesturing to me like a game show presenter, “fresh blood! This is... What’s your name?”

“Rory. Thanks for having me.”

I waved as my eyes moved over my new teammates. One of them, a petite woman with a side-shave and a mass of curls off the west coast of her face, was engrossed in her phone until she was elbowed by the person next to her. When she finally looked up, I stopped breathing.

Though I had established my one true BFF in second grade, Violet Skinner had been a close second from the day we met in middle school. After things fell apart with Sam a few years later, Violet became the only person I could still rely on. For those last few months of high school, we’d spent all our free time together loitering downtown, giving each other temporary tattoos with markers, having weekly book clubs, and getting stoned at my parents’ house since they were rarely around. Violet was solely responsible for dragging me through the last few months until graduation, for making it not just bearable but fun.

But we ended up at colleges on opposite sides of the state. We each made new friends, found new interests, built new lives. We grew up and grew apart. I thought all my old friends had moved away, including her, but now my eyes were locked on Violet Skinner’s and even from across a table in a dark, crowded bar I would’ve known her anywhere.

It seemed the recognition was mutual. Violet knocked her chair sideways in her scramble toward me. Tears started leaking from my eyes as I shuffled through the crowd to meet her halfway. We collided into each other next to a crowded table, Violet bumping hard enough into an empty chair that it rattled every nearby bottle and glass. “It’s you,” she squeaked into my ear, her arms tightening around my shoulders. “Holy shit, it’s you.”

“Vivi,” I choked out through a sob. Because she maxed out at five feet tall, Violet was easy to lift while being hugged, something I did more from muscle memory than conscious thought. “What are you doing here?”

Violet broke our hug but was still gripping my arms while she leaned back to look me over. With a scoff, she asked, “Me? What are *you* doing here? I thought you were long gone!”

“I was, but I’m back now. I’m renting a place over by the skate park.”

“Oh, so you’re back for real, not just visiting?”

“Yeah, I figured starting over again would be easier in a town where I already know there’s good coffee.”

This made Violet's elfin face light up like a marquee. "Perfect, that means we have plenty of time for all the catching up we need to do."

"Yeah, for sure." I started to ask about *him*, my former best friend, the third member of our trio, but stopped short. It was better not to know. "Tell me everything."

"Librarian, married, two cats, roller derby girl. You?"

Violet hadn't changed at all, and there was no happier revelation than that. I pulled her into another hug while we shared a laugh. "Social media manager, single due to bad taste, no pets, no hobbies."

"No hobbies?" Violet asked as her chin dropped to her chest. "You didn't quit writing. Like, there's no way. You just mean it's not a hobby anymore, right?"

I held my arms out to my sides, forming a W with my upper body. "Don't know what to tell you."

There was a genuine sadness in Violet's eyes even as a smile rounded her cheeks. "Dude, you were going to be the next J. Edward Michael."

"Okay, now you're just talking nonsense," I said with a laugh that was brightened by the mention of Jem; it had been his words that bonded Violet and me in the first place.

"It's so wild to see you here of all places. There was a J. Edward Michael question just last week, about some of his more recent work, and I remember thinking, 'Damn, I bet Rory could answer this in a heartbeat.'"

"Oh, have you not kept up with him?" When Violet shook her head, I swatted her shoulder. "You've missed out on some high quality content, dude. What's the last one you read?"

Violet folded her arms over her chest as she thought, a gesture that remained unchanged from our childhood. "I want to say it was called *The Blue Planet* or something like that."

"*My First Time on the Blue Planet*," I supplemented. All traces of my cool facade were erased by talking about *this* author with *this* person. My hands took on a life of their own, rolling and flailing as I spoke. "Okay, first of all, that was forever ago, but then second that means you haven't read *Ink as Black as Night*, which is arguably the best work he will ever do. Even that was seven years ago, though. Jesus. What's wrong with you?"

That number caused a spark of recognition on Violet's face. "Oh yeah, I still haven't caught up on all the books I missed when Mindy and I first started dating."

“Sounds like you have, like, a whole entire life now. I’m sure the wife and cats and skating keep you pretty busy.” I didn’t mean for any bitterness to seep into my tone, and Violet’s smile didn’t lessen, so maybe it was all in my head. Life had continued without me, not just in Asheville as a whole but in the specific spaces I had occupied. The things that had mattered to *us* had sloughed away from Violet over time and were now only important to me. Jem had been a major part not only of my friendship with Violet but of our identities when we’d known each other last. I was thrilled that someone I had loved so much had found the things in life that made her happy. I was thrilled to see Violet had all of the amazing things she deserved. Still, it was a hard pill to swallow.

And it became harder still when she pulled me into a hug and said, “Wait until Sam finds out you’re back. He’s gonna shit his pants.”

No. *No.* My heart twisted in my chest. I swallowed the dry lump in my throat and pushed all the air out of my lungs and through my nose. “He’s...around?”

There was understanding and compassion on Violet’s face, though her eternal optimism buoyed her voice. “He moved home about three years ago.”

An endless queue of questions organized itself in my mind, but I wasn’t ready to so much as entertain the notion of willingly giving him any real estate. “Asheville must have been so quiet without us.”

“I was thinking about moving to Durham, actually, to get my Masters. I ran into your mom at Trader Joe’s and she mentioned you were still out there, and I was like right on the verge of making up my mind because, yeah, it was quiet. But Mindy couldn’t imagine leaving, so I stayed.”

“You’d love the Duke campus,” I said, endlessly thankful for the turn in conversation, “but I’m glad you stayed. I mean, I would’ve loved to see you again, but I...I don’t know, the three of us were so codependent towards the end there. It’s probably for the best that we split up.”

Violet nodded, her smile widening. “And it’s definitely for the best that we all came back.”

Two.

Present Day

Skyland Beer & Bourbonworks was at the top of a steep, long, winding driveway. After following along the heavily wooded path for a couple of minutes, I became convinced that my GPS was lying to me, but after a final sharp turn, the industrial-looking warehouse came into view and, just beyond it, the bright blue buildings that housed the distillery, the brewery, and the tasting room. I had hoped that by planning to meet Violet right after they opened we would be spared a crowd, but it was a popular enough spot that at noon on a dreary January Friday we already had to park in the back row of the gravel lot. The patio was crowded with families and dog-owners, and both food trucks parked at the far side of the building had lines more than twenty people deep. I thought this would mean that the tasting room would be all but impenetrable, but there was no line at the host stand, and there were some empty tables in the massive room beyond. As always, Ashevilleians were an outdoorsy people.

My eyes were still scanning the seated patrons when the host asked, “Just one today, or are you meeting someone?”

“Yes.”

His gaze remained blank and I was too mortified by my mistake to do anything other than double down on silent expectancy. The most valuable item in my bag of tricks was to never show vulnerability of any kind for any reason whatsoever.

The host blinked at me, shoulders heaving with a sigh. “Is it Violet, by any chance?”

My throat was too tight for a proper response, and I forced out a high-pitched. “Mmhm.”

I scurried off in the direction the host indicated, diverting from my path to order a pint of winter ale before making my way to an unoccupied table with a huge, teal puffer coat piled on the bench seat. There was a copy of *The Soul Chronicles: With Ink as Black as Night* laying on the table with a crocheted bookmark placed about a quarter of the way through. My smile came

easily now, felt more genuine, as I shucked off my bomber jacket and hung it over a chair with my bag. As I was getting comfortable, Violet emerged from the bathroom and came scurrying across the weathered wooden floor to greet me with a stifling hug.

“I am so excited about this, you don’t even know,” she said as she slid onto the bench. She was exactly who she had always been, and my heart wanted to soar and burst and melt all at the same time. Had Violet not shown up at the bar the night before it never would have occurred to me that seeing her again was a possibility, but now that she was here it was unfathomable that I made it this far without her. I lifted my glass to my mouth to mask the silence she was going to notice any second now.

To stop myself, once again, from asking Violet about Sam.

There must have been a look on my face, though, one that she still recognized after all these years. She drummed her glittery fingernails on the cover of her book and said, “You know, Sam moved away, too.”

My body went rigid. When I put my glass back on the table, it was with stunted, jerky movements. There it was. The door was open. All I could manage was, “I recall.”

“Right.” Violet stretched out the vowel sound, forcing herself to look me in the eye no matter how uncomfortable the topic was. She waited for me to ask for further information, which she should have known was never going to happen. She gave up with a shrug of her right shoulder and said, “He asks about you a lot.”

It was the most casual of statements, like she had no idea she’d just dropped an atomic bomb onto the center of my life. I looked around the cavernous space, desperate for any kind of help or distraction. And somehow things got worse when Violet added, “My parents still ask about you sometimes, too, and obviously the Capshaws do. Every time I see them.”

This knowledge squeezed my heart until I could feel regret and shame oozing out of it. Sam’s parents, Paul and Marcy, had been my parents and their home had been my home all throughout my childhood. I spent more nights there than at my own place from fourth grade until halfway through senior year. My mom and dad weren’t bad people—at least, not on the surface—but they had never been parents to me, not really. It wasn’t until my first visit to the Capshaw home that I understood that children being considered precious and lovable wasn’t a fictional construct developed by television writers. It wasn’t until that first visit that I considered I might be worthy of care and attention.

Sam hadn't been the only thing I'd lost to our falling out. Everything that was good about my life had gone with him. I had never allowed myself to feel the full weight of it. I'd had to let it out in small increments, tiny bursts of emotions that—I now realized—still lingered in my bloodstream. I watched the ripples race across the surface of my beer as I spun my glass against the table top. “How are they?”

Violet's voice was softened by her understanding, her drooping expression evidence of the chastisement she'd received from my drastic change in mood. “Good. They're good. They went on a cruise with my parents over the summer, actually. Mindy and Sam and I were supposed to go, too, but Mindy got Covid like a week before and Sam didn't want to go to just hang out with our parents, so we're going to try again maybe in early spring. Dad is still not done complaining about how hot it was in July, which...I mean, duh?”

“Oh, so you and Sam are still, like, legit friends?”

“We reconnected when he moved back home, yeah. I mean, we were already seeing each other from time to time because of our parents, so it was pretty easy to pick that up again. When he was up north, though, we were just doing the thing where we'd text each other happy birthday and that was pretty much it.” Violet waited until I met her gaze to smile. “I know he'd like to see you.”

I wanted to see him more than I'd ever wanted anything else in my whole life, and it was how much I wanted it that made it impossible to reach for. I couldn't lose him again, and avoidance was the only way to guarantee that. “Yeah, I'm not so sure,” I said with a roll of my eyes that I knew would convince approximately no one, “he's never texted me on *my* birthday.”

“There's always this year.”

“Can we table this discussion?” I asked, tapping my now-empty glass against the tabletop as a way to burn off my sudden excess of nervous energy. “I'm not really ready to revisit that part of my past.”

The bright enthusiasm wilted from Violet's face. “Shit. Sorry. I'm so sorry. Please don't kill me, okay?”

I tilted my head at her, confused. “What—?”

“Violet!”

My pulse raced at supersonic speed. I knew that voice better than all others but thought I would never hear it again. It was the patter of rain against a nylon tent in the backyard and jars

full of lightning bugs and orange creamsicles and rainbow Christmas lights left up all year round. It was sneaking into the Skinners' pool when they were out of town and shopping cart races in the Harris Teeter parking lot and laughing so hard we got stomach cramps.

It was Sam.

I wanted to turn around and I wanted to run away. I wanted to dedicate a sonnet to Violet and curse her name for all eternity for orchestrating this reunion. I wanted everything to be just as it had been ten years before and I wanted to never see either one of them ever again.

Just as I knew the sound of Sam's footsteps, he seemed to know the back of my head. I could feel his eyes boring into it when he asked, "Is that...?"

I stared at the wall behind Violet's head through the tears blurring my eyes, knowing that if I blinked or looked away they would spill over, knowing that if I started crying in this moment I would never stop. Sam Capshaw was and always had been an armor-piercing arrow, my Achilles' heel, my Kryptonite.

I saw Violet nod and heard Sam let out a whoosh of breath tinged with laughter. He had the sort of laugh that I still found impossible to resist, even when it was softened with disbelief, even if it felt like this particular joke had been primarily at my expense. I turned in my seat.

The boy I would have known anywhere was gone. I still pictured Sam as the same gangly, pimply dork he had been at his seventeenth birthday party when he'd traded all of his arcade tickets for the massive pink dinosaur plushie I wanted. Had I seen him in any other context, I never would have recognized the tall, broad shouldered man gawking at me slack-jawed. His sandy hair was swept back from his forehead as though he'd raked his fingers through it one too many times, a theory confirmed when he reached up to do it again. His piercing eyes were wide with surprise. The braces I remembered were long gone, leaving him with one of the most perfect-looking smiles I had ever seen.

"Rory? Oh my god."

I had imagined this moment any time I'd had too much to drink over the last decade. In those imaginings, Sam's eyes met mine across a crowded room and he turned away, disgusted and disinterested, or he stormed over to me and resumed the fight that had torn us apart to start with, or he'd put me so far out of his mind that he didn't even register that I'd once been his favorite person.

What really happened was a possibility I'd never considered: he tripped over something unseen, then pushed his way through the maze of tables to get to me. Before I knew what was happening he skidded to a halt in front of me, less than a hand's breadth between us. I watched his eyes shimmer from excited to uncertain as I got to my feet. He was still that cautious little boy I knew so well. His chest rose and fell with heavy breaths, his palms turned up in supplication. That uncertainty turned to hope when he asked, "Can I?"

I couldn't speak. It felt like there was a grapefruit lodged in my throat, swollen and bitter, and all I could do was nod. He hugged me like his life depended on it and I realized with a start that mine did, that it always had. I wriggled my arms free and clasped his neck and he still smelled like my Sammy, all Old Spice deodorant and Cherry Coke.

His shoulders convulsed and I heard him snuffle. Knowing he'd been moved to tears had always been triggering for me. That hadn't changed in the intervening years.

My boots left the floor, the rubber tips brushing against the hardwood, and at first I thought that I was so happy that I'd actually started to float. It was Sam, *Sam*, after all this time, and he was happy to see me.

Eventually, Sam set me back on the ground and ran one of his hands over the mahogany-colored stubble on his angular jawline. He looked at me like I was the eighth wonder of the world, like my very existence was a miracle, and I knew I was looking at him with the same expression. He blinked up at the ceiling and pushed out a heavy sigh before saying, "I had no idea you were here. How long have you been in town? How are you? How have you been?"

"Good. I mean, you know, off and on." Sudden tension alerted me to the fact that my shoulders were creeping up toward my ears. I tried to relax and couldn't. "It's...yeah, it's been a while. You?"

"Been a long, long time."

I laughed and my shoulders dropped and Sam laughed, too. "I was asking how you've been."

"Great," he said, nodding for emphasis. "Or good, I guess. Sometimes good, sometimes great. It varies."

Life had been either good or great without me. Cool. I filed that away in the self-loathing folder for later review.

When I sat down, he took the seat beside me and the world narrowed down to ten cubic feet. I tucked my hair behind my ears and pressed my shaking hands flat against the tabletop before offering Sam perhaps the least convincing smile of my life. “I heard you moved away.”

“Yeah, you heard right.”

“So,” I said through a heavy sigh, “where'd you move? Anywhere cool? I guess not if you're back here.”

He ruffled the hair at the back of his head and wouldn't meet my eyes. I knew what that meant and bile was already in its launch position at the base of my throat when he said, “Jess and I moved up north for college and, uh...you know, we got married and settled down in Vermont for a while. Don't know if you heard about that.”

Well, great seeing you, goodbye forever. The words shot across my brain but refused to come out of my mouth, my lips pressing into a tight line and my eyes drying out because I couldn't blink. “Wow, congratulations,” I managed, hoping I didn't sound as mechanical to him as I did to myself.

“Oh, no.” Sam finally looked at me and shook his head. “I mean, thanks, but we got divorced a couple years ago. Been back since then.”

It would have been incredibly inappropriate to offer more sincere congratulations, as much as I wanted to. “Right, gotcha. Sorry you went through that. I hear divorce is a bummer.”

A knowing look flashed across his face, a twisting of his lips and a brief lowering of his eyes. “It was rough. But who could've known we weren't going to work long term, right?”

There was a wry look on his face and a joking lilt to his words, but this was still dangerous water to tread. “I'm sure your parents are glad to have you back, their little golden boy.”

“You were always their favorite kid.”

I couldn't look at him anymore. I couldn't keep looking at Sam and seeing all those lost years between us spelled out in the flecks of gray forming at his temples and the smile lines around his eyes that never entirely went away. I couldn't see those things while hearing the easy, comfortable way he talked to me like we hadn't lost any time, or the casual reference to our last argument—*who could've known?*—like it hadn't mattered at all. I had to get away from that table.

But I could feel his eyes on me, and I'd waited so long and so hopelessly to see them again that I was powerless against their magnetic pull. His smile widened and his Adam's apple bobbed with a swallow. "They're going to lose it when they find out I ran into you. How long will you be in town? Do you think you might have time for a visit?"

"Yeah, all the time in the world. I'm back-back."

"Back-back," Sam repeated with a laugh. Stars shot across his eyes and he was happy, he was happy to see me, he was happy we shared a town again. This couldn't be real. It couldn't be this easy after all this time. He was still Sam, my Sam, the one who had saved me by letting me be his hero. He folded his hands together and propped his chin on them while he thought. "I have dinner with them on Mondays if you're free then. Or..."

"Or?"

"Or we could head over there right now."

"Oh," I stammered out, eyes flicking desperately to Violet, "I mean, I would, obviously, but I have a lot of unpacking and stuff to do before I start my new job, so..."

"Oh, right." Sam shook his head at his own thoughtlessness. "No, of course. I didn't realize you just got into town."

I looked over at him, searching for any glimpse of the kid I had grown up with. I found it in his eyes. They were the sort of bright, electric blue that looked photoshopped in pictures. If the light caught them just right and you knew where to look, there were these incredible gold flecks around his irises. More than that, it was the way he still looked at me like he knew me, like he still saw all of me with every glance and loved me anyway. No one had ever looked at me like that before we met, and no one had since. No one else had ever known me like he had, not even Violet.

But he didn't know me anymore and I didn't know him. There was a very real possibility that the people we'd become wouldn't be compatible. Even worse, there was a possibility that nothing had changed, that we'd learn to resent each other all over again, that I'd lose everything I cared about a second time if I let him back in.

I'd been miserable without him, but I'd never given myself permission to notice until this moment when I didn't have to miss him anymore and when the chance of losing him presented itself once again. The weight of it was going to crush me if I didn't get out of there.

“This is so awkward,” I said, proving it by sliding sideways out of my chair before my legs were fully ready to support me, “but I actually only had a few minutes to hang out before the movers show up.”

Violet turned her phone face up and said, “Oh, shit!” It was convincing enough that it put a pit in my stomach for the second in which she’d made my lie real.

I tried to pull my jacket from the chair, forgetting that it was anchored by my backpack. Confusion gave way to panic and I was on the verge of tears when Sam untangled the strap from my sleeve. He waited until my coat was on before helping me get the bag straps onto my shoulders.

“It was so good to see you, Rory.” This time when I looked up at him, his smile was wistful and subdued. He knew exactly what was happening in my brain and why, because of course he did, and of course he was going to be cool about it.

I could tell by the set of his shoulders that he wanted to hug me again, but I couldn’t do it. The understanding in his eyes was what finally broke me. “I’ll get your number from Violet,” I said, speaking quickly to mask the tightness of my throat.

An avalanche of tears was already rolling down my cheeks by the time Violet caught up with me. “I don’t forgive you,” I huffed as we wove our way through the parked cars.

Her expression contorted from worried to remorseful. I could see the carousel of thoughts spinning madly in her mind, the less appropriate or superficial ones being cast off by the centrifugal force. Finally, instead of asking me anything at all, she took my hand in hers and said, “I’m really sorry. I shouldn’t have surprised you with each other like that. I should at least have told you because I already knew he’d—”

“Yes, you should have.” I flailed my arm to break contact with her comforting hand, my bag swinging wildly from one shoulder and thumping into the side of my car. My heart was racing and my tears were freezing to my face and—not for the first time—I questioned what it was I’d done wrong in my life to end up in this moment.

I’d backed away from Violet until I was pinned against the side of my car, and she raised her hands like she was trying to convince a wild animal that she wasn’t a threat. “Look, I knew you’d run into each other eventually, and I thought that if it was in a controlled environment or whatever it would be easier.”

“You know what it was like for me,” I said, angry fists swiping away the dampness on my cheeks, “better than anyone else, you know what it was like. He broke me, and you know that, and for you to just...”

“I know. I know, I’m sorry.” Her shrug was half-hearted and apologetic, but it didn’t inspire an ounce of forgiveness. No matter how much I’d missed her, missed Sam, missed *us* I didn’t have the wherewithal to drop my shield. “I knew if I told you he was here you wouldn’t come.”

“If I knew he was in Asheville at all I wouldn’t have come.” I swallowed down a sob as I jerked open the door and launched myself behind the wheel. My spinning tires sent sprays of gravel in my wake as I fled, as I tried to forget.

Three.

Second Grade

I was sitting on the cross bar at the very top of the jungle gym, the searing hot metal branding my legs just below the cuff of my shorts, when movement at the naughty curb caught my attention. A rat-faced little boy named Noah had grabbed the weird new kid's book and was running across the playground with it, laughing and taunting him.

The victim had transferred to Guaxule Elementary following the abrupt closure of his Christian private school. After the first day, when none of us were inclined to include him in our games, he started bringing books to recess and sitting on the curb a few yards from the cluster of gossiping teachers, a spot that was usually reserved for children who had lost recess privileges for the day. If he wasn't going to make any social effort, that was his own too bad.

But the line had to be drawn somewhere, and this was where I decided to draw it. I swung down, dodging my playmates until I was close enough to the ground to jump. My chubby little legs moved much faster than anyone could have reasonably expected, and Noah didn't make it halfway to the swing set before I tackled him, ripped the book from his hands, and smacked him across the face with it.

That was how Sam and I first met, officially.

We waited on a bench together outside the principal's office while Noah told his side of the story behind the imposing door. Sam was holding his copy of *James and the Giant Peach* in his lap and staring down at the floor, occasionally taking the sort of deep breath that let me know he was trying not to cry. I would later learn that this was the first time he'd ever really been in trouble, or even trouble adjacent.

He was a skinny boy with knobby knees and sharp elbows, and his center-parted bowl cut did little to distract from the simple fact that his nose was too big for his face. He was quiet, not speaking to anyone unless spoken to and even then keeping his voice low. His dad dropped him

off at school every morning, which I observed from my place in the bus line, and he brought lunch from home every day with notes and little hand-drawn cartoons decorating the brown paper bag it was packed in, which I noticed from my place in the lunch line.

I nudged my sandal against his sneaker and asked, “What’s that about, anyway?”

Sam sniffled and glanced in my direction, at my scraped and dirty knees and disheveled hair, and he perked up a little. “Um, there’s this orphan,” he started, sitting up straighter though his shoulders stayed hunched forward. Even the slightest movement from either of us caused the bench to squeak. “And he goes on adventures in a magic peach.”

I tried to keep the judgment out of my voice but I’m only human. “A magic peach?”

“I’m not good at explaining stuff.”

“Oh.” I started kicking my feet and glancing around, baffled and a little terrified by how long Noah had been in that room. “Why is he an orphan, do his parents not like him?”

Sam looked at me sideways, more to see if I was serious than to let me know what a dumb question it was. “That’s not what an orphan is, an orphan is somebody whose parents are dead.”

“Jesus.” My casual blasphemy startled him, and I apologized, having forgotten about the whole Christian school thing. “How did his parents die?”

“They got eaten by escaped rhinos.”

“No way! And then what?”

“Then he has to live with his mean aunts. He doesn’t have a bed or hardly any food, and they treat him really bad.” When I wrinkled my nose in response, he turned toward me and shook his head emphatically. “No, but it gets better because he meets a magician who—”

The door opened and Noah came shuffling out, a bruise already forming on his left cheekbone. Principal Lahey shuffled out, fingers hooked through his belt loops as he adjusted the khakis he wore slung over his narrow hips but below his imposing beer belly. A cloud of moldy air conditioning and burned coffee rolled off of him. “Miss Whatley, your turn.”

Sam hopped off the bench and, despite the tremor in his voice, said, “Mr. Lahey, sir, Rory didn’t do anything wrong.”

Mr. Lahey looked over the top of his rectangular glasses, noted the fear in Sam’s watering eyes and his tiny, ineffectual fists clenched at his sides. “Samson Capshaw,” he said with more

than a hint of disapproval, “you’re not someone I ever expected to see in my office. I’m very disappointed in you.”

This had the intended effect of withering Sam, who collapsed onto the bench beside me and stared blankly at the wall ahead as he tried to collect himself. I felt my anger spiking again, that pivotal moment of seeing a person in authority abusing their power on someone perceived as weak. As much as I wanted to cuss him out, I’d learned the previous year that doing so did no good. Instead, I huffed into the mildewy office and kicked the door closed behind me.

In the end I got eight demerits, the dreaded “eight straight” that meant automatic suspension. This was nothing new for me, though I’d caused my first offense much earlier in the year than I had in first grade. Principal Lahey and I already knew each other well, and that would continue until fifth grade, when I graduated to middle school and became acquainted with Vice Principal Arnulf. She was no great fan of mine, either.

Instead of going back to class, I waited in the girls’ bathroom until I heard Sam shuffling past in the hall. “Hey,” I whispered through a crack in the door. When he was close enough, I grabbed his arm and pulled him inside, despite his wide-eyed protest that he wasn’t allowed to be in there. “How many did you get?”

“How many what?”

“Demerits.”

Sam’s lips pursed as he shook his head, puzzled. “None, I guess.”

“What happened?”

“He made me sit there while he called my mom at work and told her what happened.” He sighed, crossing his arms tightly over his chest like he was hugging himself. “And he told me not to be friends with you.”

I rolled my eyes, but it stung to know yet another grown-up thought of me that way, as someone to be avoided. Sure, I hated Principal Lahey, but I didn’t know the feeling was so mutual.

“I don’t care what he says, though.” Sam raised his chin and pierced me with his turquoise gaze. “Do you want to come over after school? My mom baked cookies yesterday, and you can meet my snake if you want. He doesn’t bite or anything.”

Based on that phone call, his mom already had a negative first impression of me. I demurred on those grounds, but Sam insisted. I spent the rest of the day in a cold sweat, dreading

Sam's mom and her inevitably bad opinion of me. He'd decided to defy Principal Lahey's command to avoid a friendship with me, but Sam didn't seem like the sort of kid who would go against his mother's wishes. The second Mrs. Capshaw laid eyes on me, I knew it would be over. I spent the rest of that day wracked with anxiety, every possible bad scenario playing out in my head.

Sam's mom waited in the pick-up line, reading a Danielle Steel novel and drinking from a plastic thermos of Earl Grey tea. We'd agreed that Sam would go out to the car first and pitch the idea to her while I waited back at the main entrance, where it would take very little effort or embarrassment to transfer to the group of bus riders should the need arise. After what felt like three hours but was probably more like fifteen seconds, Sam pointed back at me and she leaned across the front seat to wave me over, a huge smile on her face. The gold-rimmed glasses set atop her round, rosy cheeks gave her the inviting, year-round look of Mrs. Claus.

"You must be Rory the hero," she said with a conspiratorial wink when I approached the passenger door.

"Yes, Mrs. Capshaw."

"You can call me Marcy, honey." She and Sam exchanged a look, then she continued, "I heard you might like to come play at our house for a little while. Do you mind if I check with your mom and dad first?"

We went through the usual song and dance, me explaining that my parents really didn't care what I did with my time while also providing their contact information. She wouldn't be swayed, though.

"Okay," she said, drumming her fingers on the center console while she thought. "You normally ride the bus, don't you? Whose house do they let you off at?"

"Mine."

"Who stays with you until your parents get home?"

This seemed like a trick question, and I could hear the hesitation in my own voice.

"Nobody. I look after myself."

Her eyes widened and her brows rose, but her shock was quickly hidden behind a warm smile, her cheeks pushing her glasses further up her nose. "Okay, hop on in. We'll call your parents just to make sure they know where you are."

Once inside the Capshaws' split-level house, I bounded down the stairs with Sam to the rec room. Item number one on the agenda was checking out the giant terrarium that housed his pet snake, Walt Hissney. I asked if I could feed Walt one of the mice kept in a small cage nearby, and Sam promised that I could if I ever came back on a feeding day.

"He only eats about every ten days," Sam explained as we stood shoulder to shoulder, our noses pressed against the glass. "I'll check with my mom, but I think the next time is Tuesday."

"Okay, I can come back Tuesday. If you want."

Sam stood back, studying me almost as intensely as I studied Walt. "Do your mom and dad let you do whatever you want?"

"Pretty much." It was easy to keep my tone neutral while walking the perimeter of the room, pretending to measure it by meticulously putting one foot in front of the other. "My dad didn't want any kids and my mom only likes me when he's not around."

"Oh."

"Yeah." I shrugged. "It's okay. I get to stay up late and watch scary movies sometimes."

"I don't like scary movies."

"Have you actually seen any?"

It was Sam's turn to shrug before his shoulders hunched inward, like he was worried he'd just committed a friendship-ending offense. He mumbled, "I don't like being scared. Like at Halloween and stuff."

"That's okay." I emphasized this with a smile and a nod when he looked at me dubiously. "I think you do like scary stuff, you just don't know it. That peach book sounded kinda scary to me."

He smiled back at me and his teeth were too big for his mouth. He was too skinny, and his voice was too nasally and it made his big, loud laugh too squeaky. Sam was too shy and too scared and too kind and too generous. I swore then and there that anyone who ever came for him again was going to get a book to the face as long as I was around, accumulating demerits be damned.

Sam smiled his too big smile and asked in his too nasally voice, "Wanna build a blanket fort? We can play house in it."

We gathered up all the extra blankets and cushions in the house, then set to work. I didn't know that blanket forts were a real thing that existed outside of movies, but Sam had learned the fine art from his cousins and within twenty minutes we had a place of our own.

I followed along with whatever Sam wanted to do because playing house was also new to me. He went upstairs and fetched *James and the Giant Peach*, then handed it to me and nodded toward a mountain of pillows in one corner. "You can stay in and read," he explained, offering me one of his hands for balance as I clambered onto my perch, "and I'll mow the lawn and stuff."

"Do I have to cook? I don't want to play if I have to cook. I don't like it."

Sam's lips twisted together as he thought. "No, that's okay. We can just order pizza every day. Do you like pizza?"

"Pizza's my favorite."

"Mine, too! I like pepperoni and mushroom."

My nose wrinkled. "The only topping I like is cheese."

He considered this obstacle as well. "We can get two pizzas every night, then."

"So..." I looked around at the fort, then down at the book in my hands. "All I'm supposed to do is read? And you're gonna do all the housework?"

"Sure, but you don't have to just read. You can do whatever you want." He smiled at me again, and his gratitude mirrored my own. "We can play however you want."

I came over after school the next day and the next day and the next. The Capshaws started adding my favorite meals to the dining rotation. It was Sam's and my responsibility to clear the table afterward, then Paul and Marcy would sit with us to help with our homework. As accountants math was their best subject, while Sam was science-minded and I excelled at language arts. Between the three of us, we had most of the second grade curriculum covered.

Between school and dinner, Sam and I played house. We co-parented Walt, Sam kept the fort in working order, and I read. After *James and the Giant Peach*, I read *The Boxcar Children* and then *Harriet the Spy*. Eventually, Marcy had to take me to the library to sign me up for a card of my own. I got my very first taste of being someone other than myself and I was hooked. Whether I was nestled down in a mountain of cushions or my skin was sizzling on the asphalt of the naughty curb, I was rarely without a book in my hands. I got lost in Terabithia and Narnia and the Shire. I was Anne of Green Gables, I was Meg Murry, I was Jo March, I was anyone

other than Rory Whatley. It was the most potent form of magic of all, being able to leave my body and go anywhere and be anyone.

When I had to go back to my house at night, I'd make a nest of pillows and blankets on my bed, get out my book, and pretend to still be in the fort while I read myself to sleep. I'd pretend to still be in the real-life place where I was loved, because of all the wonderful, fantastical places I could now imagine, Sam's house was still my favorite.