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# INTO the BLUE

*a love story*

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ORION

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TEN MINUTES BEFORE DRESS REHEARSAL, AJ Graves sat alone in the auditorium of the Hayes Theater, watching the stage lights rise. Her head was full of ticking. *Ten minutes.* One more run-through, just them. Then the doors would open, and—

*Tick, tick, tick, tick.*

What was she going to do?

With a mechanized clink, the stage turned gold, and Noah Drew strode on carrying a prop chair. AJ stirred as his muscular, six foot three frame crossed center; he had such command, even when he wasn't trying. He halted over a taped spike mark, his tousled black hair etched in light. He tried the chair this way then that, his expression so familiar it made AJ's chest ache.

*Hers.* He was hers until the show closed. That's what they'd agreed.

Noah's gaze lifted as he sensed her presence. He gestured to the chair. "Thoughts?" His low voice projected effortlessly over the scalloped red rows of the theater.

"What's the difference?" asked AJ. Half their show was improvised—

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the chair's role changed each night. But tomorrow was Noah's directorial debut: even the chair must be considered.

He turned his broad back on her. "*This* way acknowledges the fourth wall. *This* way does not."

AJ smiled as she stood. "Whatever you want. You're the bride."

Noah muttered something that sounded distinctly like *My grave is like to be my wedding bed* and returned to the prop. As AJ watched him fuss, she felt a tug near her sternum and knew: this was about them. Each tiny adjustment delayed the show from opening. From closing.

Slowly, AJ walked down the aisle. Noah faced her, severe. "Speak again, bright angel," she teased.

His lip twitched as he tried to hold on to his irritation. Then he smiled, his gaze appraising. AJ's cheeks warmed. "Come here," he said.

She stepped up to the stage, and he knelt before her, his enormous hands brushing strawberry-blond wisps out of her eyes. Then he plucked something from her hair. A stray leaf.

Fucking foliage. "That was fashion," grumbled AJ.

"That was garbage," said Noah. He examined the half-yellow leaf, then tucked it into his pocket like it was nothing, like of course he would deal with her garbage hair leaf, that was his job in life, and now AJ couldn't breathe.

She had read once that falling in love was like being a celebrity to one person. The irony was that Noah was actually famous. Wildly, obscenely famous and beloved. An Academy Award winner. The *last Drew. People*'s Sexiest Man Alive, 2012.

But despite that, despite *everything*, here he was, cleaning her up like she belonged to him.

AJ's throat constricted. "Don't throw it away." She wasn't talking about the leaf anymore.

Noah's brow creased as he read her. "It's dead," he said gently, his thumb smoothing her cheekbone. AJ leaned into his touch, looking up into his beautiful dark eyes.

"No, it isn't," she whispered. *Not yet.*

"Five minutes, you two," their stage manager, Jerry, called from the wing.

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For a moment, neither of them moved. They'd been suspending time for weeks, playing out entire lives on this stage. But once the doors opened, the clock would restart. There would be no turning back. *Let's keep playing,* AJ silently begged him. *Let's never stop playing.*

"Age," he breathed, and she glimpsed a war in his eyes. He was having doubts. AJ's heart leapt.

Then he dropped his hand, his stare going distant. AJ knew this look. She knew what it meant.

Twelve performances, then Noah would be gone.

*Tick, tick, tick, tick.*

He surveyed her now, reserved. "Are we doing this?" He hadn't changed his mind, AJ understood. But he couldn't hide from her, not his pain nor his regret. He didn't want this any more than she did.

AJ held his gaze.

Twelve performances. Twelve potential outcomes.

"Play until you reach the limits of existence," Eudora had told them, back when it all began.

And just like that, AJ knew what she had to do.

"Yes," she said, placing her hand in his. She let him pull her up onto the stage.

She was going to save them.

To save him.

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PART I

# Acting Lessons

Who? What? Where? When we ask these questions, we're not just initiating a scene; we're announcing our intention to play with the Cosmic Consciousness.

—*Laughter & Death,* by Ezell Farr

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GLADSTONE, MASSACHUSETTS

## June 2000

AJ Graves rewound the video and hit play. That morning, she was pulling a doubleheader at Reel World Video: watching *Astronauticals* on the store's silver Panasonic while writing *Astronauticals* fan fiction behind the register.

Or she was trying to. She'd broken her arm last month during track finals—just in time for junior prom. Each keystroke was torment, but AJ typed on. Anything for her twelve followers.

Doubleheaders were one of many reasons AJ loved her shifts at Reel World. With four siblings at home, AJ barely had space to think, much less write. By contrast, a solitary afternoon among Reel World's eclectic posters and inventory felt like teleporting from bleak Gladstone to New York—or what she knew of New York from *Friends, Felicity,* and *Saturday Night Live.*

That was AJ's dream—to move to the city and write for *SNL.* It was also why she watched and watched *Astronauticals,* the 1964 cult series about hippie pirates traveling the stars in the hump of a giant space whale. The show was totally improvised, which according to Storm,

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Reel World's owner and cinematic Yoda, made it a staple for any aspiring comedian.

And it was hilarious. As a devout fan, or Nautical, AJ could recite every line.

As episode 1.10, "The Mirror of Janus," began to play, she glanced down at the cast restricting her right arm. The ink from her track teammates' signatures had bled into the fiberglass like survivor's-guilt tie-dye. AJ felt a stab of dejection; New York had never felt farther.

To put it bluntly, her stupid arm had ruined her life.

AJ's endgame had been planned out so beautifully: A summer spent interning at *The Berkshire Eagle* and attending heavily scouted soccer intensives would have perfectly teed up her senior year and college applications. With luck, she would have been looking at a full ride to NYU.

But her accident had destroyed all that.

No driving meant no internship at *The Berkshire Eagle.* No vigorous activity meant no soccer intensives. No references, no scouts. No scholarship. No escape.

"Relax," her mom had said. "You're still a shoo-in for UMass."

AJ's entire family had gone to UMass. Her mom, her dad. Her siblings Patrick and Libby both loved it. Both popular. Both on track to graduate, return to Gladstone, become their parents, and die.

Now, at seventeen, AJ felt trapped—like the rest of her life had been scripted, and she *hated* this movie. Her hours alone at Reel World were her only escape.

The partition rippled, a beaded curtain depicting the All-Seeing Eye, and Storm emerged from the back room. A slender trans woman in her forties, she had long burgundy hair and nails to match.

"Age, good. You're here," she said. "There's someone I want you to meet."

"Oh?" said AJ, reaching into a Ziploc for a handful of Reese's Puffs, her favorite.

Storm drummed her acrylics on the counter. "I've hired some extra help."

AJ froze. "You didn't."

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Storm pointedly eyed AJ's cast. "Actually, I did."

AJ frowned. "Do I not get a say in this?"

Storm smiled sweetly. "Nope. Noah—"

A shadow appeared behind the All-Seeing Eye, and AJ's heart sank. Storm never let customers in back, even to use the bathroom.

She truly had decided to hire this person.

A large hand parted the beads as an extremely tall young man stepped through. He was dressed head to toe in black, with jet-black hair that hung shaggily about his broad shoulders and scowling black eyebrows; his overall vibe screamed villain. Except his eyes—dark and expressive and surprisingly lovely for such an intimidating person.

As they flicked to the Panasonic, time slowed. AJ watched the stranger's frown deepen and knew at once he must be Noah Drew.

Even the tiniest backwater along AJ's homestretch of the Mass Turnpike had ties to some historical figure of note. Great Barrington had W. E. B. Du Bois. Lenox had Edith Wharton.

Gladstone had the Drews.

They were a family of great actors, each generation more famous than the last, starting with Sir Errol Drew, who had made a name for himself on British and American stages in the 1880s, down to Noah's father, Daniel Drew, a massive action film star in the 1980s.

The Drews were omnipresent. In fact, a very young Eudora Drew was currently battling it out on the Panasonic as Glimmette, the go-go-boots-wearing, ass-kicking pilot on *Astronauticals.*

In fact, AJ was writing Glimmette fan fiction.

"AJ," said Storm. "This is Noah."

"Hi," said AJ, quickly minimizing her browser.

Noah's gaze slid from the Panasonic to AJ. His eyes went wide. "I—You."

Storm's head tilted. "You two know each other?"

They absolutely did not. "I probably just look familiar," AJ supplied, when Noah continued to stare at her. "I think you might have been in my older brother, Pat's, class?"

AJ was just being polite. She knew for a fact that he had been in Pat's class, four years ahead of hers. According to town lore, Noah had been

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raised by his mother, a college professor, who had shipped him off his senior year after an incident involving arson. Last AJ heard, he'd gone into the armed services.

What was he doing back in Gladstone?

"That's not it," said Noah. He was watching AJ with an intensity that made her feel small, which was unusual, since she was pushing five foot nine. AJ was suddenly very aware of her ratty jean shorts, hand-me-down basketball jersey, and messy strawberry-blond topknot.

As they sized each other up, AJ felt a strange untamed aspect of her being awaken.

Noah was so big, he made the DVD cases look like baseball cards. His face was angular, pale, and far too tired for someone only a few years older. He looked like he'd forgotten how to smile.

Even so, he was uncommonly handsome. As he turned his gaze back toward the Panasonic, AJ took in the aquiline nose, the precipitous cheekbones. He stared at his aunt onscreen, unreadable.

AJ sighed. "We were planning a whole Drew-themed welcome display for you, but this was the best we could do on short notice."

Noah didn't laugh. His focus shifted to the store's computer. "What is that?"

AJ glanced at the screen and realized to her utter horror that her browser was still open, the fanfiction.net masthead so large it was practically screaming.

Fuck, fuck, *fuck.*

"*Handbook for the Recently Deceased,*" she blurted. Her cheeks burned, but she held his gaze.

Noah blinked. "*You're* Patrick Graves's sister?" he drawled, and AJ felt as though an invisible hook had tugged her by the ribs. He was calling her weird. Too weird to be Pat's sister. Which . . . maybe she was.

But who was he to judge? "*You're* Glimmette's nephew?" she retorted.

Noah glared at her. AJ glared right back.

"Well, this went well," said Storm. "Come on, Noah. Time to learn about returns."

For a moment, Noah continued to watch her. Then he nodded to Storm and withdrew through the All-Seeing Eye.

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"I don't think this is working out," said AJ.

"Play nice," said Storm, then she followed Noah with a knowing air AJ could not fathom.

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**AJ ARRIVED HOME TO** find her dad having one of his quiet nights, which was never a good thing. She counted four empty cans of Bud in the trash before bringing the salad bowl to the dinner table. The tension in Patrick's burly shoulders told her he had done the same.

"Is that Russian dressing?" he asked, taking the bowl and giving AJ a reassuring wink as she slid in between him and their younger brother, Mike.

"You know it," said AJ, relieved. Having Patrick—and, grudgingly, Libby—home for the summer felt like holding a full deck of cards.

Patrick was the King of Diamonds. While he and AJ shared their father's height and strawberry-blond hair, on twenty-one-year-old Patrick, it was somehow godlike. Golden. He played point guard for the Minutemen, but he'd always been a star. In high school he'd been class president and tri-captain. Everyone loved Pat.

Across the table sat Libby, the Queen of Clubs. Packaged in a five foot two frame, with straight blond hair that dried frizz-free in July, nineteen-year-old Libby was a born ruler. She had dominated Gladstone High with an iron pom-pom as head cheerleader, and her hive had followed her right to UMass.

Beside Libby was Emily, AJ's twin, the Ace of Hearts. Emily had fine blond hair, a rollicking sense of humor, and a deep, abiding love of Shania Twain. She also had Down syndrome and a knack for bringing out the good in others—even Libby.

Last was Mike, the one-eyed Jack of Spades. Slight and quick-witted, with dark hair that must have been recessive, fifteen-year-old Mike lived for *Super Mario,* Dungeons & Dragons, and *Astronauticals.*

He was also the most likely to set off their father.

Sure enough, as the seven of them began passing platters and bowls, a chirping erupted under the table, and their dad zeroed in.

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"Mike, that better not be what I think it is," he murmured. Mike ignored him and kept playing.

Once a week, the two of them got into it over Mike gaming at the table. This never failed to frustrate AJ. She was *also* nerdy. Not as nerdy as Mike, but nerdy enough to *occasionally* tag along to his Science Fiction Society of the Berkshires meetings. And yet, she somehow managed to blend in, to be liked, to not provoke their father like it was her job. So why couldn't Mike?

*Bleep-bloop,* went Mike's Game Boy.

AJ nudged him under the table, one eye on her dad. She had to cut the tension. Her next words popped out. "What's the deal with Noah Drew?"

"Why do you care?" asked Libby, predatory senses activating.

AJ shrugged as all eyes pivoted to her. *God fucking damn it,* was she *blushing*? "He's working at Reel World as of today."

Mike snickered. "He's working in a video store?" he said without looking up from his game. "Isn't that kind of like getting a job waxing his own family's portraits?"

"I wouldn't think he'd need a job." AJ's mom sniffed, tilting her pretty blond head.

Katie Graves was an older version of Libby, a former cheerleader who had fallen for AJ's dad at UMass while he, like Patrick, had been starting point guard. She'd become the most beloved second-grade teacher in town, while he'd become a successful-if-small-time actuary.

For all outward appearances, they were perfectly normal.

Libby shrugged, all-knowing. "It's probably the only job Noah could get after what happened. We all know Storm's okay with weirdos—case in point." She nodded at AJ, who flipped her off.

Emily sat up a little, bored with a conversation that didn't include her. "Can I have dessert?"

*Bleep-bop.*

"Mike," said their father warningly. AJ kneed Mike harder.

"One sec," he breathed.

AJ glanced at their dad, a worn card shark. The more he drank, the quieter he got, watching for tells, waiting to strike. Jack Graves had a

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singular ability to cut people down with a look or a word. His rages, though rare, were terrifying—enough to keep the family in check.

For the most part.

Mike's Game Boy unleashed an arpeggio of artillery.

"Mike." Their father slammed his can down on the table with a hollow thud.

For a moment, everyone froze.

Then Patrick angled his body to shield Mike from view. "I thought Noah was doing better," he said swiftly. "I heard he got into West Point. I hope that's true. He was scary smart."

"Smart enough to get out of town after he pyro-ed the Sherwins' garage," Libby added as their dad's glare refocused on Patrick.

"The Sherwins? That can't be true," said AJ, only half aware of what she was saying. The three of them were practiced at this, at performing tricks on a table their father had just set on fire.

Libby's eyes widened. "Are you *defending* him?" She gasped. "Oh my God, Age. You like him!"

*Fuck.* "Actually, I don't."

Mike finally powered down his game as Libby sang, "Guys. *Jayde* is on the *prowl.*"

Several sets of white, fang-like incisors flashed around the table—a family trait.

AJ's face was ablaze. Seventeen years ago, in a moment of pure insanity, her parents had named her Ashlee Jayde, the trashiest, worst name in an entire family of average-named people. When her siblings wanted to make AJ wish for death, they wheeled out *Jayde,* her stripper alter ego. For AJ, who had never been kissed and felt *very* behind, this was beyond mortifying.

"Ow-ow," said Patrick.

"Ow-ow," Emily parroted.

Their dad smirked at AJ's faded jersey, her flyaway hair. "You do paint quite a picture."

He didn't need to laugh for AJ to know he was laughing at her, at the absurdity of her ever being someone's idea of attractive. As if AJ didn't already know that beside tiny, perfect Libby, she was an over-