INTO THE BLUE by Emma Brodie

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As Eudora Drew, grand dame and matriarch of the Drew acting dynasty, watched her grandnephew, Noah Drew, step onto home base to deliver his first ever cold open on *Saturday Night Live*, she began to time travel.

It was a side effect of aging, of knowing places and people through many incarnations. One minute, Eudora was eighty-two, doting on Noah, and the next a portal had opened to a show she'd attended in 1987, Glenn beside her, his tobacco piney in her nose. They hadn't been young then, but it had been before chemo had patchworked Glenn's afro and turned his skin to ash.

He would have been so proud to see Noah up there now.

Look, Dorie, he'd say. *The angry cherub has developed a sense of humor.*

Noah was hardly a cherub anymore at 6'3". That height came from some strain on his mother's side. His jet-black hair was hers as well, and it was too long, hanging shaggily about his broad shoulders. His features, though, were all Drew—the long profile, high cheekbones, excellent chin, and full lips. The dark, expressive eyes were Elijah's and, Eudora supposed, her own.

He was, objectively, beautiful.

And a pain in the ass. He'd put her up at the *Ritz-Carlton*, which was not at all to Eudora's taste (she much preferred the Carlyle). But Eudora supposed it was conveniently located if he wanted to be rid of her quickly after the show. Which he did, and Eudora knew why.

"AJ will be there," he had told her as they rode to 30 Rock. His face was impassive, his voice bored. Only his knuckles, white as moonrock, revealed what it cost him to say her name. Eudora could count on one hand the number of times he had spoken of AJ in the past decade, always in control, indifferent, as if Eudora didn't know what they'd been to each other.

You only get one. Eudora almost said it.

Instead, she cocked a brow. “Is *that* really what you’re wearing?”

Noah looked down at his black long-sleeved shirt and jeans, then out the window. “Yes.”

His wardrobe had been the right call. On stage, he looked loose and comfortable and strong. As his dark eyes flicked to the camera, the audience of Studio 8H unconsciously hushed.

“Some people think I take my job too seriously.” he deadpanned. “I can assure you that my recent portrayal of a very dark, very complex, very hungry hitman was completely phoned in.”

He had lost an Oscar-worthy amount of weight for *The Contract*, so this got a big laugh.

As Noah waited for the crowd to settle, Eudora spied a familiar face standing off to the side, gazing up at him through thick glasses frames.

She looked almost the same as she had at seventeen, 5’8, lithe, leonine, not a lick of makeup on her. There had always been something a little wild about AJ Graves—the mane of strawberry-blond hair, the prominent incisors, the way her deep-set hazel eyes glinted. She wore a faded green tee-shirt and, miracle of miracles, a pair of trousers that weren’t severed at the knee.

According to Noah, she had taken everything Eudora had taught her about the great and mysterious art of theater and become a *writer* for this…*variety show*. What a waste. Though Eudora supposed she was at least partially to blame.

She hadn’t spoken to AJ in eleven years.

Eudora knew her, though, as any teacher would know a former protégée, and as AJ stood in the shadows, Eudora could read it all: the determined carelessness of her appearance, the way she leaned to affect nonchalance, even as she grew more rapt with every syllable Noah uttered.

He delivered another joke and she smiled, her face opening like a sunflower.

As the room erupted in laughter, Noah acknowledged the crowd, then the camera. And then, ever so swiftly, he glanced towards AJ.

He looked, then looked again, eyes catching on her like some long-sought proof. As he took in the soft yearning on her face, he went still. AJ hadn't registered his attention, and for a beat, she continued to beam at him. Then he sucked in a breath, and she realized. With a start, she blinked.

And a time portal yawned open between them.

Eudora could see them as they were, two guarded adults, but she could also see them as they'd been at seventeen and twenty-one, transparent and tender. Despite years apart, it was clear to Eudora that those young souls still belonged together, if only they'd wise up.

It's not too late.
Noah was stepping towards AJ now, the cue cards forgotten. The crane camera operator nervously eyed the director. Eudora watched her face pale as she silently mouthed, "*fuck*."

For Noah was going off script. The crowd fizzed as he called AJ's character from *Into the Blue*.

"Ana Tar?"

The words didn't matter so much as the subtext. AJ heard it; Eudora had taught her that much.

Come back to me, he was saying.

Murmurs frothed around Eudora. *Was this planned?* Off camera, the crew tensed. Improvisation was forbidden on *SNL*. The average viewer might not realize, but a Drew should know better.

And still he called to her.

"Ana, is that you?"

Come back to me.

AJ’s eyes were wide. She was galled and she was exposed, her fellow writers encircling her like carrion birds. But underneath, Eudora could sense her restraint starting to fray, longing gnawing away at the thick of her pride. She *wanted* to go. AJ edged out of the shadows, into the light.

As she wove to the stage, Noah’s eyes never left her face. She wasn’t a cast member, but the crowd clapped as she stepped up, halting before him. He towered above her, dark and imposing.

Slowly, AJ lifted her gaze, and as their eyes connected, the portal opened wide. Memories streaked their vision like star trails, their minds reeling further and further back until—

Time stopped.

They stared at each other, breathing hard, eyes full.

This is it, Eudora thought. *It’s not too late.*

Now AJ faced him, defiant and bright.

The audience was spellbound; the crew held their breath.

AJ nodded once. *I’m with you.*

Noah’s gaze lit.

Then they began to play.

Part I

Acting Lessons

“Who? What? Where? When we ask these questions, we’re not just starting a scene; we’re announcing our intention to play with the Cosmic Consciousness.”— Laughter & Death

Gladstone, MA
2000

AJ Graves first encountered the concept of an unseen character reading *Romeo & Juliet* in eighth grade. Rosaline. She spurred the plot but never appeared. Not in the original play, nor in Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*, which premiered that same year, nor in the 1968 Franco Zeffirelli version AJ sobbed through during her shift at Reel World Video.

Eudora Drew was such a character.

The retired actress had been a town fixture AJ's entire life. Like the Maple Festival in autumn or the ancient cracked fountain in the town square, Eudora Drew could be found year in, year out speeding through Gladstone in her boxy red Bentley.

Yet, AJ had never actually *seen* her.

She'd come close, once——Halloween of '93. Gladstone Elementary had held a costume contest, the prize for which had been a trophy and a coveted Baskin-Robbins gift certificate, to be bestowed by *Eudora Drew*, town celebrity.

That year, AJ's father had decided Halloween was a waste of money. Determined to compete anyway, AJ had spent the better part of October strategizing how to engineer her own reddish hair into Pippi Longstocking's gravity-defying braids.

So it was that ten-year-old AJ stood amongst her peers, a coat hanger straining her scalp, breathlessly awaiting the judgement of *Eudora Drew*—the mythic figure capable of bestowing such honors as "best original monster."

But when AJ was called up on stage—"best DIY"—Eudora Drew was nowhere to be seen.

Instead, AJ was forced to accept her trophy and gift certificate from an enormous high schooler in a Jason mask, who was so terrifying that when

he stepped out AJ shrieked in front of the entire school, thus earning herself the nickname Pippi Lung-stocking for the rest of fifth grade.

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AJ's first real glimpse of Eudora Drew came a year later, during a Nor'easter so blinding no one dared leave the house.

By 9 am, AJ's Dad had already loaded a fresh case of Bud into the fridge, and AJ's stomach was in knots. The last day the whole family had been snowed in had ended with AJ and her five siblings pretending to be asleep by 7 pm, minus Patrick, who bore the brunt of a two-hour tirade.

However, on this day, AJ needn't have worried thanks to an *Astronauticals* marathon on TNN.

"*None* of you have seen this? This show is *iconic*," said AJ's dad as a janky space-scape warbled onto the TV. He turned up the volume until the deep-voiced intro shook their split-level.

"Past planet rings,
And comets bright,
The crater whale Gilaride,
Sails her crew."

Where new worlds wait,
She charts her flight,
Out of the black,
And into the blue."

And so, amidst the worst blizzard Gladstone had seen in twenty years, all eight Graves had snuggled into the family sectional to inhale episode after episode of the cult 1964 sci-fi television series about a group of hippy pirates traveling the stars in the hump of a giant space whale.

A young, gorgeous Eudora Drew played Glimmette, the ass-kicking, go-go-boots-rocking pilot, and she was hilarious. But it wasn't Glimmette's peachy bouffant, or zingers, or chemistry with Captain Winslow Shoe AJ would remember about *Astronauticals*.

It was how for that whole day, no one had bickered or mocked or popped a can. As if this campy, magical show had the power to transport their family to a better universe.

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AJ's path intercepted Eudora Drew's March of her junior spring, when she was assigned to report on the actress's fundraising efforts at the Gladstone Theater Company.

"It's a benefit—a table read of *Amarilys*," said Mr. Finnegan, the *Gladstone High Gazette*'s faculty advisor. "Nail this interview, and I'd say I'm looking at next year's Editor-in-Chief."

With track season in full swing, AJ had to squeeze her research in between practice, homework, and her job at Reel World Video, but that didn't matter. She was *going* to be Editor-in-Chief.

"I don't know why you need to do the paper," said her mother, urging her to go to bed. "With your grades and varsity soccer and track, you're already a shoo-in for UMass."

Everyone in AJ's family went to UMass—her parents, her brother, Patrick, her sister, Libby. Every one of them loved it. And, sooner or later, every one of them landed back in Gladstone.

But AJ was determined to escape.

She had her entire endgame mapped out. This spring, she'd medal in her division for track, then captain the varsity soccer team next fall. Editor-in-Chief would round out her applications nicely. With luck, she'd get a scholarship to NYU or *maybe* Georgetown.

For now, though, the next square on her chessboard was to interview Eudora Drew.

Drew House was a buttercream Gilded Age mansion twenty minutes from Gladstone's center. AJ knew from her research that the home had been purchased by Sir Erroll Drew, OBE, in 1928. She rang the bell, wondering if the stately stone lions by the front door had been Erroll's idea.

As AJ waited for an answer, she stared absently at a red Camaro parked in the driveway and reviewed what she knew of Eudora Drew.

She'd passed a glittering childhood among London's theater elite, then off to RADA, a few tours with ETT, then the New York beat scene. There she became the lifelong muse and lover of theater iconoclast, Glenn Farr, known to most as the father of improvisational comedy.

Astronauticals had been Glenn's brainchild and Eudora's breakout, launching them into a multi-decade collaboration spanning Emmys and Tonys and a Pulitzer, until Farr's death in 1992.

Eudora Drew had remained in Gladstone ever since.

Presently, a middle-aged housekeeper in a blue linen shirt and a beige apron answered the door.

"Can I help you?" she asked, with a faint Scottish lilt.

"I'm AJ Graves, from the *Gladstone High Gazette*," said AJ. The woman stared at her blankly. "I'm here to interview Ms. Drew?"

"In here," called a patrician voice from somewhere beyond.

Holy shit. It was her.

As AJ stepped inside, her sneakers reverberated on the black and white tile of the entryway. Her heart began to pound as she took in the staircase curving up to a balcony, the ample crystal chandelier, the seven-foot grandfather clock.

Scoping AJ like a shoplifter, the housekeeper reluctantly showed her through a large cased opening into a sunlit drawing room overlooking the valley of Gladstone.

Eudora Drew was seated in an upholstered, white armchair, her frosted blonde French twist resplendent in the afternoon sunlight. She looked more akin to Katherine Hepburn than Glimmette, down to the slacks and

cashmere turtleneck, both in beige. Aside from a richly applied floral perfume, there was nothing of excess about her.

“AJ, I presume,” she said crisply, and it struck AJ afresh that this person was truly *famous.*

“I’m—yes. Hi. It’s nice to meet you, Ms. Drew.”

“Eudora, please,” she said, her dark, intelligent eyes taking in AJ’s jean cutoffs and hand-me-down cardigan. Like everything from AJ’s older sister, Libby, it didn’t quite fit.

“Shall I fetch tea or…” The housekeeper trailed off as if to suggest that Eudora might want to end the meeting early. For a moment, Eudora flexed her fingers as if to examine her claws.

Her eyes flashed as she said, “Yes, please do. Thank you, Mrs. Gilroy.”

Mrs. Gilroy nodded and withdrew from the room.

“I don’t usually entertain the press,” said Eudora, gesturing for AJ to take a seat.

“I’m not really press,” said AJ, ducking into the facing chair. “This is just for the school paper.”

“You shouldn’t do that,” said Eudora. “Make light of what you’re doing. If you don’t take your art seriously, no one else will. Oh, thank you, Gilroy.”

Before AJ could so much as smart at this reprimand, the housekeeper slipped in with a silver tray laden with pastries and a full working tea-set. The clatter awoke an obese golden King Charles Cavalier that had been dozing at Eudora’s feet. The dog stretched and waddled to AJ.

“This is Hortense,” said Eudora dryly. “She used to show at Westminster, then she went and got herself preggers. Sugar dear?”

“Er—no,” said AJ, bending down to pet Hortense, who proudly exposed her swollen belly. When AJ straightened up, she found Eudora watching her. The great actress sipped her tea.

“Did you have questions you wanted to ask or—”

“Yes,” said AJ, giving herself a shake. She reached into her back pocket and extracted her notes. “What prompted this reading of *Amaryllis*? Why reprise the role after twenty-five years?”

Eudora crossed her ankles. “Has anyone close to you ever died?”

AJ looked up. Was Eudora Drew fucking with her? “Not, not really,” she said slowly.

“It’s awful,” Eudora continued. “Not like how it is in the movies—a hand falling motionless or some such. No, you watch day in and day out as the person you love dwindles from a flame to a flicker, then poof. They’re gone. That’s how it was with Glenn. Cancer—really took its sweet time. Not like dear Elijah. He was my twin. Snuffed out one night doing ninety on the 101. He took too many drugs. Gone at thirty-seven. Now Glenn is gone. Everybody’s gone.”

She stared morosely into the distance.

“I’m a twin also,” AJ blurted. Why. Why? Her twin, Emily, had Down Syndrome and had never driven anything larger than a bike—she couldn’t have had less to do with Elijah Drew.

Eudora burst out laughing, a great cackling sound. “That’s jolly good.”

AJ did not agree. In the last five minutes, she’d been scolded, questioned, and hit with enough Drew acting voltage to power a small missile silo. If she was going to make Editor-in-Chief, she needed to get this interview back on track.

“So this reading at the playhouse—”

“That’s what I’m getting at,” said Eudora impatiently. “When I return to Glenn’s work, I feel like he’s alive again.”

AJ nodded sympathetically. “That’s really beautif—”

Eudora raised an eyebrow, and AJ closed her mouth. Clearly Eudora didn't want compassion.

AJ switched tacks. "If that's the case, why not read *Fire & Water*?"

Fire & Water had been Glenn's final play; rumor was, he'd died before finishing it. Which AJ knew because she *did*, in fact, take her work seriously.

Eudora peered at AJ. "No one will *ever* perform that play," she said with a finality that chilled AJ's bones. Another misstep.

"Right, sorry," she said, cheeks coloring. She backpedaled. "Glenn was really funny, by the way. I loved him in *Astronauticals*. Why do you think that show's still so popular?"

Eudora Drew's eyes sparked. "*Astronauticals*." She pronounced each syllable with disdain. "I have no idea. I've never understood how a show that looks like a two-bit home video spawned such a base. Of course, they're all a bunch of grade-A nutjobs. Maybe that explains it."

This struck a nerve; Eudora might as well have called AJ's father a cretin. "Some people think that show's iconic," she said quietly.

Eudora raised an eyebrow. "And what, pray tell, makes you say that?"

AJ shrugged. "I've seen a lot of stuff." This had sounded more impressive in her head.

The great actress laughed. "Well excuse me for not agreeing with the cultural sensibilities of a girl who's never fallen in love or read Shakespeare."

AJ's cheeks burned. "I've read Shakespeare," she said defiantly. "*Romeo & Juliet*."

Eudora's eyes gleamed, but she said nothing further.

Neither did AJ.

Ten seconds passed. Fifteen. AJ dug her heels into the carpet, refusing to look away. Her shins gave a sharp throb, a reminder that outside these walls she won races and matches and was not nearly as insignificant as she felt right now.

“What’s this?” said a low voice in the entryway. AJ looked up to see an extremely tall young man striding towards them. She felt the energy in the room shift—even corpulent Hortense looked up. AJ realized at once this must be Noah Drew.

They’d never met, but stories of Noah’s exploits were legendary. His father, Daniel Drew, was the son of Eudora’s dead twin, and a major film star of the eighties. According to town lore, he had left Noah to be raised by his mother, who was a college professor.

Noah had been in AJ’s older brother Patrick’s class, four years ahead of AJ, at least before he’d been shipped off his senior year due to an incident of aggression that *allegedly* involved arson.

Last AJ heard, he’d gone into the armed services, a rumor that seemed borne out by his shaved head and overall size—though his head-to-toe black wardrobe gave him a villainous air. Striking, but villainous. His thick, dark brows formed a forbidding line as he advanced on Eudora.

“Are you seriously sitting here having *tea*?”

Eudora was unperturbed. “Noah, dear,” she said placidly. “This is AJ, from the school paper.”

Noah’s gaze flicked to AJ. His eyes went wide. “I—you.”

The recognition in his stare confused AJ, because on some level, she felt it too, a strange, untamed aspect of her being stirring at his arrival. As they sized each other up, time slowed.

He had presence, she had to give him that; and surprisingly lovely eyes for such an otherwise intimidating person—dark and expressive, like Eudora’s. His face was angular, pale, and far too tired for someone who was only a few years older. He looked like he’d forgotten how to smile.

What was he doing back in Gladstone?

“This isn’t a good time,” he said abruptly. AJ opened her mouth to respond, but Eudora cut in.

“That really isn’t up to you. *AJ*’s interested in hearing about my stage work. *Imagine that*.”

The muscle in Noah’s jaw tensed, and for a moment AJ thought he might tell her off. Then he turned from the room and left the house. A moment later, his car sped from the driveway.

Eudora sighed. “You’ll have to excuse him,” she said. “Noah’s dealing with a lot right now, and well, the truth is most societies send men his age to live in the solitary wilderness as it is….”

They gutted out the interview for another half-an-hour, but the interval had taken the fire out of Eudora. Though she answered AJ’s questions and made no further diatribes on death, her eyes kept drifting to the window. When Mrs. Gilroy arrived to clear the tea, AJ took her leave as well.

As she walked down the driveway into the setting sun, she couldn’t help but conclude that the Drews had done everyone a favor by keeping to themselves. When the news came the following week that that Eudora had canceled the fundraiser, AJ was almost relieved. Almost.

“We can still run something,” Mr. Finnegan reassured her. “What about ‘10 Things You Didn’t Know about Eudora Drew’?”

No matter, AJ consoled herself as she turned her meticulous notes into a puff piece. She was still poised to make Editor-in-Chief thanks to her upcoming summer internship at *The Berkshire Eagle*, after which she had a slew of heavily scouted soccer intensives to look forward to.

This time next year, she’d be out of Gladstone. Her strategy was set in black and white.

That is, until she fell.

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It was over before the third hurdle. AJ's shoelace caught on a corner, her right hand extending automatically to break her fall. When she heard her bones crack and pop like breakfast cereal, her first thought was that she'd let everyone down.

Then pain. So searing it spliced the next hour into shards: whistles and *Can you walk?* and blaring red lights. When AJ came to in the hospital, her arm was in a sling and her plans were in tatters.

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

By the next week, her track coach had replaced her on the roster. As the air filled with lilac and the whole school readied for prom, AJ found herself watching her own life from the sidelines.

She was despondent. For the first time, her tenacity had completely failed her. No force of will could make her bones heal faster.

She was stuck.

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Reel World Video had been AJ's sanctuary for as long as she could remember. Once upon a time, her mother had used the store as free childcare. Each week, she'd leave her brood to "browse" while she went grocery shopping, and AJ would sit enthralled to whatever film was being shown.

Storm, the owner, had relocated her vintage posters and eclectic inventory from the West Village to Gladstone for a "slower pace of life." By AJ's tenth birthday, Storm had toured her through Hollywood's Golden Age. By twelve, the Nouvelle Vague. By fourteen, Storm had hired her.

From her spot at the counter, AJ had free reign over the store's silver Panasonic television-VCR-DVD combo, where she endlessly indulged her film habit, cycling through directors, and actors, and studios. Reel World was the one place where AJ got to choose for herself, and she loved it.

But even at Reel World, AJ was injured. Even the most basic tasks now took a rage-inducing amount of time. Opening the store's generic white rental sleeves was impossible with one hand.

At the sound of AJ hurling a returned DVD at the wall, Storm emerged from the back. "Yes?"

She drummed her acrylics on the counter until AJ met her eyes. Though Storm had been born a biological man, she lived as a woman with long red hair and colorful nails she matched to her vast closet of candy-striped dresses and novelty earrings. Today was an ode to teal and Snoopy.

Storm squinted at her. "Do I need to bring in extra help?"

AJ shuddered. "Please don't."

"Okay then, let's not play frisbee with the merchandise, *thank you*," she said, gliding away through a beaded curtain depicting the All-Seeing Eye.

The disc in question lay rainbow-side up on the gray carpet. Contritely, AJ flipped it over.

The Complete Astronauticals: Volume One.

As AJ read the title, a feeling of intense coziness overcame her.

Instead of returning the DVD to its case, she inserted it into the Panasonic and hit play.

And that was how AJ turned Skrill.

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The first time AJ had watched *Astronauticals*, she had found the program enjoyable, if hokey. The second time, the show crawled inside her skull and laid eggs in her brain. AJ's life was shit, but that no longer mattered; all that mattered was *Astronauticals*.

The show was strange, and poignant, and *funny* in a way AJ wanted to make her own; an escape from all that was painful and disappointing and… ordinary. That miraculous snow day had forever imbued the program with an aura of safety and comfort that cut to the heart of what AJ needed right now. But more than that, it provided an intellectual lozenge, a mystery to solve.

For *Astronauticals*, it turned out, had been entirely improvised.

“That’s *right*,” Storm confirmed (you couldn’t believe everything you read on the internet). “I remember back in the city, comedians used to rent it to study Glenn Farr’s technique.”

AJ watched and watched, determined to uncover how the actors had pulled each episode out of thin air. After her third viewing, Storm gifted her the store’s old *Astronauticals* VHS tapes in an effort to free the Panasonic.

“Is this my Belle moment?” said AJ.

Storm’s eyes drooped. “Wow, Disney really does ruin everything.”

On the nights her dad wasn’t passed out in front of the T.V., AJ would sneak downstairs to bask in her treasured episodes on the family’s VCR.

Naturally, Emily noticed first, since she and AJ shared a room.

“Where’s Winslow?” AJ’s twin demanded whenever the dashing Captain was off screen, her mousy blonde pigtails staticky from the pilled fleece blanket she kept stealing from AJ.

Soon fifteen-year-old Mike had joined.

“*Star Trek* ripped that off,” he opined, mouth full of off-brand Costco cheese puffs. Slight and quick-witted with jet black hair that must have been recessive, Mike lived for *Super Mario* and *Dungeons & Dragons*. He was delighted that AJ had outed herself as a fellow nerd.

Thirteen-year-old Kelly was not to be left out.

“I am *not* snoring,” yawned the baby of the family, exhausted from her life’s work: dominating her travel swim team. As she snored, her dirty-blonde hair glowed green in the T.V.’s light.

Each night, crowded by her three younger siblings, AJ would lose herself in the show, forgetting about her injury right up to the moment the screen went dark.

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Outside of *Astronauticals*, every conversation, every inside joke, every outing revolved around sports AJ could no longer play. After the third time Sarah and Becky invited AJ to watch them buy cleats for the soccer intensives she’d had to cancel, she began actively avoiding them.

Instead, she holed up every weekend binging *Astronauticals*. If someone kicked her off the TV, she’d stay in her room and sleep. Her bathing rituals were also triggered by sports, so no track meant no showering. On a good weekend, AJ could squeeze three days out of a single outfit.

Her two older siblings attempted to intervene the second they returned from college.

“Age—aw jeez look at that,” said Patrick, examining her arm, then enveloping her in a hug that made AJ feel like crying. “Come on. We’re going out.”

“You might consider bathing first,” said Libby. “Your hair looks like pizza grease.”

Patrick gave Libby the finger, and she smirked, slinking off down the hall to find her next victim.

“Pizza grease my ass,” he muttered, though AJ knew Libby had been talking to her.

While AJ and her brother shared their father’s height and coloring, on twenty-one-year-old Patrick, it was somehow godlike. Golden. He played point guard for the Minute Men, but he’d always been a star. In high school he’d been class president and tri-captain. Everyone loved Pat.