

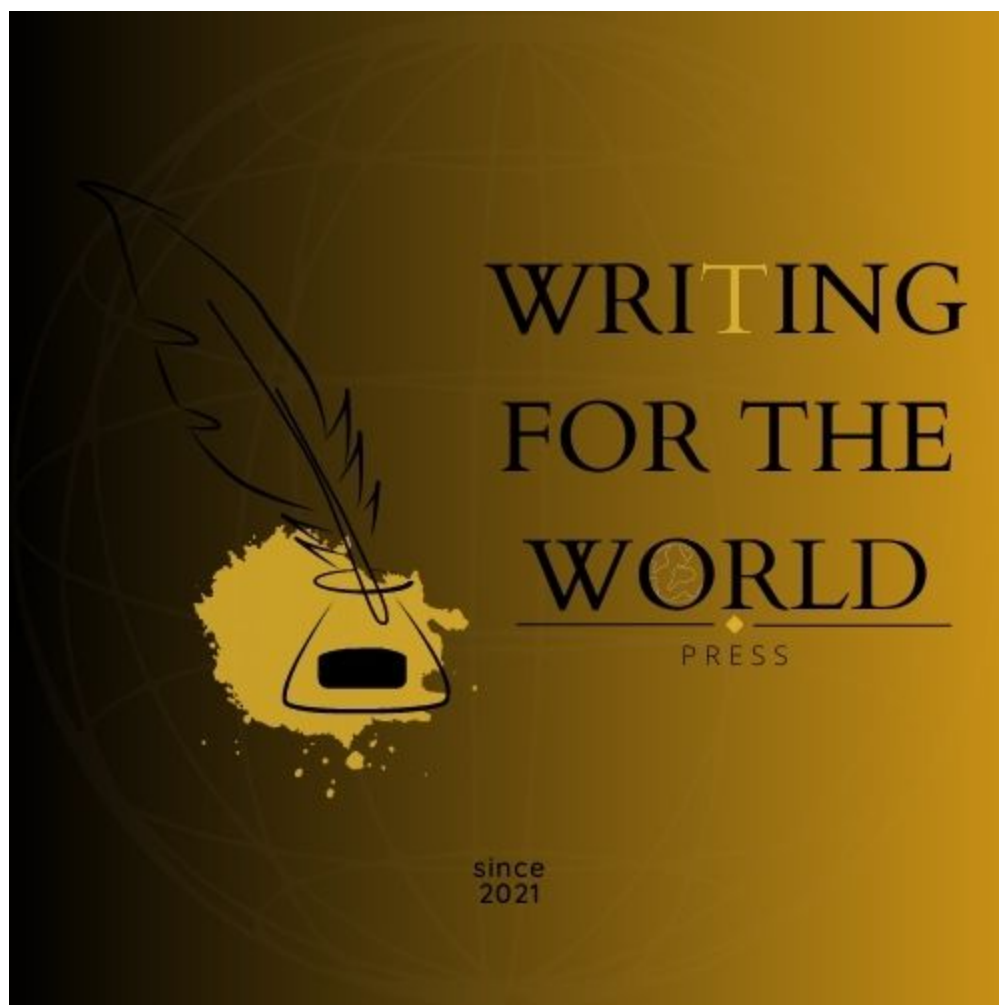
F. A. SPRINGS

Next Exit

The Ghosted Series

NEXT EXIT

J. A. Springs



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ISBN:
ISBN-13:

Always for J.M.S. First

Part One

Chapter One

The summer sun hung lazily in the sky, its eventual descent toward the horizon looming on the horizon. As the day waned, the last warm rays of summer stretched across the land, casting a golden hue over everything.

The quarry's once imposing rocks seemed to lose their edge in the fading light, and the water's surface below transformed into a reflective mirror. Gentle breezes skimmed across the water's surface, creating delicate ripples that felt like a fleeting caress.

Laughter echoed off the quarry's walls as six children played by the water's edge, their youthful joy infectious. They splashed and frolicked, embracing the carefree spirit that defined their days.

Yet, in the coming weeks, these idyllic moments beneath the summer sun would come to an end as the kids embarked on their high school journey in the bustling city of Ionia. Excitement and anticipation pulsed through them, but they savored these final days of leisure before the

rigors of freshman year.

Among the group were Stephanie and Chris. Stephanie, with her fair complexion and glasses, sported a single dimple on her cherubic right cheek. Her mischievous green eyes sparkled as she playfully doused Chris with water. She wore a sleek, blue one-piece bathing suit, her long hair fashioned into a bun at the back of her head.

The boy Stephanie played with, Chris, had a warm, ebony complexion. His short-cropped hair framed a wide, infectious grin that showcased a full set of teeth. Standing at an impressive six feet, he loomed over Stephanie by a couple of inches. Dressed in vibrant green swim trunks, his skin glistened with moisture, and his movements revealed the subtle ripple of his muscles.

As they playfully doused each other with water, Chris and Stephanie moved in a graceful dance, creating vivid rainbows in their wake. Chris appreciated how Stephanie fit snugly into his arms whenever they drew near.

Near the water's edge, another boy named Henry perched on a sizable rock, diligently applying suntan lotion to his fair, porcelain skin, shielding it from even the feeblest sun rays. His dusty blonde hair tumbled over his eyes in an unruly manner.

By Henry's side, John contributed his jovial presence to the festivities. John was a constant companion to Henry, his lean and muscular frame contrasting with Henry's less athletic build. Dark hair framed his face, and a faint pink scar adorned his chin, a lasting reminder of an adventure he and Henry had shared a few years earlier. It involved a treehouse in Henry's backyard and a slippery rope, with the scar serving as the only lasting souvenir from that day's escapade.

Completing this tight-knit group of youngsters were Sarah and Babs, whose real name

was Barbie, much like the iconic toy. Babs not only shared the name but also bore a striking resemblance to the doll, exuding a friendly disposition and an effervescent personality.

Babs found a seat beside Sarah and couldn't help but giggle every time Henry caught their attention. It was no secret that Babs harbored a serious crush on Henry. Sarah, in contrast, possessed a reserved personality that often kept her in the background. Her friends had a knack for coaxing her into the group's activities, and despite her inclination to hang back, she cherished her time with them. Her dark hair was cut short, framing her face.

This was their group, a circle of friends as close as family. They knew each other intimately, making their bond feel perfectly natural. These six friends had spent more time together in these dwindling summer days than with their own families.

They had a pact, these friends, believing they were the exception to the rule, confident their friendship could withstand any challenge and endure the test of time when so many others had faltered.

As the sun dipped lower on the horizon, the youthful crew knew it was time to bid farewell to their fun-filled day. Gathering their belongings, they waited for Chris and Stephanie to return to reality and join the rest of the group.

Their fellowship had been steadfast ever since they embarked on their middle school journey together. Chris gently clasped Stephanie's hand, ready to lead her away when he noticed the rest of the group standing by the shore, their belongings at the ready, signaling that it was time to depart.

With a heartfelt farewell on behalf of both himself and Stephanie, Chris assured the group they'd reunite soon. He explained his plan to ascend to the quarry's rim and take a daring leap

into the water below. John and Henry accepted this decision, offering their own farewells. Babs, locking eyes with Stephanie, playfully winked before taking Sarah by the hand and guiding her away. In their final moments, they observed Sarah's lingering gaze at her friends before departing for home.

Following Chris, Stephanie navigated the craggy, steep slope leading to the renowned "jumping rock." This natural stone ledge extended over the open quarry pit, serving as a perfect diving platform into the inviting waters below, about twenty-five feet down.

This spot had witnessed the courage of every group member but Stephanie, who had yet to take the daring plunge. Even Henry Goldman, despite his lightweight and fragile appearance, had embraced the challenge, spurred on by his constant companion, John. Though John was muscular, he stood smaller than Henry, yet his unwavering support propelled him forward relentlessly.

The "jumping rock" held a unique rule: before leaping into the water, you had to share a kiss with someone else from the group. It meant taking two plunges, one literal, into the water, and the other, a thrilling adventure of its own.

Chris positioned himself in front of Stephanie, her hands resting in his. The late sun, accompanied by a gentle breeze, had succeeded in drying the water off his dark chocolate skin, revealing a broad, charismatic smile. Stephanie couldn't help but wonder why someone as handsome as Chris had chosen to like her. He enjoyed popularity in school, especially among the girls, while Stephanie considered herself plain, though still a nice-looking girl.

"Are you ready?" Chris inquired, his voice rich and deep. "You've got to do it at least once before summer ends."

Shyly, Stephanie asked, “Why?” Her gaze couldn’t linger on Chris for long, especially when he looked at her so intensely.

Chris regarded Stephanie as if she were the most captivating thing in the world, making her acutely aware that she held his undivided attention with that half-smirk. Drawing her closer, he gently kissed her forehead.

“You’re brave, girl,” he said softly. “You can do anything because you’re stronger than you think.”

“I don’t think so,” Stephanie replied, turning away from Chris’s probing gaze.

His gaze had a way of stripping away Stephanie’s defenses, leaving her feeling exposed and vulnerable, as if her very soul lay bare before him, susceptible to his profound influence.

With a gentle touch, Chris placed his hand beneath her chin and turned her to face him. “I know so,” he asserted, planting a brief, tender kiss on her lips. Stephanie’s eyes closed, and her lips lingered, anticipating more.

“If you want more, you have to follow me,” Chris teased. Stephanie pouted. “That’s not fair.”

“It’s just you and me,” Chris chuckled.

“Yeah,” Stephanie agreed.

“Then come and get me,” Chris challenged, sealing his words with another kiss. This time, he brushed his lips against her cheek, and in the blink of an eye, he took the daring plunge.

Stephanie would likely have let him take the leap alone, but Chris’s audacious move caught her off guard. In a moment of spontaneity, she joined him, jumping off the “jumping rock” without a second thought, her hand still firmly in his grasp.

Stephanie's head emerged from the water, breaking the surface with a sputter. Water had infiltrated her mouth, thanks to the scream she had released on her way down to meet the water below.

Annoyed at having been involuntarily roped into this exhilarating jump, she scanned the area for her diving partner. It took a few moments of searching before she spotted him breaking through the surface tension of the cool water to catch a breath. In a playful display of frustration, Stephanie slapped the water, causing a wave to splash across and hit Chris right in his grinning face.

"You're a jerk," Stephanie grumbled, her irritation evident.

Swimming up to Stephanie, Chris reached out, and she willingly wrapped her arms around his neck. Drawing her closer, they began to wade toward the shore together, with Chris leading the way out of the deeper waters. Finally, they settled on the rocky shore.

The last rays of sunlight painted the horizon with shades of red and orange as daylight gradually surrendered to evening. The sunlight extended along a lengthened axis through the atmosphere, continuing its journey to reach and illuminate the world around them.

Stephanie reached across Chris and gently pulled him so that he rolled on top of her. He used his hands to support himself above her, and Stephanie placed her hands on either side of his face, holding them there.

"You have a beautiful heart, Stephanie. I'll be your lucky penny if you'll be my four-leaf clover," Chris said with a heartfelt smile.

Stephanie returned the smile. "Okay, it's only because people like you let me show it," she replied.

Drawing him close, Stephanie kissed him passionately on the lips, their tongues intertwining as they shared the warmth of their intimate connection.

After a while, Chris gently pulled away from Stephanie, his words filled with tenderness. “If you were an angel, I’d want to bind your wings so that you’d never fly away from me.”

Stephanie’s gentle smile softened even more at Chris’s heartfelt confession. “You wouldn’t have to do that. If I were an angel, then I’d gladly give up my wings to stay on this earth with you.”

Chris kissed Stephanie once more and then rolled away, lying down beside her. Stephanie lifted her head, allowing Chris to put his arm down so she could snuggle up close to him. He held her tightly.

“What’s on your mind, Chris?” Stephanie inquired.

“I’m just thinking about you and me, the rest of the gang,” Chris replied, his gaze fixed on the darkening sky. He stretched his hand toward the heavens, as though attempting to pluck the first blinking stars from the vastness above them. “I want to give you everything. The moon and the stars. The whole wide world.”

Stephanie propped herself up on her elbow, peering at him intently. “You don’t have to do that. Just give me you.”

Chris didn’t respond immediately, allowing the moment to linger. He continued to gaze up at the sky until Stephanie’s small hand gently turned his face toward her.

“I can do that,” Chris said, breaking into a warm smile. He sat up. “Let’s go to the bonfire.”



The 'bonfire' took place at Henry's house, where the six friends gathered around a cozy fire pit in his backyard. Their plans for the evening included sitting around the fire, indulging in sodas, munching on popcorn, savoring s'mores, and simply relishing the boisterous camaraderie that came naturally to teenagers. Eventually, they would depart, returning to their respective families.

Upon Chris and Stephanie's arrival, the rest of the group had already assembled around the inviting fire pit. While they hadn't been specifically waiting for the latecomers, there was no complaint when the pair finally appeared. Warm greetings emanated from both their friends and the crackling blaze before them.

"Hey, you two!" exclaimed Babs joyfully as Chris and Stephanie came into view, emerging from around the side of Henry's house. Without delay, they found seats around the fire pit, seamlessly joining the lively gathering.

Babs was seated to Stephanie's right. Close to her was seated Henry and then John. This was followed by Sarah.

"So what did you two do when we left," Babs asked Stephanie conspiratorially.

Stephanie immediately blushed. It was Chris that ended up answering the question for both of them.

"I made Stephanie take the jump off the rock."

Chris's statement was followed by a smatter of applause along with murmurs and other sounds of approval. Stephanie avoided looking into any of her friends eyes for a few minutes because she was embarrassed.

They all knew what had to happen before you jumped off the rock. All of them had done

it at least once, with Stephanie being the last one of their group to perform the rite. They had all agreed on the conditions that would apply to anyone who wanted to jump off the rock jut into the quarry waters. There was a requirement for a kiss.

“Great job, Deb,” said John. He turned to Henry to get his friend’s approval. “She did great, didn’t she?” he asked Henry.

Henry nodded with his grin. “Yeah. Congrats, brave girl.”

All of her friends knew that it took courage for her to meet the requirement that they had all set for the jump and for her to actually jump. All of them were happy for her. As she looked around the campfire at each of her friends, they showed their support of her and their feelings for her by their smiles that continued to glow brightly for her.

The glow of each of their smiles made the burn pit seem dim in comparison. Stephanie attributed that to the hearts beating in the chests of her friends. The only exception was Sarah, who refused to make eye contact with her.

Stephanie could not afford to keep her attention on Sara so that she could ascertain why it was that Sara would not want to show her how happy she was for Stephanie by at least looking into her eyes and acknowledging her presence right there in the midst of all of them. It would have been such a simple thing to do. It would have meant so much to Stephanie.

Stephanie could not stay focused on Sarah for too long because Chris was demanding everyone’s attention. He got it because no one could deny him anything when he flashed that winning smile at anyone.

“Wow,” said Chris as he looked at those individuals who were gathered around near to him. “How long have we all been friends together?”

Chris did not ask anyone in particular. Henry hazarded a best guess.

“For some of us, it’s been since the fourth or fifth grade.”

For the most part, he was correct. Sarah was the last one to join their group of friends. That occurred when they all entered middle school. She was new to their city and to the school.

Because everyone in the group was enchanted with her, they ended up adopting her as one of their own. It helped Sarah navigate the many complexities inherent to moving to a new environment. Adjusting to new people that you meet. Finding a niche to fit in. Making friends to get you through the hard times when you felt alone.

Chris waved a dismissing hand and sat back further in his chair. He moved off of the edge of the chair so he could get comfortable.

“It could be two years or twenty years. All I know is that I’m gonna be friends with you guys forever.”

As Chris looked around through their group, it was clear that each of them were in a state of agreement with him. He looked over at Stephanie last and was blown away with the glow that radiated from her.

He could not decide if her glow was because of the fire blaring in the pit in front of them, if it was the love goggles he always wore when looking at her, or if it was an inner glow that accentuated her beauty to him.

Chris clapped his hands together suddenly, gathering everyone’s attention with the unexpected noise.

“I think we should make a pact together. I mean next year all of us start as freshmen at Ionia High so let’s promise to stay friends for the next four years of school, no matter what

happens.”

“I like that idea,” chimed in John. “Do you like it, Henry?”

Henry looked over at John and nodded so vigorously that it threatened to dislodge his glasses from his face.

“Yeah, that sounds good,” he replied.

Babs clapped eagerly as she smiled. The braces on her teeth glinted in the firelight.

“I think it’s a great idea, Henry; Chris. What do you think, Sarah?”

Sarah did not respond immediately. She ended up waiting until she had drawn everyone’s attention before she decided to speak. She had not meant to draw so much attention so she hurriedly agreed so that everyone’s eyes would look elsewhere.

“It sounds good to me,” she whispered in her small voice.

This caused a ripple of laughter to drift through the group of friends before the conversation eventually moved on, furthering the idea of a pact between all of them to remain friends throughout another four years of school.

Another four years of each of their young lives. Four years that would see each of them grow and develop into different people as the world continued to put pressure on each of them from the outside.

They were young and hopeful of the future. Their paths were opened up before them and shining bright stars lit their way. All they had to do was put their foot on that path and start walking in order to start their journey into the future. It was easy to start.

“Is everyone agreed,” Chris asked. Everyone consented.

Chapter Two

Stephanie navigated the seemingly endless hallway, flanked on both sides by lockers standing like silent sentinels. Her mission: to reach her first afternoon class. This particular class, scheduled right after lunch, presented an ongoing challenge. The temptation of a post-lunch nap loomed, especially after indulging in the cafeteria's delectable offerings.

Stephanie found herself entangled in this internal battle, fully aware that every minute of the impending lecture held significant value. This class, undoubtedly the most demanding of her day, demanded unwavering focus. Trigonometry, a pivotal subject on her journey toward a mathematics degree, formed a critical foundation she couldn't afford to neglect.

Her destination beckoned a few doors further down the hallway. As she drew closer, her progress was unexpectedly halted by an interruption – a pair of hands that gently covered her eyes, momentarily obscuring her vision. There was no need for Stephanie to ponder the identity of the playful intruder. The size and touch of those hands bore an unmistakable familiarity, a unique trait possessed by only one person within the entire school. This playful act was an

exclusive privilege extended to her by a friend whose bond transcended the boundaries of the school's student body.

"Hey, Babs," Stephanie's laughter resonated in the bustling corridor, adding a cheerful note to the surroundings.

Babs responded with her characteristic high-pitched voice, playfully weaving a hint of disappointment into her tone. "You always guess right," she exclaimed, punctuating her words with a playful stomp of her feet, underscoring her mock frustration.

Stephanie resumed her stride, but then paused, allowing Babs to catch up. They fell into step, making their way toward their class. "It's always you," Stephanie remarked with a chuckle, "No one else would even dare to pull a stunt like that with me because no one else knows me well enough." Her laughter echoed with warmth, a testament to their deep bond and shared memories.

Amidst the stream of passing students, Stephanie couldn't help but notice the interactions that unfolded around Babs. Her presence was undeniable, leaving an imprint on their surroundings. However, the world around them seemed to cast a veil over Stephanie, rendering her nearly invisible, or perhaps just a fleeting presence.

High school marked a transformative phase for Babs. Her popularity skyrocketed as they entered this new chapter, much of it owing to her older sister, a senior and the head cheerleader, who paved the way for Babs's rise. Physical changes also played a role; braces were replaced by a winning smile, and laser eye surgery granted her clearer vision by swapping out her glasses.

Recalling that very first day three years ago, it was evident that Babs had undergone a significant transformation. The school's hallways bore witness to her evolution, a journey from

obscurity to prominence. Even as she basked in the spotlight, her popularity bolstered by her cheerleading role, one aspect remained unwavering—Babs’s core character remained unchanged.

In Stephanie’s eyes, this steadfastness was a precious treasure, a guarantee that their friendship would remain unwavering. The idea of losing her best friend and facing the void it would create was a notion Stephanie preferred to keep at bay. Babs’s uniqueness was irreplaceable, a cherished bond Stephanie held dear.

As Stephanie and Babs prepared to continue their journey to class, their attention was captivated by the sight of Chris sauntering down the hallway, gradually approaching them. A hush descended upon Stephanie as she silently observed his approach, a whirlwind of emotions stirring within her.

‘There he is,’ Stephanie thought, her heart echoing with both yearning and a touch of melancholy. ‘The one who used to be my closest friend.’ She couldn’t help but feel the pain of the growing distance that had come between them, a chasm that seemed daunting.

In response to their encounter with Chris, Babs extended her hands toward Stephanie. One hand gently rested on Stephanie’s arm, while the other skillfully interlocked their fingers. This subtle yet reassuring gesture conveyed Babs’s unwavering support.

Drawing closer to Stephanie, Babs closed the physical gap between them, ensuring their bodies brushed against each other. This delicate contact spoke volumes, conveying an unspoken solidarity and presence between them. Babs’s intention was clear—to offer her steadying presence and let Stephanie know that she was by her side.

Amidst this interplay of connections and emotions, Chris’s attention was also captured by the two girls standing slightly apart from the bustling hallway, positioned near the bay of wall

lockers. In an instinctive response, Chris extended his arm, draping it casually around the shoulders of the girl walking in close proximity to him.

Sarah's awareness of her surroundings had been somewhat lacking, so when Chris's arm enveloped her shoulders, she redirected her attention to him, a subtle curiosity in her glance. Chris was never one to openly display affection in public; he had refrained from such gestures for years now.

Puzzled, Sarah pondered the reason behind his sudden choice to initiate this proximity. They were navigating a bustling school hallway during the transition between classes—a time when any action would surely draw attention. Sarah, inherently reserved, found herself disinterested in inviting the spotlight.

Gazing towards Chris, who had drawn her closer to his side by then, Sarah anticipated a certain look in his eyes—a connection of shared understanding. Yet, as her gaze met his, she encountered an unexpected sight. Chris's eyes were directed not at her, but down the hallway, in the same direction they were headed.

Following Chris's line of sight, Sarah's gaze aligned with Stephanie's, locking in a momentary connection. Instinctively, she broke the link, suddenly captivated by the intricate dance of the floor tiles beneath her feet. An inexplicable heaviness settled in her stomach.

A realization dawned on Sarah, clarity weaving its way through the unexpected tension. Chris's arm around her shoulders, the deliberate closeness—these actions weren't driven by a spontaneous surge of affection directed at her. No, they were carefully orchestrated for Stephanie's benefit. A pang of vulnerability gripped Sarah as she recognized the intricate threads of this orchestrated performance.

In an almost choreographed halt, Chris brought them to a stop alongside Stephanie and Babs. Sarah's inner desire to recede into insignificance surged, the weight of her presence suddenly palpable. The collision of unspoken intentions and unexpressed emotions left Sarah grappling with a sense of awkward displacement, longing for a way to blend into the background.

"Hey," Chris said to Stephanie. His smile that he so readily used in their childhood no longer held that innocence that drew people to him in droves. Now, there instead, was a hint of malice. Just a bit of hate for the world that they lived in. As if a promise that had been given and broken, leaving Chris floundering and looking for a way to regain his balance and footing. Leaving him angry because of it. Leaving him broken because of it.

"Hi, Chris," Stephanie's greeting carried an undertone of wistfulness, a resonance of emotions buried deep within her. Echoes of faded sentiments reverberated, the ache of what once was and the uncertainty of its return painted across her thoughts. She mourned the loss, trapped in a reverie of missed opportunities and the dreams that had slipped through the cracks of time.

Her gaze shifted towards Sarah, a silent observer of the scene before her. Sarah's demeanor spoke volumes, broadcasting an unspoken yearning to be anywhere but in that very moment. A profound sense of displacement radiated from her, an unspoken narrative woven into the very lines of her posture.

"Hi, Sarah," Stephanie's words reached out, infused with a touch of nostalgia. In that brief exchange, she attempted to fan the embers of their once vibrant friendship. A subtle invitation lingered in her voice, an invitation to remember the camaraderie that had once been their foundation. The weight of past memories hung in the air, a delicate thread connecting their

present to the chapters they had shared.

Sarah's greeting emerged as a mumble, a half-hearted acknowledgment of the situation. She made a subtle attempt to ease Chris's arm from her shoulders, her hand reaching up to delicately intercept his grip. However, her efforts were swiftly arrested as the pressure he applied shifted from casual touch to discomforting force, causing her shoulder to protest.

Frustration etched itself across her features as the failed attempt to free herself hung in the air. The discomfort lingered like an unwelcome guest, and she soon realized the implication of Chris's tightened hold. A sense of helplessness started to unfurl within her, an understanding that she was confined in this unwarranted embrace.

In that moment, Sarah found herself ensnared, trapped within the contours of Chris's grip. The initial pain had transformed into a binding constraint, an unspoken assertion of his control. Her gaze flitted about, as if searching for an escape route that eluded her, a futile attempt to break free from the confines of the situation.

Stuck in a tableau of unwanted intimacy, Sarah grappled with her emotions. She recognized the boundaries being pushed, her autonomy sidelined by Chris's unyielding grasp. The realization dawned that leaving was no longer an option; her agency had been subtly revoked. As she stood there, suspended in a state of unspoken tension, the ambivalence of her presence became a reflection of her suppressed emotions.

The encounter weighed just as heavily on Babs as it did on Sarah, and the reasons behind her unease were rooted in a complex web of history. Their once tight-knit group of friends had splintered years ago, leaving Babs burdened with a sense of perceived betrayal. Remaining steadfast as Stephanie's best friend felt like a choice that had unknowingly placed her in

opposition to Chris and Sarah. While the discomfort was undeniable, navigating this predicament seemed like an insurmountable task. It was a conundrum she grappled with daily, a constant reminder of the distance that had grown between them.

The fractures within their circle extended back to their shared past. The revelation that Chris had been held back a year, a consequence of his absenteeism during their freshman year, lingered as a tacit secret they all upheld. A collective act of willful ignorance masked the real reasons behind Chris's delay.

Within Chris's tumultuous family, his father's alcohol-fueled brutality had long been a grim reality. The situation had worsened after Chris's mother abruptly departed, leaving him alone with a father who grew increasingly vile and inventive in his cruelty. The dark masquerade of forced boxing training was a twisted narrative that Chris's father propagated. It served as a thin veil to hide the truth behind Chris's battered appearance—a trail of bruised ribs, fractured features, and blackened eyes bore witness to the pain he endured.

Each injury marked a chapter of anguish, a silent narrative of suffering that Chris wore like a shield of secrecy. These wounds, both visible and concealed, bore witness to a harrowing reality that the facade of normalcy could never truly obscure. As Chris finally stepped onto the school grounds, each step carried the weight of his hidden battles, a testament to the strength he summoned to endure the storm that raged behind closed doors.

As Chris's presence dwindled within the group, Stephanie felt like their bond, once so tight, was unraveling. The cohesive force that held them together seemed to dissipate, leaving each of them to drift away like autumn leaves carried by a breeze. The shared laughter and camaraderie faded, replaced by the quiet echo of missed connections. Their circle slowly

dissolved, and it was painfully evident that the heart of their friendship had departed with Chris.

The departure of their glue, Chris, acted as a catalyst for their divergence. Each member continued on their individual trajectories, slowly losing the threads that once wove them into a close-knit unit. Yet, amidst the separation, one person defied the trend, and that person was Sarah.

In Stephanie's eyes, it was as if Sarah sprinted away from the group just as the bonds were weakening. She raced directly into Chris's orbit, a gravitational force that repelled all others. Sarah clung to him with a tenacity that was almost desperate, as if Chris were her lifeline amidst the tumultuous waters of society and its complexities. He became her anchor, her protector against the currents of life's challenges.

Amidst these changes, Stephanie couldn't help but nurse a wound of hurt. She felt the sting of Chris's retreat, even after they had finally confessed their love for one another. The pain ran deep—Chris's choice to turn to Sarah instead felt like a rejection, a dismissal of their shared emotions. It was a bitter pill to swallow, a hurt that she grappled with as the days passed.

Caught between the tides of disappointment and acceptance, Stephanie recognized that she had little control over the situation. All she could do was confront her feelings and confront the reality before her. It was a test of resilience, an exercise in coming to terms with the unexpected turns of fate. With a sigh, Stephanie knew that dealing with it head-on was the only way forward, even though the ache within her heart persisted.

Chris's actions spoke louder than any words, a forceful push that distanced him from their once-tight-knit circle. While everyone, including Stephanie, understood that his troubled home life was the root cause, their comprehension seemed passive, almost resigned. None of

them took a bold step forward to halt his retreat, to bridge the gap that widened between them and their friend. Stephanie, despite the feelings she held for Chris, remained among those who didn't attempt to stop his departure. He became a distant figure, and the opportunity to help, to mend their bonds, slipped through their fingers as Chris closed himself off.

The gravity of Chris's struggles weighed heavily on him, and while the rest were aware, he never granted them the chance to lend a hand or offer solace. He erected barriers that none could breach, shutting himself away from the support they could have provided. His pain simmered beneath the surface, hidden by a stoic exterior that masked the turmoil he faced.

Eventually, Chris's presence waned, lingering for only a brief moment longer before he gently guided Sarah back into the bustling flow of students that populated the corridors. The moments that followed were a blur of movement and voices as they melted into the crowd, Chris's casual parting call—"See ya"—dissipating into the ambient noise.

The throng swallowed them, absorbing them into its current, until Stephanie could no longer catch even a glimpse of her friend and the girl he clung to. Her gaze lingered on the spot where they had vanished, a bittersweet ache in her chest. The truth was evident: they had slipped through her fingers, like sand through an hourglass.

As Stephanie watched the emptiness left by their departure, a wish tugged at her heartstrings, not for the first time. She wished for an alternate reality where things had unfolded differently, where Chris hadn't been driven to retreat and where their bonds had remained intact. The ache of missed opportunities and unspoken words lingered, a poignant reminder of what might have been.

Babs's footsteps led them on a divergent path, away from the fleeting image of Chris and

Sarah. Her fingers gently wrapped around Stephanie's arm, a soft touch that urged Stephanie forward.

"Come on, girl," Babs's voice, like a murmur of encouragement, cut through the ambient sounds. "You and me are gonna be late to class and you know that Mr. Walker doesn't like tardy."

Concentrating and listening to what Babs had said was enough to prompt Stephanie to push aside her lingering feelings and put the chance encounter with Sarah and Chris out of her mind. Her smile returned to her face as she took up a conversation with Babs while they walked the remaining distance to the classroom.

"Why are you even taking trigonometry, Babs?" Stephanie's lips curled into a playful grin as she leaned against the locker, her eyes fixed on her friend. "You hate math, remember?"

Babs, undeterred by the question, met Stephanie's gaze with a mischievous glint in her eyes. "Because it was the only class that I could get with you this year," she replied, her voice dancing with cheerful notes.

Stephanie's amusement bubbled up, threatening to spill into laughter, but she held it back, not wanting to hurt Babs' feelings. She offered a half-smile instead. "That's the dumbest reason in the world, Babs. You do realize that you're failing this class, right?"

Babs pretended to be taken aback, her eyebrows shooting up in mock shock, and a hand placed over her heart in feigned indignation. "I am not failing. I'm holding onto a strong 'D' and I would be doing better if my best friend came by to tutor me more often."

A heavy sigh escaped Stephanie's lips, the lines of her face hinting at a mixture of annoyance and affection. "I get it. I get it. I'll come by more often," she conceded, her tone testy

but laced with camaraderie. She offered a half-hearted huff. “I still think you’re crazy for taking this class.”

Babs shrugged nonchalantly, owning her unconventional choice of class. “I took it as an elective and I’ll be fine as long as I get a ‘D’ or higher, professor.”

Their laughter resonated harmoniously as they stepped into the math classroom, settling into their familiar seats. An hour and a quarter later, they emerged, once again passing through the same door they had entered earlier. Babs veered in a different direction from Stephanie, a brief parting before their next classes.

“Shoot me a text before our study session, alright?” Babs reminded Stephanie, her voice carrying a note of camaraderie.

“Of course,” Stephanie assured with a nod.

Observing Babs join a cluster of popular peers, Stephanie felt a momentary separation in their paths. Babs was swept away in the currents of teenage society, while Stephanie had her own course to chart.

Urged by the impending class schedule, Stephanie quickened her pace, making a beeline for her locker. The minutes ticked away relentlessly, and her next class beckoned.

Stephanie’s mind seamlessly shifted into autopilot, expertly guiding her through the bustling hallways toward her intended destination. Her senses acted as vigilant guides, deftly sidestepping obstacles her preoccupied mind might otherwise miss.

As the class drew to a close, Stephanie found herself involuntarily replaying her recent encounter with Chris and Sarah outside the classroom. The mental playback unfolded in vivid hues, every detail alive and accompanied by a symphony of sound. Chris’s uncomplicated

greeting looped incessantly within her thoughts, each utterance etching itself into her consciousness. His voice resonated emphatically, as though it occupied a space between her ears, drowning out all other sound. Amid the echoing tones, she fixated on his once-beautiful smile, now marked by a shadow of its former self.

Regret coursed through her, a pang for the untaken paths that could have been. She lamented the emergence of what now stood in their place. Her longing was palpable; she yearned for the revival of her once cherished friendship and the resurrection of the love that seemed to have slipped away. In the midst of it all, the solution to bridge that gap remained elusive despite the passage of time.

Her footfalls became mechanical, each step placed without thought. It was no wonder that her distracted journey led her to an inadvertent collision. The collision felt serendipitous, as if the universe had orchestrated their encounter. And there, in the unexpected tangle of limbs and apologies, stood another face from her past, a friend she had also lost along the way.

She glanced up from the stack of books in her arms and met the boyish gaze of Henry Goldman. It was evident that Henry had been navigating the halls in a similar daze, moving on autopilot.

“Excuse me, I’m sorry,” Henry mumbled absentmindedly before he looked up to identify the person he had bumped into.

Stephanie held her gaze on him until he finally shifted his focus from looking through her to recognizing her. “Oh. Hi, Step,” Henry greeted her, the only one who called her that.

“Hey, Henry,” Stephanie responded with a faint smile.

Henry fidgeted, displaying an awkwardness in conversing with Stephanie, even though

they had done it countless times when they used to hang out. “What are you up to?” he asked.

Stephanie raised her trigonometry textbook. “I have study hall, so I’m heading to the computer lab to study.”

Henry visibly relaxed, shedding the nervous foot-shuffling that usually made it seem like he was perpetually racing somewhere in haste. Stephanie couldn’t help but wonder how he managed that intricate dance without his upper body betraying a readiness to bolt if given the chance.

“You’re the smartest person I know when it comes to math, so why are you planning to use the computer for your trigonometry?” he inquired assertively.

“I’m not,” Stephanie replied. “I’m heading to an online resource from the textbook to brush up on some concepts.”

“That’s good. You really don’t need a computer’s help,” Henry remarked.

Perplexed, Stephanie asked, “Why do you say that?”

Henry adjusted his glasses further up the bridge of his nose. “Computers are essentially giant calculators that can add faster than we can. I prefer doing math by hand. Besides, computers are pretty dumb when it comes to math, anyway.”

Stephanie looked at Henry, still puzzled. “How so?” she inquired.

A smile played across Henry’s face. “They can only add two numbers...”

“...Zeros and ones,” they finished together, completing their longstanding inside joke.

They shared an easy laugh, and it was as if the distance time had put between them instantly vanished.

“We haven’t cracked that joke in a while,” Stephanie remarked, wiping tears of laughter

from her eyes.

“Yeah,” Henry began, “It’s been too long.”

Henry’s words were interrupted by another familiar voice they both recognized.

“Hiya, Mr. Gold,” greeted John.

Stephanie glanced beyond Henry to see John Masters approaching. He looked dashing with his dusty blond hair, clad in his letter jacket and a pair of blue jeans. A nondescript, solid-colored green t-shirt completed his casual ensemble.

During the summer before they entered high school, John had packed on about twenty-five pounds of lean muscle and grown two and a half inches in height. He had shot past Henry in almost no time, leaving Henry in his wake—both in terms of stature and popularity.

Much like Babs, John had started attracting a lot of attention, and he spent less and less time in Henry’s shadow. Their dynamic had shifted, and Stephanie wasn’t too fond of it. Not at all.

Stephanie turned her gaze back to Henry and noticed his rigid and uncomfortable posture. He stood so stiffly that it seemed as if someone had strapped a board to his back. It was anything but natural.

John casually sidled up to Henry, his gaze briefly flicking toward Stephanie. The way he looked at her now seemed to suggest that their past friendship had vanished into thin air. Stephanie assumed he was playing this part for the benefit of the two hulking figures in letter jackets accompanying him. John paid no heed to Stephanie, focusing his attention solely on Henry.

“You’re a tough guy to track down, Mr. Gold. I distinctly recall telling you to meet me at

my locker. I didn't want to lug these books to my next class, buddy," John remarked, glancing back at the two imposing figures flanking him. They all shared a hearty laugh.

Stephanie couldn't find anything amusing in his words. She hoped this encounter wouldn't spiral into an unpleasant confrontation, similar to her previous run-in with an old friend.

"I've got my own stuff to carry, John," Henry replied, his words hesitant.

At that point, Stephanie knew the encounter was taking a sour turn. The hint of humor that had briefly graced John's face slowly evaporated. He leaned in closer to Henry, his forehead touching Henry's, and his voice a whisper near Henry's ear.

"You're embarrassing me in front of my friends, Henry. I told you to call me 'J' at school, didn't I? And I can't have you talking back to me like that. It makes me look weak."

John smacked the stack of books cradled against Henry's chest with enough force to send them tumbling to the floor, scattered like fallen leaves.

"Now your hands are free. I'll catch you in class, buddy." Effortlessly, John unslung his book bag from his shoulder and slipped the strap over Henry's, his hands now free for other items.

As John brushed past Henry, he bumped into him with his arm, a signal the two burly companions emulated. Each of them shouldered Henry as they passed, with one of them even taking the liberty to kick his books, sending them scattering further across the floor.

Henry kept his gaze lowered, his eyes welling up with tears. Stephanie sensed his struggle and decided to occupy herself with helping him collect his books, giving him a moment to compose himself. In the pretense of straightening his crooked glasses, he could discreetly wipe

away any tears. Once they finished gathering the books, Henry knelt down and assisted Stephanie, their silence remained amidst the scattered pages.

They managed to organize the books and notebooks into a neat stack that Henry could comfortably carry in his arms. Stephanie helped him settle the stack in place before speaking up.

“Why do you allow him to treat you that way?” Stephanie inquired, her gaze avoiding Henry’s face.

Henry remained silent, prompting Stephanie to lock eyes with him, attempting to coax him into meeting her gaze instead of simply staring at the floor like a fool. But Henry adamantly averted her gaze, opting to begin walking away.

“Henry?” Stephanie called after him, her voice trailing to his retreating back.

He halted and stood with his head hung low once more. “Just leave it alone, Step,” he murmured, pausing briefly before continuing his departure. Stephanie wasn’t sure if his pause was an invitation for her to reach out to him or if he needed a moment to steady himself before moving on. In any case, Henry walked away, and Stephanie allowed him to slip through her fingers.

As she reflected on her encounters with their old group of friends today, Stephanie couldn’t help but feel less than thrilled about how the reunions had unfolded. She watched Henry’s receding figure and pondered what had caused the shift in their dynamics and why Chris’s absence seemed to be the turning point.

Stephanie made her way to the computer lab and diligently tackled her work. On her journey home, she called Babs, and they made plans to study together that evening. Stephanie headed straight to her friend’s house.

Babs greeted Stephanie at her front door and welcomed her inside. They ascended the stairs to Babs's bedroom, settling down for their study session. Once their study time came to an end, Stephanie decided it was time to confide in Babs about the encounter with John and Henry.

She had the foresight not to bring up the incident before their study session. Babs had remained deeply infatuated with Henry all these years, and Stephanie knew that spilling the news about Henry first would have left Babs too distracted for their study session to be productive.

"Babs, what happened between you and Henry?" Stephanie began, her curiosity finally surfacing. "You two were always together when we started high school. You looked so happy, and I know it's what you wanted. But you never really told me why you two never became a real couple."

Babs retained a melancholic expression as she reminisced about her past with Henry. She considered how to respond to Stephanie's question. "He didn't want to be my boyfriend because he's a good guy," Babs explained. "He thought he was too boring for someone as pretty as me and that someone like John would be a better match for me."

Stephanie couldn't hide her disgust. "Why on earth would he say something so foolish? That was incredibly thoughtless of him," she remarked.

Babs turned to her best friend, locking eyes with her. Once she was certain she had Stephanie's full attention, she continued, "He was feeling insecure and unworthy. No matter how many times I assured him I didn't want anyone else, he couldn't believe it."

Tears welled up in Babs's eyes. "I miss him, Stephanie. I love him, and I hate seeing John treat him like that now. I wish things were the way they used to be."

Stephanie pulled Babs into a comforting embrace. "I do too," she admitted softly, her

thoughts drifting to Chris as she consoled her friend. “I don’t know why all of this happened, but I miss our little group too. I miss all of them.”

Through her tears, Babs managed a laugh. “You say that, and at the same time, you’re still pining for that guy.”

Stephanie playfully pushed Babs away. “You’re a pain, Babs.”

“You know I’m right,” Babs retorted, easing back a bit. They sat on the floor beside Babs’s bed, and Babs leaned against it for support. She wiped her tears away and added, “You can’t tell me you don’t miss Chris as well.”

Stephanie could have denied it, but her friend knew her heart too well. Instead of responding, she chose to tickle Babs, lightening the mood.

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