

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA: BOOK 1

~ CHAPTER 1 ~ THE BOY AT THE FUNERAL

James shifted uncomfortably as he stood at his designated spot. The mortician had given him strict instructions to stay put so that people could pay him their respects and sympathy . . . but that was extremely difficult for any eleven-year-old.

He hated everything about this day. Mostly he hated having to get dressed up in the stiff, tight, and extremely hot suit. And on top of it, having to comb his sandy-colored hair. He usually kept it shaggy and loose. Having it slicked to the side made it feel super awkward and uncomfortable—like a mold of plaster was pasted to his head.

James remembered once attending a wedding for one of his mother’s cousins. He remembered watching the wedding planner coordinate everything with militaristic precision.

“Everything needs to be perfect for the bride’s special day,” the wedding planner would often shout to the workers if they lagged in their duties.

James got the eerie sense that the mortician was behaving the same way. It made him sort of irritated. Almost as if the mortician was taking advantage of the emotions of everyone attending the funeral . . . making everything perfect for this “sad” day . . . so that he could get a paycheck.

“He doesn’t care about me . . . or my family,” he muttered under his breath.

He glowered at the mortician as he observed the crowd like a secret service agent. How could he care? How could anyone in this small town care?

A small part of him *was* grateful that practically everyone in the town showed up for the funeral. But everything still seemed so . . . detached. . . . And he noticed this detached-ness from the very beginning.

He remembered when it all began. He had been dropped off at his grandpa’s cabin for the weekend while his parents were to go on a weekend getaway. The very next day, Grandpa Joe received the phone call. James’s parents had been killed in an accident.

Now, a week later, James stood awkwardly in front of his parents’ caskets as the crowd filed through to give him their condolences.

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The strangest thing about all of it was that James was not sad. Again, he just felt detached from it all. He just had no emotion to go with it. He certainly felt a . . . a sense of depression. But it wasn't for the fact that he was now an orphan.

I'll bet I'm just picking up on what everyone else is feeling.

He caught a few disapproving glances from some of the townsfolk as they came through and noticed his blank, emotionless stare.

What are they expecting? he thought to himself. *Are they wanting me to be teary-eyed but standing tall and brave?*

If there was any crying to be done James had already done it. But as he reflected on the days following the news of his parents' death he realized something. Something that bothered him a little bit, but something he could easily hide. He *was* sad about losing his parents . . . especially his mother, MaryAnn. But when it came to his father, Steven, he felt more of a sadness for the fact that he *wasn't* sad.

There had always been something missing between him and his father. Something that was always . . . gone. He didn't know what it was, but he just never felt any strong bond between him and his dad. Maybe it was because he was frequently gone on his business trips.

Let them stare, he thought. *I don't care what they think.*

He just wanted this day to be over so that he could move on. He looked up at the clock. Still, twenty minutes to go. Had it *really* only been just over an hour and a half? It felt way longer than that to him. He was sure he would be able to hold out for another twenty minutes. But then again, that was just for the viewing. There was still the actual funeral services later.

James sighed deeply. This was going to be a very long day.

The Porter family had just expressed their sympathies and followed the line to view James's dead parents. James pursed his lips as he watched them. He didn't know if his parents had any interaction with the Porters . . . let alone anyone else in town. He couldn't understand why so many people from the town would show up. His parents always seemed to keep to themselves. Especially his dad who was always gone on "business trips." In fact, James's only connection with the Porters was their daughter, Bailey.

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The strange tomboy girl always hung around him and his friends whenever they played games at the park. James always saw her standing off to the side with her weathered baseball cap worn backward, braided blonde pigtails, and an old baseball mitt. He was sure she inherited all of it from her much older brother Mitch.

Despite his confusion at the family's attendance, James was in some small way glad they were there. It certainly took him a bit by surprise to see Bailey all dolled-up instead of in her dirty tomboy apparel. She even looked . . . cute wasn't the right word . . . adorable?

James looked around the room and exhaled long and exasperated. His only entertainment was to do quick assessments of each family as he had just done with the Porters.

"James?" he heard a voice to the side.

James turned and smiled broadly. *This* was the group he was hoping to see. Of everyone in their small town, his small gang of friends were the ones who meant the most to him. Tony, Elliot, Ben, and Slade stood there, shifting awkwardly. They all looked so different in their suits that seemed too big for their eleven-year-old bodies.

James laughed when he saw them. "Hey," he said as they all approached—one united group.

No one said anything. They just circled all together and formed their usual huddle, arms overlapping and interlocking as they rested them on each other's shoulders and waists.

"Thanks for coming guys," James said.

He choked a bit. *Now* the tears started coming. Not because he lost his parents, but because he knew he had true friends.

"We're always here for you," Slade responded.

Everyone in the huddle echoed Slade's words.

James wanted nothing more than to just go and play a good game of baseball with his buds. He squeezed the shoulders of Tony and Ben who were on either side of him.

"What are you going to do now?" Tony asked.

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Elliot shot him a reproving glare. It was quick, and no one probably noticed it, but James did.

That was a huge question . . . what *was* he going to do now? He was technically an orphan.

“I’m not sure,” James answered. “I guess I’ll stay with Grandpa Joe.”

The boys all nodded and James could sense a mixture of emotions. Some obviously thought it awesome the idea of living in the cabin up the canyon. Others, he could tell, didn’t like the idea of their friend being so far away.

“Hey,” he said reassuringly. “Don’t worry. I’ll still make it to our games.”

He didn’t know how he would. But he was determined that *nothing* was going to change with his friends.

They all smiled and again repeated words of comfort. They all squeezed the huddle in a big group hug then broke the circle. James couldn’t help but smile warmly. Especially as they each took individual turns to give him one more bro-hug in support.

It was good to have close friends.

James felt his spirits lift. He noticed the mortician slightly glaring at him. Obviously, the man didn’t approve of the line stalling due to their little huddle. James didn’t care. He even smirked at the guy.

Just as the last recognizable townsfolk came through, James saw Grandpa Joe enter. *Where has he been? And why hasn’t he stood in line with me?*

The elderly Nielsen—and now James’s only living relative—came and stood beside him just as the last family came up. Typical greetings and well-wishes were exchanged. Then it was James and Grandpa Joe all to themselves. The mortician quickly took over and ushered the crowd out of the viewing area.

“The Nielsen’s will have a moment to themselves before the services begin,” he announced.

Everyone shuffled quickly out of the room. James wondered how many would stay for the remaining services.

Just as the mortician finished herding everyone out and shut the door behind him, another side door opened. Four men and a lady entered the room. Grandpa Joe smiled warmly as the strange group approached. They appeared like normal people

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attending a funeral. They wore nice suits and the lady donned a fancy Sunday style dress. But something about them made them look . . . different. As if they were uncomfortable in the clothes—like a little kid wearing a suit for the first time. They all had sharp, beautiful features, with piercing blue and green eyes. And their skin wasn't pale, but fair. The only thing James could think of to describe them was beautiful.

“Hello, Joseph,” said the oldest looking one.

Oldest? They all looked the same age. But James's instincts said this one was the oldest because . . . well, he didn't really know. The guy just looked—wiser. Which he figured made him older.

“Andel,” Grandpa Joe answered—Andel? What kind of a name was Andel? “I'm glad you guys could make it.”

“Your family means more to us than some trivial meetings,” said the second oldest—wisest—looking man.

Grandpa Joe smiled. “I take it that's where Tina is?”

The others nodded.

James tried to make heads-or-tails of what they were saying but wasn't understanding any of it.

After a few brief exchanges that James couldn't follow, the group turned to him. He somewhat shrunk under their gaze, though he felt a very clear and distinct impression that they felt nothing but sadness and sympathy for him.

“You are James?” the one named Andel asked.

“Yes, sir.”

All of them smiled warmly at him and James didn't feel so intimidated anymore.

“Your father was a great man,” Andel said as he extended his hand. “All the men in your family were.”

James wondered what he meant by that as he shook Andel's hand. The stranger couldn't have been older than his dad. He certainly didn't look old enough to be the same age as Grandpa Joe. How could he know anyone else?

Grandpa Joe cleared his throat loudly.

“Sorry,” Andel said with a wink. “*Are . . . They are still great men.*”

“Thank you,” Grandpa Joe returned the wink.

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What is going on here? James wondered.

“We look forward to working with you as well,” Andel continued.

Now James was really confused. He cocked a quizzical eyebrow at the curious group. For a brief moment, he thought of his superhero comic books. Was his dad some rich tycoon who left him his fortune and these people were his board of directors? Wouldn't that be something? But he was certain that wasn't the case.

Each of the strangers took turns shaking his hand and offering their sympathies. For the first time—and despite their unusualness—James felt the sincerity of their words and even fought back a few tears. Andel, Rosden, Dagget, Alden, and Theya—they all named themselves to him and said they looked forward to seeing him again.

Just as quickly and mysteriously as they appeared, they left through the side door.

No sooner had they left then the mortician opened the main door and poked his head in. “Are we ready to begin?” It sounded more like a command than a question.

“We're ready,” said Grandpa Joe as he rested his hand on James's shoulder.

James nodded in agreement, and together they followed the pallbearers to the chapel.

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~ Michael ~

