the Wonder of Us

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WALKER
BOOKS

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for Peter

the first Wonder

FLORENCE, ITALY

Abby

I have a history of getting stuck in bathrooms. Back home in Yuba Ridge, I've been trapped in at least eleven different bathrooms around town. Sierra Theaters. The Gas & Shop. Dave's Deli. I got stuck six times in the Blue Market employee bathroom before Dan, my manager, made a special sign for me to hang on the doorknob so I don't have to lock it. It says, *Abby occupied, stay back!* Dan thinks he's hilarious. But it's not like I panic about it. I've grown up knowing I have a tendency to lock myself into places. A latch gets stuck. My hair gets caught on the towel hook on the back of the door (long story). The door swells and sticks. The lock spins and spins but won't open. "Ha-ha," I say when I finally emerge. "Got myself stuck in a bathroom again."

But this is the first time I've been caught in an airplane bathroom miles up in the sky. And this time, I might have panicked slightly. I might have banged too loudly on the unmoving accordion door, the metal latch not

clicking back to Vacant. The poor flight attendant on the other side of the door clearly read it as panic, because she keeps saying, "Don't panic," every minute or so. "Don't panic, honey," she murmurs through the door. "I'm getting someone to help. The little lever thingy must be jammed." Jammed airplane lever thingy. Add that to the list of reasons Abby's been stuck in a bathroom. "So weird," I hear her say to someone who has come to assist her, someone who is now jiggling the door. As if I hadn't tried just jiggling it myself. "This never happens," she adds.

Figures. I can practically hear Riya saying, "Because this airplane isn't Abby-proof."

Riya.

My best friend.

Can I still call her that? I haven't seen her in person since last August, almost ten months ago. And I haven't talked to her for longer than five minutes since the end of April. Is someone still your best friend if there's a chance you don't know her anymore?

The door folds open with a whoosh. "Oof, there." The flight attendant blows a lock of black hair from her sweaty face. "Wow. You really got jammed in there. That took some effort." I'm not sure if she means the actual getting-trapped part or her work to free me. My face flames as the people sitting nearby burst into applause. Mumbling an embarrassed thank-you, I slink back to my seat.

Several hours later, the plane hums with landing noises: people waking and shifting around, wadding up their thin blankets, snapping open the airplane window blinds to let in sheets of eye-stabbing light. I sit up, tug off my glasses, and rub my eyes with my free hand. When did I doze off? I couldn't sleep for hours after getting on the plane in San Francisco, restless in my seat, so it must have only been in the last hour. Which is worse than getting no sleep at all. Groggy, I swallow thickly, and for about the tenth time since getting on the plane, read Riya's letter again:

Ab.
Yes! That other thing in your hand right now is a ticket to Florence, Italy – for you!!! Surprise! My nani is sending us on an incredible multi-city trip this summer. She's giving me my eighteenth birthday trip four months early. Two and a half weeks of European fun! I know this year has been the worst for you, and when I was telling her about it, she said we need this trip because "travel cures all ills" (sounds like her, huh?). And she will not take no for an answer. You're coming. No excuses – no: "I've got SAT classes" or "I'm working at the Blue

Market" or "I'm so mad at you right now." I know you're mad at me – I can feel the Abby-chill all the way across the Atlantic. We're both mad. And we have a million things to talk about. So don't tell me you don't have time and blah, blah, blah. If you want to fix things, you'll get on that plane! Courtesy of Bharti Nani.

Because we need this, Abby.

You have your Seven Ancient Wonders. And we have the wonders from being best friends since preschool, but here's what we need right now: We need NEW wonders. And we need to find them together. In Europe. This summer.

See what I'm doing here?!

Aren't you impressed with me?!

So pack your bags and meet me in Florence.

(Wow. I really like the sound of that, don't you?)

xoxoxoxoxox R

I fold the letter back into a square, its edges soft like tissue, thinking about the moment last summer when Riya told me she was moving to Berlin for a year with

her parents. It had been an ordinary evening – could have been any one of our days spent by the river that cut through the back of Riya's property where her dad built his family a cedar-planked cabin.

I guess everything is ordinary until it's not.

We were sitting on our favorite flat rock that juts out into the water. "You don't even speak German," I said to her, the river moving its green ink around us. "You can't move to Berlin. They speak German there." I rolled onto my back, watching as the Northern California sky grew a mockingly cheerful shade of pink.

Riya sat up, crossing her legs and flipping her thick black braid down the length of her back. "Abby, they speak English, too. It's an English-speaking school. And I can learn some German." As if that explained it. As if that was enough to explain a move across the world to a German place with German buildings and German food and new German friends. "It's just a year," she said.

"Did you know the Gregorian calendar we use today was named after a pope? In 1582. Pope Gregory XIII."

"Fascinating." She shooed away a dragonfly hovering nearby. "This history tidbit brought to you by Abby Byrd, Wikipedia addict." Pawing through her ancient blue-and-white cooler, she said, "See, I'll miss that. You'll have to send me tidbits when I'm in Berlin. It can be one of our things while I'm gone." It was Riya who'd named my random history facts "tidbits" in fourth grade. That year

I'd had a borderline unhealthy obsession with Greek mythology, and, for reasons I can't remember, the crested porcupine. And the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. That hasn't changed.

I remember Riya pulling the silver foil from the top of an organic strawberry yogurt. She licked it, folded it delicately in half, and tossed it back into the cooler. She'd been doing that exact move for years, but seeing it follow her Berlin news made me want to dive into the river's depths and pile the gray-blue stones on my back to fasten me to the bottom. There was a good chance the tiny silvery fish that darted around down there wouldn't move to Germany on me, right?

But I tried to appear cool that day. I was sixteen then, not eight. I knew I was supposed to say something like "you'll have a great time" or "how exciting" or "I wish I could take my junior year abroad," but I only wondered how you say "this sucks rocks" in German, and I didn't say anything at all. Riya didn't mind, though. My silences were as familiar to her as the river she'd grown up by.

We studied the water growing silver as the sun dipped behind the pines. Finally, she said, "If the whole world can go on after some pope changed the calendar, we can be fine for a year."

Sometimes my history tidbits backfire on me.

We haven't been fine, though. Nothing about this year has been fine.

But I can't turn back now even if I wanted to. The plane is landing. The man next to me, who still looks crisp in his black suit and white shirt, pulls a plastic bottle from his seat-back pocket and swishes water around his mouth. I do the same with my bottle, giving him a look that I hope says, *Yeah, here we are. Done this before.* Only I haven't ever done this before. I've taken two flights in my whole life: Sacramento to LA for a cousin's seaside wedding, and Sacramento to Portland, Oregon, to check out colleges for my older sister, Kate. Until today, Europe had been a multicolored blotch on my world map and the background for countless History Channel documentaries.

I stuff the worse-for-wear bottle into the seat back. I bought the Vittel water in Frankfurt, where I nearly missed my connection to Florence. Now I'm pretty sure I resemble the bottle – crumpled, drained. My jeans and black T-shirt look like I pulled them from the depths of a laundry hamper before flying in them. Funny how eighteen hours of travel can make hours feel like weeks. Still, less than a day to fly from San Francisco to Italy amazes me. In the 1600s, it took months to make this kind of crossing, maybe even a year. I resist the urge to text Riya this particular history tidbit. I'd stopped sending her much of anything these last few months.

"Il Duomo," the man murmurs, motioning at Brunelleschi's looming burnt-orange icon as the plane settles lower into

the Tuscan sky. I've seen pictures of the famous Santa Maria del Fiore, but to be suddenly *flying by it*... I must make some sort of awed noise, because the man asks, "First time in Florence?" Somehow he smells like citrus and cinnamon, which is impressive after such a long flight. I'm pretty sure I can smell my own feet.

"Yes, I'm meeting a friend." The plane bumps down. Italy. My head spins. I've crossed an ocean to meet Riya in Florence, where she'll be waiting for me after customs. Customs! I've never been off the West Coast and soon I'll be clearing customs in Italy. Maybe it was better when it took months to get here. Made you feel like you'd earned it.

When I peel my eyes away from the window, the man waits in the aisle, his black bag smartly tucked under his arm. *"Ciao."* He winks as the line begins to move sluggishly toward the exits. I bet he never gets trapped in airplane bathrooms. I tug my bag from the overhead bin (*pack light,* Riya had said, *some layers, we'll shop!*) and follow the other weary passengers off the plane.

I don't recognize Riya at first. She's cut her waist-length hair and it's not just her usual trim. It's half a foot shorter and has actual layers, touseled but purposely so. She wears a plum-colored tank dress with a chunky belt, dangly silver earrings, and aviator glasses.

Apparently, Europe looks good on Riya.

"Abby!" she squeals, spotting me, and hurries to engulf

me in a floral-scented hug. After a year, after this stupid, harsh year, I thought I might be too angry to hug her, to pretend we aren't furious with each other, to act like we never said all those things the last time we talked, but it's Riya and she's hugging me, and I've missed her so much and I'm exhausted from the travel and from this year, so I melt into her. After a moment, she steps back, takes my bag, and slings it over her shoulder. "How was the flight?"

Exhausted, I babble random history thoughts at her. "I couldn't stop thinking about how a hundred years ago, people were just starting to consider that a transatlantic flight was possible. Weird, right?" Nodding, Riya tries to follow my line of thought as she leads me toward the airport exit. "I mean, I couldn't stop thinking about Charles Lindbergh and the *Spirit of St. Louis* and how he was just alone up there in the sky above all that dark water."

As we walk into the hot Italian air, Riya takes my hand. "I missed you."

"Missed you more."

Riya

In the back of the taxi, I study Abby as we speed toward the city center. She looks exhausted, and I know it's not just the long day of travel etched in those dark smudges beneath her eyes. It's worse than I thought. I poke her. "Try to stay awake. We'll hit the hotel so you can change into something cooler, and then we'll go to dinner. Seriously, you have never tasted pasta like this – try not to sleep until at least ten."

Abby slouches into the worn leather of the taxi seat, fighting her heavy lids. "Does jet lag feel like the stomach flu?"

"It can." As Abby's eyes slip shut, I jostle her again. "Don't sleep!"

She jolts, eyes wide, and tugs at her black T-shirt. "Ugh, it's humid." She motions to the driver. "Can he turn on the air?"

I shake my head. "Get used to no air-conditioning. It's actually better. Just let your body acclimatize to the heat."

"How is sweating like a farm animal better?"

I grin – there's my Abby. As she paws through her bag, I notice an entire box of full-size Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. "What you got there?" I motion to the box.

"Oh, that sounds good, actually." She tears open the box and grabs an orange package. "Maybe the sugar will wake me up."

I watch her unwrap the candy. "Did you think they wouldn't have sugar in Italy?"

She unpeels a cup and takes a bite. "It was a gift. From Dan. He said when he went to Europe, it was super hard to find peanut butter anything."

"Yet somehow I survived."

She ignores this. "Want one?"

I take the other cup. "Glad to see Dan's still encouraging healthy eating habits in his employees."

"Don't start on Dan."

Abby's been weirdly protective of her boss since she started working at the Blue Market in her freshman year, so I don't say anything more. "Here." I hand her a bottle of water. "Stay hydrated."

"Thanks." She takes a drink, her eyes tracking the road ahead of us. "So, why Florence?"

I hesitate. She made it clear when we fought in April that she was sick of my Europe stories. So I keep it short. "I came here last year with my parents and just couldn't wait to come back." Then I sweeten the deal. "You're

going to love all the history stuff. And the gelato."

This gets the flicker of a smile. "And after Florence?"

"It's a surprise. I'll tell you when we're about to head to the next stop."

"Seriously? You're still not going to tell me where we're going?"

"It's more fun this way!"

"For who?" She frowns out the window. I knew this would bother her, not knowing our full itinerary, but it's good for her to be surprised. Abby always takes too much on with planning things. She's usually the one helping Dan sort out the Blue Market schedule or making sure her dad books camping reservations for our favorite Lake Tahoe spot six months in advance. It's time for her to just sit back and relax. Not an easy task. A funny look steals across her face as she glances back at me. "Do my parents know where our next stop is going to be?"

I know what she's doing. "My mom sent them our itinerary, but don't ask your dad to tell you. That's cheating."

She turns back to the window, the dark look lowering her lids again. "I wasn't going to do that." Yes, she was.

"Speaking of your parents, did you let them know you landed?"

Abby caps the water, tucking it into her backpack. "Both of them. I have to do everything twice now because they can't handle being on a group text together."

My stomach twists. “I’m really sorry, Abby. We were so shocked. My parents didn’t even believe me when I told them.” I glance down at the text my mom just sent. “They say hi, by the way.”

“Hi, Anju and Dean,” Abby sighs. She looks hollowed out like a pumpkin. I’ve heard traces of it in her voice since January, but seeing her now makes me wish I’d flown home last spring instead of just letting her tell me that she was fine. That things were fine. They clearly weren’t.

I follow her gaze. The outskirts of Florence slip by: plain apartment buildings with clothes flung over railings, squat storefronts, the giant Coop sign with the clock announcing 18:24. A few more hours and then I’ll let Abby sleep. “I wish you’d told me how bad things were.”

Abby’s eyes slide to mine. Even as hot as it is, she gives off her trademark chill, what my dad calls her “Abby Armor.” She shrugs. “It is what it is.”

Typical Abby. She doesn’t like to dredge things up. But we haven’t talked about our fight, or about the silence since, and we’ll need to before this trip is over. Such a stupid fight. I’ve gone over it in my head a million times. I Skyped at the end of April, just to say hi, and she was red-eyed, distracted, so I tried for overly upbeat, hoping to coax a smile out of her, telling her how I’d tagged along with Mom on a business trip to London, how much I’d loved the city, but before I could finish,

Abby snapped, "You know what, Riya? You'll excuse me if I'm not really in the mood to hear you brag about your jet-setting lifestyle right now. I'm busy living in the sucky real world."

Her words shot through me, and I blinked into the screen, stung by her hard stare. In all of our years as best friends, in all of our school years and sleepovers and vacations and summer camps, she never snapped at me like that. Before I could stop them, my own terrible words spilled out. "You're not the only one in the world whose parents are getting a divorce, you know? You're acting like you invented it." She ended the Skype call, and I imagined her slamming the laptop screen shut. The next day, I sent three texts. Unanswered. I tried FaceTime. Nothing. Skype. Nothing. Forget it, I thought. I'm busy, too. My life wasn't all trips to London this year. I'd dealt with tough things, too. She was acting like her problems were the only ones in the entire universe.

After three days of silence, I texted: you're being so immature. grow up!

Not the best thing to say. But it got her attention.

She immediately texted back: i hope you stay in germany.

I threw my phone across my bedroom, where it hit the wall, the screen cracking. I've been carrying around that visible crack ever since.

After that terrible text, we didn't have any form of

communication for three weeks. It was the longest I'd ever gone without talking to her. Finally, I express-mailed her the package for our trip and waited.

A week later, she called to say she would meet me in Florence the last week of June. "Thanks for the drawing," she added, her voice quiet, hard to read. "It's hanging on my board." Along with the letter and a print-out of her ticket, I'd sent a picture I sketched of the Lighthouse of Alexandria, her favorite wonder, only I'd drawn it looming over our own river back in Yuba Ridge. I pictured her tacking it to the layers of pictures and concert ticket stubs and other paraphernalia Abby keeps on an enormous, messy bulletin board in her room.

We've texted off and on again since, but nothing real. Just trip stuff. What to pack. What the weather might be like in Florence. Little pebbles to rebuild the crumbled bridge between us.

Now Abby watches the modern buildings move past us. "This isn't how I imagined Florence."

"Just wait."

Soon, the scenery shifts from the more modern outskirts to the historic center of the city, the buildings going back in time, turning into towers and arches and wide stone, the colors muted with sepia tones. Abby perks up, sitting forward, practically pressing her nose flat to the glass. Abby's history addiction spans *much* wider than Wikipedia and history tidbits. Sitting here, I can

sense her excitement for the history passing by us, but I feel something else there, too, the faint trace of the invisible ribbon that has always connected us. I can't help but smile. This is exactly what we need. This will fix us.

The taxi driver stops at the corner of Via del Proconsolo and Via del Corso. "We're going to the Albergo Firenze," I tell him, frowning.

"You walk from here." He motions vaguely in the direction of the hotel. "Is close."

We step out onto the buzzing street corner, hauling Abby's duffel and backpack out with us. I'd checked in earlier and it's not *that* close, our hotel. As we start walking, a group of young Italian guys wave to us, offering to help carry our bags, but I wave them off: *"No grazie."* They mime being seriously wounded by our rejection. Abby's eyes go wide at their exaggerated pouts, and I laugh. "Get used to it."

We trudge through the hot sun. I turn to point out the hotel awning up ahead, but Abby's fallen behind, kneeling next to a scruffy beige dog, scratching him affectionately behind his fanlike ears. His owner, an old man in trousers, a matching vest, and long-sleeved white shirt beams down at them. She sees me waiting, gives the dog a final scratch, and catches up. "Cute dog."

"You're here ten minutes and you find a dog to cuddle."

"They find me."

"Of course." I tug her toward the awning. Almost there.

At the hotel entrance, she pauses, turning to me. "I can't believe this, Riya. I can't believe we're in Italy. I will never be able to thank your grandma enough." She looks more stunned than happy.

"You can thank her by loving it here, by seeing the sights and shopping and eating great food, okay?" I usher her through the front door. "Come on. This hotel is next to the Torre dei Donati, where Dante's wife was born. Just one of the soon-to-be-many fabulous history tidbits you will learn on this trip."

My promise draws a smile to Abby's face, even if it looks like a ghost there.