

# The First Day of the Rest of Her Life

a *Forgotten Relics* short story

“Cora! I’m not going to ask you again!”

“No! Shut up! You can’t make me go!”

“Cora Leigh Riley, your freckled behind better be down these stairs ready to go to school by the count of three or you’ll be picking stones out of my garden every day for the next two weeks.”

“Ugh!”

“One!”

Silence.

“Two!”

Silence.

“Two and half!”

“FINE!”

*Riflerifleshove. Huff. Slam. Thumpthumpthump. Stomp. Extra loud huff.*

“Look, I’m downstairs with my backpack and shoes on and everything. You happy now?”

Mother and daughter stand face to face at the bottom of the stairway leading up to the unfinished second floor that Cora’s claimed as her domain. Evidence of exposed drywall and particleboard are all over her rumpled clothes in smears and splinters. The tangled red bird’s nest she calls hair these days is entirely her own doing, and it completes the ragamuffin picture quite well.

Susannah glowers at the preteen mess in front of her and sighs. “Happy, no. In a damned hurry because you missed the bus on purpose, yes.”

Cora rolls her eyes. “Whatever. Not like you have anywhere to go.”

“In fact, Little Miss Know It All, I happen to have an interview at the grocery store in twenty minutes, so you best get a move on.” She points the way out of the kitchen to the two front doors. “March.”

There’s more huffing as Cora stomps across the house and slams the screen door hard behind her. Susannah flinches but lets it slide. She’s determined not to let adolescence sour her relationship with her daughter. If this is what it’s like on the first day of seventh grade, though, there’s a long road ahead for them both.

She snatches her purse and keys off a high stack of cardboard boxes in the living room. When she’ll ever get time to properly unpack, she has no idea. She tries not to think about it as she follows Cora to the car.

It wouldn’t be accurate to say there’s another fight once they’re on the road. The war began six months ago when Danny announced they were moving, and if Susannah’s mother is any authority, it’ll keep on until after Cora graduates from high school. There aren’t individual battles, just rounds between rests.

“This is stupid,” Cora mutters from her slouch in the passenger seat. “School is stupid.”

“Don’t be like that. You like school, and they tested you in at a whole grade level higher here. You’ll have more challenging classes. Won’t that be nice?”

“No! It makes me a freak. And I’m the new kid, so everybody’s going to hate me.”

“Look at it as a chance to make new friends.”

“I don’t *want* any new friends, Mom! I want the ones I had!” she shouts. “Why did you do this to me?”

The sheer volume of her voice hurts Susannah’s ears. But rather than rising to the bait, she lets it drop, and they ride in silence in the thick, late-August heat. Nothing she can say will make her baby happy. Cora cried for days when she realized she’d have to leave her school and friends behind. Then she lashed out at her parents, alternately shutting them down and gouging out their hearts. The only real question is which barb will be the one cuts too deep today.

When they pull up in front of the low-slung school, the first bell’s ringing. Cora can’t get out fast enough. She’s already halfway to the door before Susannah can call after her.

“Cora! Do you want me to come in? I can talk to the principal about you being late. We can blame it all on me.”

To her surprise, her daughter spins around and walks back, then leans down to talk through the passenger window. Susannah smiles, but realizes too late that it’s not a friendly gesture.

“Do *not* get out of this car,” Cora hisses, as if someone might hear. “Don’t you dare embarrass me on my first day, Mom. What is *wrong* with you?”

The ferocity of the demand catches Susannah off guard. “I— I’m sorry, honey. I just thought I could help.”

“Then you shouldn’t have made me move here in the first place.”

“We came here for you, baby,” she says, unable to help the pleading in her voice. “I know it’s hard to understand now, but we did it because we love you and want you to grow up somewhere safe. You know we’d do anything for you, right?”

An ugly sneer creases Cora’s face. “I hate you,” she spits.

Then she turns on her heel and runs into the school without looking back.

Shocked tears rush to fill Susannah’s eyes and suddenly she can’t breathe. Tilting her head back, she blinks fast to keep from ruining her mascara. Bites her lip to keep it from quivering. She knew this was going to be hard. But nothing could prepare her for those words, for the contempt in her daughter’s voice. Nothing.

She takes a couple of deep breaths and adjusts the rearview mirror. Then she puts the car in gear and slowly pulls onto the main street towards her interview, steeling herself, pretending she’s unfazed by her daughter’s rage. The way she knows she’ll have to do for the next ten years of her life.

Cora marches into the school as the last bell fades, squeezing her backpack straps so hard her fingernails bite into her palms. But she doesn’t care. It takes the edge off the shame. She didn’t mean to say that to her mom. Not after she’d said it, anyway. She’d immediately wanted to apologize and hug her and cry about all the hot feelings that don’t belong to her. But she couldn’t.

And so instead she sets her jaw and raises her chin and strides into her first class as if she’s proud of every syllable.

Four rows of faces stare at her from the inside of her homeroom as she opens the door. All of them are vacant, pimply, and...white. After years of being in the minority at

her inner-city school, her brain doesn't know how to process what she's seeing. Where are all the black people?

She must stand there a long time trying to figure it out because the teacher clears his throat pointedly, making a “come in” motion when she looks up. She ducks her head and scoots to the back row, ears burning furiously red as the other students watch silently.

“Eyes front, everybody,” the teacher says with a dense Missouri drawl. “You can all get to know Miss Riley after class. Let's finish up this syllabus.”

Everyone obeys with a scuff of jeans against wood. Cora feels ten pounds lighter without all those eyes on her. She wipes the sweat off her palms, then digs in her backpack for her notebook and a pen.

When she pops her head back up, there's a piece of paper on her desk. But it's not the syllabus—the teacher's still droning on and hasn't given her one yet—it's a folded up square of wide-ruled paper.

Cora scans the airy classroom with suspicion. Who had time to write her a note in the two minutes she'd been there? And there's an empty row between her and the next kid—how did the note get there without her noticing?

Very carefully, under the desk but keeping her eyes forward to avoid getting caught, she unfolds the paper, then lifts it to the desktop to read.

*Hey new girl. I think you're cute. Jeremy.*

The blush that'd just subsided bursts into new life, scorching her cheeks and scalp. Somebody likes her?! Somebody in this class?!

She wants to die. And find out who it is. Both of them right now.

She scans the room again, focusing on the boys, trying to read their minds through the back of their heads. Which guy is he? He has to be close, right? Is he messing with her head? Boys are totally like that. Not as bad as girls, but almost.

In the ardency of her investigation, she leans right to get a better look at one of the boys in particular. It's too much. The one-piece desk tips just enough to dump two pens and a notebook onto the tile floor with a comically loud *crash*.

The teacher abruptly stops his droning and stares at Cora over the top of his wire-rimmed glasses. All the students turn back around to stare at her again, too. She nearly spontaneously combusts from mortal humiliation. Tears threaten.

“Miss Riley?” the teacher says dryly. “Do you have something you’d like to share with the class?”

She fights down the impulse to shove the note in her mouth, chew it up, and swallow it. Instead, she lets it fall into her open backpack at her feet.

“No, sir. Sorry.”

“Do try to pay attention, Miss Riley, or your first trip to the principal’s office is going to be sooner than you think.”

He goes back to reading the rules and regulations, and the other kids turn back towards the front.

Except one.

The boy sitting directly in front of her, the one with sandy hair and tanned skin, keeps staring. He doesn’t say anything, doesn’t make any movement. But Cora suddenly knows for a fact that this is Jeremy. She tries a smile that looks like she’s going to barf. He winks, then turns back around like nothing happened.

The rest of homeroom hour goes by in a blur. And the rest of the day, too. The note in her bag weighs a ton but she only takes it out again once she’s on the bus ride home. Then she reads it so many times she’s amazed the words don’t wear off the page.

A boy likes her.

By the time she gets home, she’s not sure if it’s love or motion sickness that’s got her stomach churned up. She floats into the house and up to her room on a cloud of sweet pink dreams that not even her mother’s nagging about homework and chores can touch.

Maybe this new place will work out after all.