

DRAWN

from LIFE

a novel

Sarah P. Blanchard

Drawn from Life

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First Printing, March 2024

Eagle Ridge Farm

ISBN: 979-8-218-33228-0

For Phil and Rich,
my Hōkūleʻa and Hōkūpaʻa

ONE

Thursday, November 18, 2015 - 2:00 a.m.

“Really, Em. You’re being such a drama queen, all that moaning and groaning. It’s not like you’re dying. You saw the X-rays, it’s just a little crack.”

Lucy risked a glance away from the wet road to frown at her cousin Emma, huddled beneath a blanket in the passenger seat. “And, FYI, your shirt’s buttoned all crooked. You look like a sad-ass refugee.”

A gust of wind rocked the car. Sucking in her breath, Lucy tightened her grip on the wheel and braked. She hunched forward, squinting past thrashing wipers into inky blackness. Seeking a glimpse of slick pavement through the downpour.

Woozy with painkillers, preoccupied with tracking rain streaks on the side window, Emma blinked herself halfway into focus and organized a response.

“Next time,” she began slowly. “Next time I break a bone...I’ll dress better. I’ll be dressed. No more...” She thought a bit. “No more posing nudely. Nudity? Posing nude.”

Lucy shot her a worried look. “You don’t mean that, right? You can’t stop sitting for me. I need you, Em. You’re my abso-fucking-lutely best model, always have been.” Her eyes flicked to the road, then back to Emma. “You’re kidding, right? Hey, Mouse. I *said* I was sorry.”

Nudity, Emma thought. There’s a fun word. Who used to say that?

Radar O’Reilly, that’s who. On *M.A.S.H.*, her dad’s favorite show. She should call. Let him know she was okay. The broken collarbone was nothing, they’d still be there for Thanksgiving.

Call her dad, she amended. Not Radar O'Reilly. And not right now because it was like two in the morning.

Belatedly, Emma caught up to Lucy's words and worry. "But posing for you is dangerous. You saw it, right? That easel attacked me." She frowned. "My name's not Mouse. I hate that nickname. You should use my real name."

The pain meds were doing a fine job now of blurring everything except the mesmerizing swipe of the wipers. Emma rolled her head back toward the side window, careful not to jostle her left arm in its sling.

Lucy found the interstate's on-ramp and accelerated, risking a skid.

Emma wanted to say something about the perils of excessive speed on slippery mountain roads, but then she felt the Subaru's all-wheel-drive take hold and the moment was gone. The words weren't lining up correctly anyway.

Lucy exhaled loudly and relaxed her grip on the wheel. "That doctor said you'll be just fine, Em, all healed up in a week or two. So no one needs to know about this, right?"

Emma considered that. "I'll need an extension from Panetta. I've got a paper due Friday, the day after tomorrow. No, tomorrow. Today's Thursday already, right?"

"I'll call him," Lucy reassured her. "What's your topic? Never mind," she added quickly. "This is just me, faking an interest. I'm sure it's totally mind-numbing."

"The Roles of Women..." Emma frowned in concentration. "...in Sub-Saharan Village...Economies? ...Maybe."

"Yeah, boring as fuck." Lucy swapped dismissal for persuasion. "Don't worry, I'll tell Panetta you got a doctor's note. But no one else needs to know. Right?" Fingers twitched on the wheel. "This is adulting one-oh-one, Em. We don't need to run to Daddy or Uncle Jerry with every little boo-boo, right? We solve our own fucking problems. Pinky-swear, okay?"

Only Lucy would say fucking and pinky-swear in the same breath.

Through the rain and inky darkness, Emma saw the flash of an exit sign and the lights of what might be a gas station. She wanted to remind her cousin about the Subaru needing gas but instead she fell asleep.

She woke to the crunch of tires on gravel and the growl of the Outback downshifting as it began the sharp climb to their cabin. On the car's instrument panel, the GET GAS NOW light glowed red.

A small panic jolted Emma upright. "Lucy, the gas—" She gasped as a sharp pain knifed her left shoulder.

Lucy scowled, her face inches from the windshield as she navigated a hairpin turn through the downpour. The wipers were slapping frantically now, running on high. At the second switchback, she slowed to a crawl and snapped on the high beams.

"Stupid headlights." One hand left the wheel to scoop back a shock of white-blond hair. "They're fucking useless! I can't see anything."

"Go back to low beams," Emma forced the words through clenched teeth. "It won't reflect off the rain as much."

"Really?" Lucy snapped. "Do you want to drive?"

Emma bit back a response.

Yes I do, but no I can't. What if we run out of gas? No one else drives this road, we're still half a mile from home—

Her right hand flew to the grab handle as the Subaru fishtailed on loose gravel and thumped into a pothole. She caught her lower lip between her teeth and braced both feet against the floor. Pain shot again through her shoulder.

Five minutes later, they pulled into the nearly invisible clearing at the end of the old logging road. The Outback sputtered its last fumes and died, sliding a little sideways in the mud.

At least the cabin's lights were still on.

Lucy offered Emma a weak grin, the silver stud in her lower lip glinting in the dashboard's glow before she switched off the ignition.

"Made it, Mouse. Easy-peasey."

They stumbled through blasts of cold rain to the porch, strewn now with slick wet leaves. Inside, Lucy slammed the door against a blast of wet

wind as Emma dropped her wet blanket on the floor and toed off her muddy shoes.

Rain drummed hard on the cabin's metal roof. We're okay now, Emma thought as Lucy helped her peel off wet jeans and socks. In a few hours it would be daylight. When the rain ended Lucy could take their other car, Emma's Miata, to get gas for the Subaru. Everything would be fine.

As Emma tried to figure out how to lie on her right side while holding an icepack on her left shoulder, Lucy's "easy-peasey" tickled her memory. One of her mother's favorite phrases. What other platitudes would her mother provide now?

It's not a problem unless you make it a problem, Emmie. A warm blanket and a hot cup of tea, that's all you need. Let Lucy do the hard stuff. She'll take care of you like she always does.

Except her mother was gone forever and there was nothing easy-peasey about life with Lucy.

Emma at nineteen liked to study root causes. What factors precipitated the Great Depression? Which innovation motivated a barter economy to transition to a monetary system? How did she end up with a hairline crack in her collarbone?

The physics of that was simple: The crossbar of Lucy's easel had collided with Emma's clavicle. Force plus velocity plus trajectory. But what was the propelling force, Lucy's frustration with that damned art project or the disturbing text from her mother? Probably both.

Like all juniors in the Silvermill College art school, Lucy was required to produce a capstone project, a major artwork worthy of exhibition at the end of the fall semester. She'd proposed creating a three-dimensional self-portrait, a life-sized plaster sculpture that she would then destroy during the gallery show.

She had a theme and a title, Genesis and Catharsis. She knew what Catharsis would look like, a multimedia video extravaganza—with strobe lights, clashing cymbals, maybe cannon fire—during which she'd sledgehammer her plaster self into smithereens.

But Genesis was proving tricky. She'd begun with typical Lucy-style enthusiasm, creating detailed drawings that exaggerated her own angular features—aquiline nose, wide shoulders, sharp hips. Plus all the body art, the ink and metal ornaments.

The timeline required her to complete a frame of wood and chicken wire by Thanksgiving, but she'd spent all of October and half of November changing her mind about the perfect posture to express The Full Essence of Lucy. Nude, of course, but what then? Spreadeagled on a concrete slab or draped on a tree limb? Emerging from the ground as a hellish demon or crouching like a hungry spider? She loved Louise Bourgeois' arachnid *Maman* at the National Gallery in Ottawa, but wouldn't a spider be too derivative?

Emma had suggested a Lucy-piñata, suspended from a tree branch like a naked paratrooper or a flying zombie. Just joking, Emma had added, but her cousin liked the idea. She just couldn't decide what should spill out of the Lucy-zombie-piñata when she destroyed it on camera.

After months of listening to Lucy's indecision, Emma was done contributing feedback. *You're going to smash it anyway*, she wanted to say. *Just get it done.*

On the afternoon before the hospital trip—Wednesday, a week before Thanksgiving—they'd come home early from classes. Emma retreated to her bedroom to work on her economics paper while Lucy sat in front of the television, sketchpad in hand, to draw warrior poses from *Game of Thrones* freeze frames.

A little before six p.m., Lucy dragged her big A-frame easel into the center of their front room and set it up beside the fieldstone fireplace.

"Please, Em, I need you to pose. Twenty minutes, that's all. I've got it narrowed down to three concepts. It won't take long."

Emma stifled a sigh. The economics paper needed her full attention but Lucy sounded desperate. She set aside her laptop and pulled off her sweatshirt because posing for Lucy usually meant nude.

"Twenty minutes," Emma agreed. "Then dinner. I'm holding you to that. How about Norah Jones?"

They'd agreed years earlier that the model chooses the music. To the opening notes of "Sunrise," Emma draped her jeans and underwear neatly over the sofa and stood naked on the braided rug in front of a dark window.

"I need your hair up," Lucy reminded her.

Emma gathered her thick curls, wrestling the mass into a thick bird's nest and securing it with an elastic band above her neck. A few russet strands always escaped, springing away from her head in defiance of hairdressing and gravity.

At Lucy's direction, Emma eased into a warrior pose with feet planted wide and hands clutching an imaginary broadsword over a shoulder.

Beneath the music she heard a light rain peppering the windows, the beginning of a storm moving through the mountains. She shuddered a little, imagining the cold rain against her skin.

"Puh-leese, Em," Lucy coaxed. "Hold it just a little longer. I've really got to get this done. Bring that left leg forward a bit."

By the time the first sketch was completed, all the blood had left Emma's arms. Twenty minutes came and went, but Lucy kept sketching and coaxing.

"Hang on, Em. I've almost got it. Five more minutes."

Then it was five more in a new position and five more after that, until Lucy forgot to ask and Emma forgot to protest.

Norah Jones had run out of songs. The only sounds now were the rain and Lucy's frustrated mutterings as she dragged a floor lamp around the room and repositioned her easel. Nothing was working. She blamed gloomy lighting, paper-curling humidity, and Emma.

"Jeez, Mouse. That pose is so static. You're just standing there like a freaky little rodent. I need you fierce and powerful. Be a dragon queen."

Emma steeled herself, not for the pose but for what would happen next. There'd be swearing and foot-stomping, sketches ripped to shreds. Eventually Lucy might produce something brilliant, but the process was always fraught with drama.

“Just fucking try,” Lucy growled. “Come on, Mouse. You’ve got to look like me.”

Emma remembered Rodin’s nude study of Jean d’Aire, a bronze sculpture at the art museum in Raleigh. One of Auguste Rodin’s besieged *Burghers of Calais*, the massive figure stood in defiance and despair, fists clenched at his side as he prepared to sacrifice himself to the invading army.

Worth a try.

“How about this? From the Rodin garden.” Emma turned away and imagined herself large and powerful. Knees locked, fists coiled, jaw clenched.

Lucy’s scowl evaporated. “Oh! Yes. Can you get more weight on your right leg? Like you’re stepping toward death. Keep your back arched, show those biceps. That’s awesome!”

But it wasn’t awesome, it was impossible. Emma was six inches shorter and ten pounds heavier than Lucy, all soft curves where Lucy was hard bone and muscle. Emma didn’t have biceps.

She couldn’t be a body double for her Valkyrie cousin and she really couldn’t be the nine-foot-tall statue of a desperate, naked Frenchman. Five minutes later, her arms began trembling. When her right calf cramped, she collapsed on the sofa and folded herself into a blanket.

“Sorry, Lucy, I can’t do this. You took pictures of the Rodins. Can’t you just look at those?”

“No, I can’t! I deleted those stupid photos and now there’s no time!”

She tore the Emma-burgher sketch off her easel and ripped it in half. Crumpled the pieces and tossed them into the cold fireplace. Threw herself into a chair and buried her face in her hands.

“It’s a fucking disaster,” she groaned.

“Let’s take a break,” Emma coaxed. “We can go back to it after dinner.”

She pulled on her clothes and began ladling chili from the pot on the stove while Lucy sulked on the sofa. Emma hesitated over a bottle of red

wine, then poured a scant half glass for Lucy. She corked the bottle and tucked it away in a cupboard.

Food brought Lucy back to life. She ate hunched over the table, spoon in one hand and phone in the other, alternating between eating and swiping through a dating app. Left, left, left. She snort-laughed derisively and kept swiping.

They finished the chili just before eight, when Lucy's phone pinged with a text.

TWO

“Fucking spam.” Lucy frowned. Her finger hovered over the delete icon.

She paused. “What—? It’s my mother. But it’s someone else’s phone.” She swiped rapidly, her frown deepening. “Shit! Really? She says she’s moving again. Leaving New Haven, going back to Stanstead.”

Lucy had been born in Stanstead, Quebec, just north of Vermont.

Emma set their empty bowls in the sink. “When’s she leaving? After Thanksgiving?”

“Now! *Right now.*” Lucy’s face pinched in dismay, then fury. “This is so fucking *stupid.* She says I can’t call her because the phone she’s using belongs to someone named Brad. Who the hell is Brad? She’s left Hartford, she’s literally on a bus. But she’s heading *north*, not south. They’re almost at the border and now they’ve lost the cell signal. *Fuck.*”

“North?”

“Canada! Quebec!”

“But she’ll be back for Thanksgiving, right?”

Lucy threw her phone down. It skidded off the table, bounced on the braided rug, and came to rest against a leg of their saggy old sofa. Being closer, Emma retrieved it and placed it back on the table.

Lucy jumped to her feet and began pacing between the fireplace and kitchen sink.

“Shit shit shit! My *fucking* mother. She can’t *do* that! They’ll stop her at the border. She can’t get a work visa, she can’t get a job. If she sneaks over the border, she’ll get deported. Again.”

“Why is she leaving?”

“Who the fuck knows?”

“I’m sorry,” Emma couldn’t offer a hug, she’d be flung off. “Last time you talked, she was clean, right? Six months sober?”

Lucy continued pacing. “This is my mother we’re talking about, remember? No fucking way she’s still clean. And she’s the one who said oh, let’s get everyone together for Thanksgiving at the family farm.” She mimicked a saccharine wheedling. “We’ve got things to talk about, she said. To celebrate, because Maggie’s sober. She swore she’s getting her life together, everything’s turning around. Yeah, no.” She resumed pacing.

“Maybe—”

“Fuck that shit. She’s disappeared again and I’m *done* with her.”

“But we’ll still have Thanksgiving. Dad and Jerry are flying down on Tuesday.”

Lucy paused to glare at Emma. “You don’t get it! She was supposed to ask Jerry—” She broke off abruptly. “Fuck it. Let’s go somewhere. I’m sick of hanging out here.”

Emma knew if they drove the twenty miles into Asheville, Lucy would head for a bar. Emma, always the designated driver, would have to drive them home through the storm.

“Let’s not, okay?” Emma hated to beg so she aimed for logic. “Your tank’s almost empty. Do you really want to stop for gas tonight, in this rain? Besides, I’ve got work to do.”

Lucy flopped onto the sofa and threw her head back to stare at the ceiling. Emma waited a beat, then opened her textbook.

A minute later, Lucy shot back onto her feet and strode to her easel. “Okay, let’s finish this stupid drawing. You offered, remember? After dinner, you said.”

Emma sighed. She marked her book with a paper napkin and shed her clothes again.

Lucy poked through her box of charcoals. “You know, Em, in the whole fucking world you’re the only one who understands me. The only one who puts up with me when I get crazy.”

Emma couldn’t claim to understand Lucy but she suspected the last part was true. No one else tolerated her cousin’s tantrums and sarcasm. But was that a strength or a weakness?

Lucy positioned a wooden chair near the window. “Nothing hard, I promise. Just sit and stare at the window, okay? And pull the band off your hair. Let it hang loose, or whatever it wants to do.” She switched off the

overhead light and dragged her easel across the floor, bringing it closer to Emma. Now the only light came from a small desk lamp on the kitchen table, beside Emma's left shoulder.

"Shake your head again, Em. Your hair, it's wild." She pulled a wool blanket off the sofa. "Here, drape this over your shoulder. Maybe I'll add some fabric for texture. Rags, or wet seaweed. Remember that exhibit in Montreal, with the kinetic fabric that moved to music? A skirt started fluttering when I sang to it. That's what I need."

Emma groaned. Another concept, another complication. But if Lucy was feeling inspired instead of frustrated, she'd go along with it. "Thanks for the blanket, cuz. It's getting chilly. Maybe you could light a fire."

"When it's raining? No, it'll just make the room smokey. Besides, the wood's all wet."

It had been Lucy's turn to bring in logs from the woodpile by the porch.

Emma pulled the blanket closer, thinking she should've kept her clothes on. How many years had she been posing for Lucy's art? She couldn't remember the first time. Before kindergarten, certainly.

Cousins with no other siblings, they were only a year apart in age. They'd been thrown together since childhood by circumstances and their family's collective need to cope with Lucy's mercurial mother Maggie.

Whenever motherhood—or life in general—overwhelmed Maggie, Emma's small rural home in eastern Connecticut became Lucy's refuge. The doorbell would ring, usually late at night. There'd be whispers or raised voices, sometimes tears. A shadowy figure would hand over a backpack and nudge the sullen girl through the door.

Emma's mother Kit or father Frank would fold Lucy into an unreciprocated hug and exclaim, "Look, Emmie. Here's Lucy, she's staying with us for a night or two, maybe a week. Isn't that wonderful? We can always make room for Lucy."

The night or the week frequently stretched to a month or longer, depending on where Maggie had gone and why. Rehab, jail, drugs, a new boyfriend, alcohol, a halfway house, drugs again, jail again. Frank's sister always vowed to return for her daughter when she got her act together.

Each time, Emma would set aside her toys and offer Lucy a fresh box of crayons or markers. The girls had learned to co-exist through a shared

interest in art. Their talents emerged early: Lucy's artistic skills, Emma's ability to follow admiringly.

Lucy especially loved the gritty messiness of charcoal. She often used both hands, holding a drawing stick in her right and a blending stump or eraser in her left. If the work went well, she'd swap the blunt stick for a thin piece of burnt grapevine or a white highlighter. She was her own toughest critic, though, and most drawings were abandoned halfway. Sheets of sixty-pound Strathmore crumpled on the hearth made excellent fire starters.

Now she paused, scowling. "I've got the lighting right, but the composition is flat. It needs more depth." She pointed her charcoal at Emma, accusing. "You're easy to sketch, Em, but hard to draw. I want myth and mystery, but you're all saints and serenity. No depth."

Emma tried to speak without moving. "What did I do? Was I shivering? I'm trying to hold still but it's cold."

Half of her body was covered by the blanket, the other half exposed. She felt goosebumps and nipples rising, probably not the look Lucy was looking for. "How about a Mona Lisa smile? That's mysterious."

"Stop that, Mouse," Lucy muttered. "Don't move. And stop mocking me."

Emma flinched. "Sorry. I'm not mocking. I'm—"

"No stupid Mona Lisa face."

There was a *snap* and Lucy groaned. "Shit. I need a new stick." She rummaged through her box. When she resumed sketching, the strokes came hard and rough, like a rake scraping concrete.

"Em," Lucy demanded, "why don't you ever get angry? I'm trying to put some emotion into this drawing but you aren't giving me anything."

Time to shut this down, Emma thought. *Get up, get dressed, get warm.*

But she remained in her chair, distracted by the sight of her own reflection in the window. Floating in darkness, framed by an exuberant mane of curls, her face looked blank and inconsequential. The mask of an artist's manikin.

"Okay, if you can't do anger, try shame." Lucy was drawing now with quiet, carefully controlled strokes. "Think of something shameful. Like that asshole in seventh grade, what was his name? The boy who grabbed you

behind the bleachers.” Her voice had gone flat and cold. “Remember how he got you down, shoved his hands under your shirt?”

Calmly now, she was prompting pain like it was a friendly bit of nostalgia. “Remember what that felt like? Show me that feeling. I want to draw that.”

Emma’s goosebumps vanished in a flush of heat.

“Then remember,” Lucy continued amiably, “how glad you were when I hauled him off you. Remember what I did to him? You were so scared, you were crying. But I saved you, right?”

“That’s not fair—” The blanket slipped to the floor as Emma leaped to her feet. Naked and not caring, she spun to face her cousin. “I’m done—”

Lucy kept drawing, apparently unconcerned that Emma had broken the pose. “Okay, so give me something else then. How about some random time when you really screwed up. No, fuck that, I forgot, the Mouse never screws up. Oh, I know! How about grief? That could work. Remember when your mother asked you to go skiing with her? But you said no. So she went alone, and then she died.”

Lucy stepped back from the easel to inspect her work. Shook her head, sighed, and added as an afterthought, “I loved skiing with your mother. If I was there, I’d have gone. Then maybe she wouldn’t have died.”

The casual cruelty took Emma’s breath. She bit down hard on her lower lip, then had to force words past the tang of blood. “You don’t get to use my grief for whatever this is.”

Lucy resumed drawing with a fresh violence that threatened to tear the paper. She remained silent.

Abruptly remembering her nakedness, Emma retrieved the blanket from the floor and fumbled it around her shoulders. From long habit, she sought conciliation. “Lucy, I’m sorry about your mother running off again. But what you’re doing right now, it’s a mind-fuck. Don’t dump all your shit on me.”

Emma, who seldom swore, had captured Lucy’s attention. The scrape of charcoal stopped.

“Much better, Mouse. You’re actually defending yourself.” A pause. “This is exhausting.”

What’s exhausting? Emma wondered. *Drawing me, or bullying me?*

How could she defuse her cousin's anger? "I can't be the angry one," she said. "That's your job. Remember the summer you turned twelve? Uncle Jerry said you acted like you were the Director of Outrage and Fury. He said it's my job to stay calm, to balance your anger. We're yin and yang, that's why we're friends."

Suddenly Lucy was standing way too close, pushing the fury into Emma's face. "Yin and yang? Friends? Shit, that's it? That's what you think we are?"

Emma pulled her blanket tighter and fought the instinct to retreat. "Sorry. How about—"

Lucy spun back to her easel. "Sit down, Mouse! I'm not done. And do *not* say besties," she spat, "or something equally fucking stupid, like BFFs or soul sisters. Superficial crap."

"No, I mean— I don't know! Fam? Tribe? Blood sisters? What would *you* call us, Lucy?"

The second piece of charcoal broke and Lucy's face twisted in rage. She grabbed the easel with both hands and heaved it.

Charcoals and sketchpad rattled to the floor as the easel's wooden crossbar smacked Emma's left collarbone. Too startled to cry out, she crumpled to her knees on the bare floor. Whimpering, gasping for breath, she clutched her left arm tight against her breasts.

Lucy's rage evaporated. Begging forgiveness, she guided Emma to the sofa and rushed to fill a plastic bag with crushed ice. She helped Emma dress and guided her through a cold drenching rain into the Subaru, then drove ever so carefully down their treacherous mountain road with the car's headlights reflecting nothing but slanting rain and the black forest.

In the emergency room, Emma sat for three hours on a hard plastic chair. She dripped melted ice and hot tears while Lucy swore at the hospital staff. Shortly before one a.m. on Thursday morning, a burly ER nurse in wrinkled teal scrubs took X-rays.

"You've got lots of bruising but only a small crack in the clavicle," he said. "You're going to have swelling and pain, but you don't need surgery."

He taped her shoulder to immobilize it and showed them how to fasten a sling and a clavicle brace. "This will take the pressure off. Ice it every two or three hours, if possible, for the first twenty-four. Don't try to use it at all

for three days. Then you can swap the sling for just the brace so you'll have a little mobility in that arm. Really, you just gotta leave it alone to heal. In a week or two it should feel a lot better and then you can get a referral for PT."

When he handed Emma a prescription, Lucy scoffed. "Hah. Percocet? That's not strong enough."

The nurse kept a wary eye on Lucy as he spoke to Emma. "Follow the directions. There's enough for three or four days, no refills. Then if you still need something for the pain, try acetaminophen or ibuprofen or a combo. This is an opioid, so don't even think about driving until you're off it. Got that?"

THREE

Late Thursday morning, as Emma dozed under a quilt in her painkiller blur, Lucy paced the front room and sometimes the front porch, swearing at the weather.

Forecasters were predicting five or six inches or maybe more before it all cleared out, which might be today or Friday or Saturday. Hard to tell because the storm had stalled right over them.

Emma and Lucy were stuck until the rain ended. The Subaru had no gas, and Emma's Miata couldn't be driven in weather like this. It was prone to skidding on gravel and ice, it bottomed out on every pothole, and its canvas top was in tatters.

She knew her twelve-year-old, pearl white sports car with its temperamental clutch and sticky parking brake was completely unsuited for service on Appalachian mountain roads. So why had she kept it? Because it was her pride and joy. Her seventeenth birthday present, the talisman that her father had hoped would lend a touch of cool-kid status to his shy, unpopular daughter.

Emma didn't care about status but she loved the car and agonized over the care she couldn't give it. The Miata should be residing in a warm garage, not stuck beneath a frayed blue tarp in the freezing mud where a falling tree limb could punch a giant hole in its burgundy roof.

Which was what had happened two weeks earlier, when a widowmaker broke off a half-dead pine tree and ripped down through the canvas top, leaving a hole that Emma could fit her head and shoulders through. No, she and Lucy weren't going to drive the Miata in a cold downpour.

The storm continued all day Thursday. By mid-afternoon, Lucy had changed the timeline from Thursday to Friday for the getting-gas

expedition, and added groceries to the list because they'd run out of milk and bread. Admitting to an attack of cabin fever, she binge-watched *Game of Thrones* without even pretending to work on her capstone project.

That evening, Lucy thawed a cheese pizza and topped it with a leftover slice of deli turkey, which reminded Emma about Thanksgiving.

"Lucy, have you told Dad or Uncle Jerry about Maggie? Not coming for Thanksgiving."

"Not my job. It's her information, she can tell them."

"But isn't Jerry planning to pick her up at the bus station? I'll call him."

Lucy scowled. "Leave it." Her irritation simmered, rising like a stench.

Emma offered a compromise. "I'll text my dad."

"Whatever. But don't mention your shoulder."

On Friday, it rained harder. Emma abandoned the icepack and began staring at her books, not quite able to concentrate but unwilling to quit trying. She roused herself sufficiently to suggest that Lucy call a few of her friends, see if someone could bring them a gallon of gas for the Subaru.

Lucy brushed her off. "Who's even left? Everyone's gone, they're all ghosting me. We're fine, I'll get gas tomorrow. Besides, I'm busy."

Finally annoyed with her own procrastination, Lucy had dragged a roll of wet chicken wire from the porch into the front room. She unrolled several yards of wire and began wrestling with the tin snips, cutting the unwieldy wire into chunks that she twisted into ragged, tortured shapes.

On Saturday the rain let up for an hour, then fell harder. Emma called three gas stations near Asheville but all were short-handed and too busy to deliver gas. Was she serious? On the weekend before Thanksgiving? One manager told her his own tanks were empty, too. Another informed her that running out of gas in your own yard didn't qualify as an emergency. Another said he could send someone out but not until Monday.

The rain finally stopped on Sunday afternoon.

At three-thirty, Lucy pulled on her best Mountain Girl outfit—sheepskin jacket, a feedstore logo cap, paint-stained jeans, and hiking

boots—and slopped through the shoe-sucking muck to the side yard where the Miata sat beneath its tarp.

“Hey Em,” she called. “Hurry up. It’s fucking freezing out here.” She yanked off the tarp and kicked rocks over the blue plastic to anchor it against a freshening breeze.

Paused on the porch, Emma leaned over the railing and squinted at broken clouds. The air was thick with the smell of dead leaves, the rotting debris field of autumn. Shivering, she tugged her jacket a little tighter over the clavicle brace, an arrangement of padded straps that immobilized her left shoulder.

“Em, I need your keys.” Lucy reached for the driver’s door handle. She skidded in the mud and nearly fell. “Whoops!” She grabbed the Miata’s side mirror and erupted in giggles. “No worries, I meant to do that.”

Emma frowned. “Don’t break my car.” She hesitated. Lucy was not a giggler. And was she slurring her words? “Maybe we should wait a little longer,” she added. “Can you hear the stream? It’s really loud. There’s been so much rain, it’s probably running over the road.”

“Yeah, no. So let’s get going. It’s almost four—”

Emma remained on the porch. “It’ll be dark before we get back. And there’ll be a hard freeze tonight.”

“No shit, weather girl. Yeah, it’s cold. Let’s go.” More giggling as she fumbled her hands into leather gloves.

Was Lucy drunk?

Waiting for the rain to stop, they’d scrounged lunch from an olive jar and a bag of stale taco chips. Lucy had popped open a beer. Only one beer, or more? Emma should have paid closer attention, but she’d taken her last Percocet at noon and was planning an afternoon nap.

Now, watching her cousin stumble around a puddle, Emma wondered if she should ride along to caution Lucy’s driving. Or, third option, maybe her collarbone had healed enough so she could drive her own car. She flexed her left elbow. The ache had definitely eased, but how would she manage the stick shift?

“Hey,” Lucy called, “where’s the gas can?”

“Under the porch. But there’s kerosene in it.”

It was Lucy who’d put lamp oil in the gas can. “Well, I’ll buy another one. But we still need shopping bags.” She slogged back to the porch, trailing mud up the steps and through the front door.

Frowning, Emma shivered again and watched a swirl of dead leaves tumble across the yard. Even in good weather, driving these steep mountain roads required planning and energy. She was having serious regrets, not for the first time, about her decision to share off-campus housing with Lucy. Though she wasn’t sure how much regret she should assign to the house, and how much to her housemate. Probably fifty-fifty.

Lucy had found the furnished cabin six months earlier at the end of her sophomore year at Silvermill College, in the beautiful month of May when the Appalachians were at their most alluring. The craigslist ad sounded wonderful: gorgeous views, two bedrooms, a cathedral-ceilinged front room with a big fireplace, a satellite dish for TV and wi-fi.

The old hunting lodge clung to a west-facing ledge of granite halfway up Bishops Knob, a sparsely populated mid-sized peak eight miles east of campus and twenty miles northwest of Asheville. Their front porch offered a spectacular view of graduated peaks rising to a blue-gray skyline that stretched fifty miles west into Tennessee. Summer and early fall had been warm and breezy, the woods full of birdsong and every shade of green. By mid-November, though, storms had begun to batter the cabin with sleet and freezing rain. The raw winds blew smoke back down the chimney and set the windows rattling.

Now it was four days before Thanksgiving and most of the trees were bare. From their front porch, Emma had a clear view of the narrow access road that climbed, switchback by switchback, from the shadowy cove below.

Their neighbor’s oldest boy Billy was walking along the road. Nine or ten years old, a small child with big dark eyes and tangled black hair, to Emma he always seemed a little feral. In warmer months he usually went shirtless, wearing only dirty gym shorts and falling-apart sneakers. She’d

met him back in late May, when his bare shoulders and thin chest were spotted with insect bites and old scabs.

Saying hello had startled him into a wary silence. When he did speak, the words came out in a jumble.

“That’s a Carlina wren,” he whispered. “A male. They got this three-noter, kinda like a whistle. Like sayin ‘teakettle teakettle teakettle’ but faster. I’m Billy,” he added, “but I ain’t sposed to be out. Don’t tell no one you seen me....seen me.”

His voice had an upcountry drawl that stuttered and repeated the last words, as if there’d been a near-silent echo. He blushed, clapped a hand over his mouth, and vanished, leaving her to wonder why a child his age was alone in the forest mid-morning on a school day.

Today he wore a too-small jacket and frayed jeans, better than shirtless but still not adequate for the cold. Shivering in sympathy, Emma watched from the porch as he ducked behind a moment before as a blue van appeared, crawling downhill on the gravel road. It disappeared around the next curve without stopping.

She recognized the van. The driver, Billy’s mother Chrissy, lived with her four young kids in the only other home on their road, a rusty single-wide trailer set in a weedy clearing a quarter-mile downhill. The yard in front of the trailer was landscaped with abandoned toys, dead appliances, and a torn *Thank You Jesus* banner hanging from a walnut tree. Whenever Emma drove by, she waved to whoever was in the yard, Chrissy or the kids or an unknown man who seemed to be forever dismantling a pickup. Only Billy ever waved back, and only if he was alone.

Other than Emma’s Miata and Lucy’s Outback, Chrissy’s van was the only vehicle that regularly traveled their road, a one-lane dirt track winding for two steep miles up from Chickapay Crossroads, a junction distinguished by a stoplight and a small dollar store with erratic hours.

The old loggers’ path was optimistically labeled a “private drive” on county maps. In passable shape at the bottom, by the time it reached their cabin it had become no more than a pair of wheel ruts with ragwort and thistles growing in the center. On the rare occasion when two vehicles

met, one had to nudge against the uphill bank or back into a wider place where a game trail branched off.

Mail trucks and Uber drivers did not come to their cabin. Letters and packages were dropped at the dollar store. After every storm, the ruts grew deeper, the potholes wider. Lucy's car was the obvious choice for driving on their miserable excuse for a road but today they'd have to take the low-slung, skid-prone Miata with the ripped ragtop.

And who was more fit to drive?

Emma thought again about Lucy's giggles. Maybe her cousin was high instead of drunk. Or high and drunk?

Lucy often had cannabis stashed somewhere in the cabin. A tin of high-octane gummies in her sock drawer, a baggie of buds in the medicine cabinet. She was also too careful—usually—to risk a DUI. One ticket, one warning, and Uncle Jerry would yank everything: tuition, rent, car insurance. Maybe her car. Lucy frequently drank and got high, but only when she could rely on Emma to drive.

Could Emma drive? She'd taken the Percocet four hours ago. The familiar fuzzy-brain feeling had worn off and surely she'd be okay now, right?

Lucy emerged from the cabin waving a pair of Trader Joe's shopping bags. "Found them. But I need the keys." She clumped down the steps.

Emma followed. "I don't think it's safe—"

Lucy exhaled sharply. "Oh for fuck's sake, Em, get real. Your car's perfectly fine to drive now the rain's stopped."

"I'll drive."

"What? You can't drive, you're wearing that brace. How will you shift it? *Keys*, Em." She tugged at the driver's door. "Fuck, it's locked."

"No, it's not."

Lucy yanked harder and the door popped open. She swayed and lurched back, scrambling to keep her feet.

Emma frowned. "Lucy, you're trashed."

“No, I’m not. I’m fine.” Lucy folded herself down into the driver’s seat and snort-laughed. “Shit, the seat’s forward! Your legs are so freakin’ short.”

“Just move it.” Why couldn’t she just say it? *Get out of my car, Lucy. You aren’t fit to drive.*

There was a sharp *thunk* as Lucy found the adjustment lever and the seat shot to its farthest-back position. She fastened her seatbelt and pulled the door shut. Planting her hands on the wheel at ten and two, she grinned up at Emma.

“Okay, Mouse, I’m ready. Get in if you’re coming. Or hey, stay home and nurse that broken wing. I’ll have more room for groceries. You can’t carry much anyway.”

Faced with the fact of Lucy buckled into the driver’s seat, Emma climbed in on the passenger side, awkwardly reaching across with her right hand to latch the seatbelt. “Did you adjust the mirrors? The parking brake’s sticky, remember? You’ve got to pull it up really hard to set it. And release it.”

“I *know*.” She smacked the steering wheel with both hands. The grin was gone, replaced by a thin snarl. “You tell me that every. Single. Fucking. Time.”

“I just wanted to remind you—”

“Hey, Mouse, you know what?” Lucy unsnapped her belt. “I’ve changed my mind. I’m staying home. You can drive your own fucking car.”

She scrambled out, leaving the driver’s door ajar but stopping a few yards away with her back to the car, fists clenched at her side and feet braced in the mud.

Like the Burgher of Calais, Emma thought, *full of fury and despair*. “Lucy, I know you’re angry about Maggie. I didn’t mean—”

Lucy spun to face Emma. “Fuck Maggie. She’s screwed up everything. You have no fucking idea—”

“You’re right. I have no idea.” Emma flexed her left arm again. Could she drive? The shoulder was stiff but not sore. She’d be extra careful not

to spin her wheels on the wet gravel. Stay in first gear through the switchbacks, avoid the washouts. If her left arm wasn't up to holding the wheel while she changed gears, she'd steady it with a knee like she'd seen Lucy do.

But what if the pain returned, or she injured her shoulder again?

"Come on, Lucy," Emma said. "Yeah, it's my car and I should drive. But I need you to come, too. Maybe you're right, maybe it will hurt too much and I won't be able to manage the gears. I'll probably need you to drive home, anyway. Please."

Emma dropped the keys in the cupholder and unbuckled her seatbelt.

FOUR

First came a slow tilt, the heavy rumble of rocks and earth. A hollow place opened in Emma's gut, like the imminent drop of a roller coaster but much, much worse.

Then came a long slide and a sickening first flip.

Everything accelerated, spinning and tumbling until the cold sky and black earth smashed together. Rocks trees metal, shrieking and grinding.

She heard a child scream. Children? Maybe it was her own voice, high and shrill.

The earth filled her ears, nose, and mouth. She smelled leaf mold, wild grapes, and blood.

Darkness arrived then, cold and silent. She was alone for a long time.

The copper taste of fear rose like bile in her throat then because everything shameful was moving closer, soon to be lying beside her in the freezing rubble.

People were dying and it was all her fault.

FIVE

September 21, 2023

Squinting against the afternoon sun, Chaz stabbed his narrow-bladed shovel into damp red clay, carving clean the sides of a new post hole. Only eight more and he'd be done with the digging. The Kubota's power auger worked fast but you still had to get down in the dirt to get the depth right. He wanted it done right.

He hefted a six-foot post from the dwindling stack on the tractor's front pallet fork. As the post thudded into place, he glanced back along the plumbline stretched above a row of twenty identical holes. Ten feet apart, two feet deep, ten inches wide. From each hole a post tilted upward, waiting to be spirit-leveled into straightness and set in slushy concrete. After the concrete set, he'd use the tractor to stretch the hundred-foot rolls of woven wire tight against the posts and pound in staples. Last, he'd hang gates and string two strands of solar-powered electric wire around the outside.

Coyotes weren't getting into *this* sheep pasture.

Chaz felt lucky, landing this summer job on Miz Emma's farm. He was used to the heat and sweat, the afternoon showers that came down hard and sudden from massive thunderheads above the mountains. He was proud of the muscles he'd grown and the callouses he'd earned by clearing trails, bucking hay bales, and digging post holes. He especially liked driving the big Kubota tractor and running the attachments with the cool-sounding names: cutterbar, disc mower, rotary rake, hay tedder, haybale spike.

What he didn't like was the damn insects. Mosquitoes and deer flies in the woods, greenbottles and hummingbird-size horseflies in the fields. Gnats and chiggers everywhere.

And ticks, hiding everywhere in the grass. Holding out their shitty little legs to grab on and bury their bloodsucking mouthparts into you.

The stingers were the worst. White-face hornets defending their paper nests in the weeds, yellow jackets that rose up from holes in the ground like the spawn of Satan.

His kid sister Jessie called them all yellow stripey things, a stupid name because it made hornets sound the same as the bees in the flower gardens at Miz Buckner's, where his sister Jessie still lived. She claimed she could pet the bumblebees, if she moved slow and talked gentle.

Yeah, no. Nobody'd find Chaz petting a bee. Which was why he kept a can of twenty-foot wasp spray in the Kubota's cupholder, and two more cans under the seat of his pickup.

Chaz's hatred of wasps and hornets went way back. The September he'd started first grade, Ma told everyone she was deathly allergic to yellow jackets so her kids must be too. Ma said if any of them got stung they'd swell up and die. She'd come up with this weird homemade bug-repelling stuff made from what she called her medicinals, plants she grew beside their skanky old trailer. Lavender, rosemary, marigolds, garlic. Chaz definitely remembered the garlic.

Ma crushed the leaves and roots of everything. Mixed it with cider vinegar and strained the mess through a piece of flannel shirt, then wiped it on everyone's skin. Soaked their clothes and make him drink it, too. That way, she said, the medicinals would come right out through his skin.

Bless her heart, what a flippin smelly mess he'd been. Jessie, too, but she was too young for school back then so she didn't care so much.

First grade was hell. He spent the first couple months slumped down at his desk like the loser-kid he was, oozing garlic. Other kids called him Stinkpot and worse, and beat him up every day. The teachers wrinkled their noses and backed off.

It wasn't until the first frost in November that Ma quit using that evil stuff. Then she got a new boyfriend so that kept her busy and when spring came she'd traded those foul medicinals for quartz crystals to hang around their necks. He didn't stink of garlic any longer but the damage was done, and he was forever known as the weird loser who smelled like a shithouse.

Chaz had never once been stung by a yellow jacket and neither had Ma or Jessie, as far he knew, but a dozen years later the stench of garlic still turned his stomach.

His buddy Darren, who'd signed up with the Army three days after graduation, told him there's way better stuff now to keep the bugs off. During his first Sunday evening phone call from boot camp, Darren had jumped right into complaining about the weather and the insects.

"It's not even summer yet and everything sucks, man. Humidity's so bad it feels like y'all are breathin through a wet-wipe. Heat's awful. They call black-flag when it's gonna be over ninety. Then they haul us out of bed extra early, like three-thirty A-fucking-M, to do our five-miler before sun-up. And the bugs. We got every kinda bug like back home, but bigger. Palmetto bugs, a fancy name for roaches, but these're the size of baseballs. Plus fire ants that sting like bitches. They build big mounds in the sand in the middle of our ropes course, and we have to crawl through 'em. Jesuschrist, I miss the mountains."

Darren sounded proud, though. Like it was all *his*, the hot muggy weather, the fire ants, the monster roaches. So when Darren lowered his voice like he was giving out classified information, Chaz listened.

"The army's got a secret weapon. They treat our fatigues with this kick-ass chemical to keep bugs away. Per-meth-reen. It works good on ticks. They can't have us gettin sick from Lyme ticks, so all our clothes have this stuff in it. Doesn't work on fire ants, though."

"What's it smell like?"

"No smell at all. They say it's made of flowers, like those yellow mums the feed store sells. It's real sick shit."

Chaz googled on a library computer and learned that anybody could buy permethrin, not just the U.S. Army. The stuff had been developed