



The  
**HEARTSEER  
CODEX**

**FANTASY OR REALITY**

**John Richmon**

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Book Cover by John Richmon

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# *Dedication*

## **To My Grandchildren**

Flannery

Lucy

Rosie

Juno

Sadie

Vivienne

Hadley

Maisie

Annika

Lukin



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## CHAPTER ONE

# *Photographs and Memories*

**"E**mily ..."

*Jagged spikes run along your back, whispering tales of your hidden strength. Perfect. Now, the eyes ... what should they be? Embers, yes. Glowing fiercely, their intensity hinting at a fire eager to escape. Not quite Puff, the Magic Dragon, are you? Still, I find myself drawn to you.*

"Emily ..."

*Scales, iridescent, catch the light and shadows. You stand as a guardian at the threshold between worlds, a sentinel over realms unseen. I can almost hear the armor of knights clinking and their presence whispering of ancient battles and forgotten lands. I bet—*

"Emily!" I blinked, and the dragon's fiery gaze faded into reality's embrace. "Finally ... your counselor called. Your teachers' concerns are growing."

When I glanced up, Dad stood in the doorway, gripping the frame.

"No reason to be. I'm fine."

After stepping into my room, Dad paused and studied me with a crinkled brow. "It's not just your grades, Em. They

say you live in another world. And, sadly, I can't argue with that."

In my world, galaxies spun, and mystical cities soared. Their colors blazed against the drab walls of high school corridors and stood out amid the predictable rhythm of family dinners. It was like stepping from a canvas alive with dreams into a world drained of wonder. Each day merged into the next, like a page from an old, forgotten book.

*Why can't you understand?*

I released a long, drawn-out exhale, my breath stirring the loose papers on my desk while setting my pencil next to my open notebook. "I get good grades in my art class ... and English. That should be enough."

Dad sat down on the edge of my bed. "But we want more for you, Em. More than squeaking by. Mr. Jamison recommended you talk to someone."

*Not a chance.* Tension spread through my shoulders as I crossed my arms and pursed my lips. "I don't need therapy, Dad. I'm an artist with a vivid imagination. That's not something that needs fixing."

Dad ran his hand through his hair. "But you're not connecting ... making friends. Don't you want that?" Unable to resist, my eyes drifted to the window. Outside, a robin danced from branch to branch, its cheerful chirps piercing the heavy, stagnant air trapped within these walls. Unburdened by the weight of our conversation, I envied its life of simplicity.

Dad followed my gaze. "You're doing it right now, aren't you? Retreating into your own little world."

"My world's better."

"What's that? I didn't get that mumble."

"My world's better."

"Em, please look at me." Hesitant, I turned to face his unrelenting glare. "Would you at least consider talking to someone?"



While my stare fell on my shaking hands, I took a deep breath and let it out with an audible sigh. "I'll consider it." *A counselor might be more understanding ...* "But no promises on the going part."

Dad stood up and headed for the door.

"Dad?" Pausing, he looked over his shoulder. "I miss Nana."

"I know. I miss her too."

"How do you know?"

He breathed deeply enough that I saw his chest expand. "I've seen you staring at her picture on the mantle. Sometimes wiping at the corner of your eye. Your bracelet. I never see you without it."

"It's been a year, but it feels like yesterday."

"Why don't you rummage her hope chest? Maybe it will make you feel better." Dad, again, turned to leave. "School, Em. You need to do better."

*Yeah, yeah.*

After Dad closed the door, I spun my charm bracelet about my wrist several times before heading for the attic.

*I'll be back, Puff.*

The attic entrance, a portal to my secret world, lay hidden in plain sight right off the stair landing. Its creaky door was a mere whisper away from the solitude of my room. Within its confines, many adventures had taken place. No one ever thought of looking for me there. It was my secret hideaway.

*This place needs a cleaning.*

Entering was like climbing a castle wall. New items for attic storage got placed near the door, piled high until getting through required a battering ram. Its smell was pungent, much like walking into a second-hand store.

*Where are you? It's like a war zone in here. Aren't you ever getting rid of the Barbie dollhouse, Madison? There you are.*

Nana's hope chest was ancient, passed along to her by her grandmother. I raised the chest's dust-covered lid. Be-

neath it, a treasure trove of captured memories awaited in photos. My fingers brushed over them, each a gateway to times gone by. "I remember this one." Pausing at a photo of me as a baby, my eyes widened with innocent wonder.

*Wedding day. You guys look so happy.*

Then, tucked between familiar scenes, an unrecognized photograph caught my attention—a younger me beside my grandmother, standing in front of an antique store. With hourglasses on each end of the storefront sign, it murmured of secrets yet to be unveiled, promising answers to questions I hadn't dared to fully articulate. *The hourglasses look just like my charm.* The similarity sparked a quiet curiosity and a subtle tug at the edge of my awareness. *You trying to speak to me, Nana?*

It was as if the photograph whispered of a connection across time, linking me to my grandmother in a way words never could. I looked about the space surrounding me, partly because of an eerie feeling that someone was watching over my shoulder and partly to ensure it was my secret only.

While my fingers traced the charm's contours, I mulled their significance. *This can't be a coincidence.* Upon removing my bracelet for a closer look, I experienced a sudden disconnection. *What was that?*

Then, while placing the charm next to one of the sign's hourglasses, a sudden chill passed over me like a severe case of the heebie-jeebies—*creepy*. Then the silence of the attic, usually a blanket of peace, felt charged with the weight of unspoken stories, amplifying my restlessness.

After shaking it off, I noticed a sealed envelope beneath a stack of similarly aged photos. Though faded, the handwriting on the front was unmistakably Nana's, addressed to me. With a mix of reverence and curiosity, I opened it with care.

My dearest Emily,

If you're reading this, you've found your way to my hope chest, a place of memories and secrets. I've always known you to be a dreamer, much like I was at your age. There's a world out there full of magic and mystery, waiting for someone with the heart to explore it.

You have always been closer to my heart than you know. Your creativity, spirit of adventure, and way of seeing the world remind me of myself when I was younger. I want you to know that it's okay to feel different, dream big, and pursue those dreams, no matter how outlandish they may seem.

Remember, my dear, bravery is not the absence of fear but the courage to face it. I hope one day you'll find your own path that leads you to adventures as grand as those in your drawings and stories. Don't be afraid to step out of your comfort zone. You might just find yourself along the way.

With all my love and a thousand wishes for your journey,  
Nana

P.S. The enclosed picture is you and your birth mother, Teresita Rodriguez. I took it the day you were born. Your dad was deployed.

Trembling fingers traced the edges of the photograph, each touch etched with a question mark in the air. *You lied, Dad. What else?* Anger mingled with a sharp pang of betrayal. Yet beneath it lay an undercurrent of longing—a desire to know more, to understand.

With the photograph of the antique store in hand, I left the attic's cocoon of memories and the weight of discovery pressing against my chest. The hallway felt longer as each step bridged the world I knew and the one I was about to explore.

I found Dad in his usual spot, typing away in his home office, hunched over his computer. While hovering in the doorway, model ships and planes from his Navy days momentarily captured my attention. I hoped he'd look up and

notice me standing there, but I guess he was too absorbed in what occupied him.

"Dad ..."

While continuing to type, "Just a sec, Em." It was longer than a sec—more like a minute if I'm being kind. "Yeah?"

"Have you seen this picture before?"

Dad's eyes dropped and then lingered on the mystery photograph. "It's been a while but yeah. You were so eager to help Nana. She adored your company."

"You mean, this is that place? An antique store? I remember begging to go."

"Yep."

"Strange. None of this exterior is familiar, but I still remember the inside. A funny smell. Musky. Old wooden floors and wall-to-wall junk. Antiques, huh? Is it still there?"

"I believe so."

"What's with the hourglass on the sign? It matches the charm Nana gave me just before she passed." Holding out my wrist, "See?"

"Interesting. Not sure what to make of that. Sounds like something she'd do though. The store was important to her. She hated giving it up. Maybe it was her way of passing on a piece of something you two shared. Em, I need to get back to this."

"Just one more thing. Can I use one of your cars Saturday?"

"I'm working, and your mom's obligated—some lady's thing. But out of curiosity, what for?"

"Go to Boulder." Dad dropped his chin, peered over his glasses, and stared. "What?"

Dad shrugged. "Surprised is all. Not much gets you out of your fortress. What's wrong with yours?"

"Mad has dibs. I'll figure it out. So I can go?"

"Far be it that I stand in your way."

## CHAPTER TWO

### *The Hourglass*

Come Saturday, while perched on a metal bench outside the bus station, I glared at the schedule board. *Wizard's beards! A Saturday schedule? How could I miss that?* Realizing my bus was still an hour away cast a shadow over me like a towering castle wall.

As I immersed myself in a book, an elderly man sat beside me. "Lovely day, isn't it? Heading somewhere special?" he inquired, smiling.

I offered a noncommittal nod while my discomfort grew. The man's unwanted chatter quickly grew old and at odds with my desire for solitude. But before I could find an excuse to move, panic gripped me. *My bus ticket!* I patted my pockets, and my heart raced.

In a frantic search, I turned my bag inside out, but the ticket was nowhere to be found. As the old man watched, his expression changed from friendly to concerned. "Have you lost something, dear?"

"My bus ticket. I just had it."

As I rummaged through my belongings one more time, people continued to gather around the bus stop. Their conversations, laughs, and noise all felt so invasive and

suffocating. Their eyes, filled with curiosity, honed in on me as they observed my obvious distress.

After an eternity seemed to pass, I discovered the crumpled ticket hidden in my sketchbook. *Finally*. A wave of relief surged through me, only to vanish like mist around a dragon's breath. The realization that I still had to endure another hour of waiting, surrounded by strangers, felt like a dagger to my heart.

*I can handle this. It's just an hour. I need to do this for Nana and myself.* I clutched my ticket like a lifeline and retreated into the pages of my book. Its words blurred as I struggled to block out the world around me.

When the bus finally arrived, the sound of its brakes screeching to a halt was like a symphony. Signaling the start of a new chapter, it echoed a chance to break free from the suffocating world around me.

Nestled in a window seat, I opened my sketchbook. The gentle engine purr and soothing rocking motion put me at ease as I drew. But my tranquility shattered just as a knight was about to rescue a damsel from an evil sorceress. A group of rowdy individuals boarded, laughing with loud voices that penetrated the calm. I tried to return to the climax of my fable, but their presence was an unwelcome intrusion.

"Hey, what country are you from? Somewheres in Asia?" The bus fell quiet, and I felt everyone's eyes on me. Their silence was as loud as his words. My cheeks burned with anger and shame while my pencil paused and my hand trembled.

Vanishing seemed ideal, yet his piercing look demanded a response. Around me, passengers shifted while their eyes averted, and their silence became an unspoken barrier. My sketchbook, once my sanctuary, offered no escape as my characters blurred with unshed tears.

The man pressed. In the gentle quiet of the bus, he leaned in closer, magnifying the tension with his loud voice. "Come on, tell us. We're all curious."

The bus's collective gaze created a heavy, unseen presence. With a deep breath, "Actually, that's none of your business. But why would you presume I'm not from here?"

"Cuz, cuz, you're—never mind."

There was a moment of stunned silence before the group resumed their activities. With my hands still shaking, I couldn't resume my drawing. Instead, I stared out the window, watching the landscape pass in a blur. Although shaken by the experience, I discovered a newfound sense of strength. *Atta girl, Em.*

Stepping off the bus, Boulder unfolded before me. As I inhaled the promise of adventure, my fingers fumbled through my backpack for the map I'd drawn. *No! No ...* A knot of anxiety anchored in my stomach as each pocket turned up empty. *Troll's teeth!*

Panic surged. *Think, Em. Phone book. Phone book. Over there.* Leafing through the Yellow Pages, I spotted Time and Again. Despite the churn of disappointment, my hands remained steady while I scribbled the store's address on the back of my sketchbook,

*Now for the map section. Where is it? Map. Map.* A jagged void stared back. *Seriously?* I let out a huff of frustration. *Think, Em. It's north of here. I remember that much. Easy. Head north. Look for a map on the way.*

The glaring absence of a phone book taunted me at the street's first pay phone. Then, the drugstore's spin rack was barren of maps, and the waitress at the corner diner could only offer an apologetic shrug.

But fortune smiled at a newsstand with magazines fluttering in the breeze. A real estate brochure lay among the chaos, offering a rudimentary map of the area on its back pages. *Yes! Hillsborough. Hillsborough. Neggets.* The map lacked detail, not much more than a guide.

The thought of approaching strangers and exposing myself to the unknown terrified me. Yet, there I was, asking a passerby for Hillsborough Avenue. He pointed in my general direction before blending back into the sea of people. My thanks were lost to the wind.

Ahead, a deluge of blue lights illuminated the scene while police tape fluttered in the wind. "Manhunt," an officer stated, her face stern. "You need to go around."

"Hillsborough Avenue ...?"

"Go down four blocks, then left. It'll loop you back around. Be quick. It's not safe." Her words were a flurry, and her attention had already shifted back to the urgency of her duty.

I followed her directions, navigating the detour with the brochure's map clutched in my hands. As I walked, each step carried a silent plea for safety and for the world to find balance once I reached my destination.

Finally, the antique store appeared, nestled between a bakery and a modern clothing boutique. But the windows were dark and the door locked with a crooked sign—closed. "No! You can't be closed." The word hit me harder than expected, a silent shout against my hopes. Standing there, with the cold beginning to seep through my jacket, I threw back my head and let out a slow breath. *This was the last thing I needed.*

Staring at me was the storefront sign. *The hourglasses. What's with you guys?* I rubbed the charm between my fingers and felt that same creepy feeling from the other day. *Is that you speaking to me, Nana?*

My eyes returned to the sign on the door, and with a deep breath, I exhaled through my parted lips. *Just like the bus, Em. Dig.* I straightened up, pulling my jacket closer. Across the street, a diner promised warmth and the scent of coffee. Staring at its welcoming facade, I felt a flicker of determination. It wasn't much but enough to take the next step. And sometimes, that's all you really need.



A waitress with a mosaic of tattoos offered a thread of hope. "The diner's owner, Mr. Jacobs, maybe he knows. He's been around here forever," she said. Her voice carried the warmth of the diner.

*I've come this far. I can't give up now.*

Grabbing the receiver, I punched in the number. Its beeps mirrored my pounding heart. The phone rang while I held my breath. Holding the receiver tight, I willed the ringing to cease as my thoughts raced in silent pleas.

"Hello?" The voice at the other end sounded rough, seasoned by years I could only imagine. "Yes, Mr. Jacobs? My name is Emily Reynolds. I was told you might know how to contact the owner of Time and Again. Tell me it's true."

"As a matter of fact."

*Yes.* My spirits soared like a dragon taking flight, high and unbound. Mrs. Cates was kind enough to take time out of her day to let me in. "Thank you, so much."

"You sounded desperate, as if chasing treasure or fleeing pirates." Her eyes twinkled with amusement as she unlocked the door. Stepping inside, I discovered a cavern of memories, where the air was filled with the aroma of old books and wood polish. She peered over her glasses, mingling curiosity and warmth. "Looking for something specific, dear?"

I pulled out my sketchbook and removed the mystery picture. The paper crackled as I exposed its riddle. "This photo ... the hourglasses in the sign." Extending my wrist, "This charm. They're identical. My grandmother gave this to me for my birthday. There's a connection here I can't ignore."

"Elenore. You're her granddaughter?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Ellie stayed on with me for several months after I bought the store. Come." I followed her toward the back. It was utterly disorganized, with nothing but odds and ends. "I asked Ellie about the hourglasses. She said it was the

perfect symbol for an antique store. Then, shortly before she left my employ, I ran across this."

With a careful hand, Mrs. Cates lifted an ancient-looking hourglass into the dim light, its frame no taller than eight inches. The metal, dull, with six protruding symbols, three on each side, and an ancient-looking book at the top and bottom. It whispered of old secrets, an enigma suggesting an honorable but vivid history.

"What's this?" she asked. Engraved on the bottom were the letters MOB. "That's odd. I've never noticed."

"What do you think it means?" I asked.

"I haven't the foggiest."

"Elf's ears! Look." My voice rose with conviction. "These symbols. Not only are they unique, they're identical to the storefront sign. Even my charm has little raised dots. See?" Mrs. Cates offered a cursory glance but wasn't interested in unraveling my quandary.

"These letters. They look out of place, almost scribbled. I bet they're the key. They have to mean something. Maybe Nana was trying to send a message."

The old lady took a deep breath and sighed. "I don't know what to tell you, dear. Except ... You know, hon, there is one person in Boulder who could possibly help you. A long shot, mind you. Her name is Bea Garrett. The lady knows all things Boulder. Name a building. She knows its history. A Boulder encyclopedia she is."

Eager, I leaned in. "Do you know where I might find her?"

"Exactly where a woman with her knowledge should be, The Museum of Boulder. The Historical Society runs it. It's west of here on Broadway if you're up to it?"

My tone sparkled with a playful resolve. "Guess it's time for fairy wings." Fishing the map from my pocket, I unfolded it with determination and whimsy. "Can you direct me using this map?"

"About here ... on your way out of town. Go out the door and turn right. Good luck, Emily."

"Thanks so much."

"Wait. You need the hourglass. It's yours."

I thanked her again. With the map in my pocket and resolve fortifying each step, I moved toward the promise of answers hidden in the folds of the past.

## CHAPTER THREE

# *Matching Symbols*

**A**s the road stretched before me, it unrolled like a scroll of mysteries, winding its path through the heart of Boulder. With each step, I followed it amidst a blend of excitement and nervousness. But as I neared the road splitting into two unknown futures, a flutter of uncertainty unsettled my heart. *Phoenix feathers! Which way?* My feet paused while I searched my back pocket.

*I know I put it there. I checked the other—empty. No ... I'm losing it. Please don't tell me. Bupkis. "Not again! Argh ..."* With a surge of determination, I retraced my steps to the antique store. Its closed facade and windows reflecting the dimming light greeted me.

Defeated yet unwilling to surrender to the whims of fate, I returned to the junction. Standing at the precipice of a choice once more, the question of left or right appeared more daunting than before. Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath of the cool Colorado air and sought guidance in the gentle breeze. A quiet sixth sense whispered a subtle heartstring tug guiding me left.

Emboldened by an internal nudge, I marched on with a renewed purpose. Living out an adventure born from

charting my own course surged an undeniable thrill through my bones. Intuition whispered, and the untold stories awaiting discovery pulled me forward.

Moments after my leap of faith, the unexpected spectacle of a local artisan festival unfolded around me. Amidst Boulder's urban backdrop, stalls exploded with vibrant crafts lining the street. Each was a kaleidoscope of colors and textures that whispered promises of stories untold. The air was alive with the aromas of street food, mingling with the strains of live music that seemed to pulsate with the heartbeat of Boulder.

*Wow, what's all this? A quick look around won't hurt.* But with each step, the festival's embrace tightened. A street painter caught my eye. Her brush played across the canvas with a passion that mirrored the storm of emotions within me. And then the melody of a nearby musician wrapped me with a soulful tune that spoke to my wandering spirit.

*I could watch these artists for hours.* Their prowess shone through as daylight waned, and their commitment reflected the enthusiasm that fueled my quest. Still, I found myself afloat in the tide of their imaginative force.

The festival, with its endless distractions, was a delightful detour. But a detour it was. *Focus. I can't afford to get lost in this.* The urgency of my quest to the museum returned with a renewed force.

Seeking direction, I approached a group of festivalgoers, their laughter a bright note in the afternoon air. "Excuse me," I inquired, "am I on the right track to the Museum of Boulder?" Their friendly nods and pointed directions offered a guide and lifeline to the path from which I'd strayed.

Resisting the festival's allure, I pulled myself from its captivating charm. With stained hands bearing testimony to her craft, an artisan called out from one of the stalls, "Hey, you look lost. Need some help?"

"Yes, thank you." Grateful for the offer, I shared my destination.

"Head as if you're leaving town toward the west." She stepped out of her stall and looked around. "You look like you're veering more to the north," she said, extending her arm. "Try that direction. It's fascinating. You'll love it."

"Thanks loads."

Casting a final glance at the festival, a pang of regret for the departing sights and sounds swirled within. Yet, the artisan's words reignited my resolve, infusing my path with purpose and a fleeting connection to the community. The festival's vibrant energy, a lingering buzz beneath my skin, clashed with the street's growing murmur, wrapping me in a cloak of solitude.

Ahead, I noticed a small figure at the edge of the sidewalk. A young child with distress imprinted on her face divulged confusion. Drawn by an invisible thread of concern, my steps slowed. While trying to mask my worry with a gentle tone, "Hey, are you OK? Where's your mom?"

The child's eyes, wide and brimming with unshed tears, met mine. Kneeling, I offered a smile that I hoped would comfort. "Don't worry, we'll find her. Let's check out these stores," I said, reaching out my hand. As we weaved through the myriad of businesses that spread along the street, we explored them hand-in-hand.

As the minutes passed, each weighted with a sense of urgency, worry nibbled at the edges of my resolve. The ticking clock dispensed a constant reminder of the elusive secrets hidden within the museum. Yet, the sight of the child, alone and vulnerable, anchored me in place.

"Mommy!" The lady's face, a portrait of relief and gratitude, enveloped her child in a tight embrace. "Oh, thank you so much. I've been looking everywhere for her!" Her words calmed the frantic beat of my heart.

With the child safely returned, I remembered my own predicament. “Is this the right way to the Museum of Boulder?”

Still flush with relief, the mother asked, “Are you interested in the easiest or fastest?”

I looked around, assessing. “Easiest if it’s not too much longer.”

“We’re on Arapahoe. Take it to ninety-three, then hang a right. It becomes Broadway—saves zig-zagging through side streets.”

“You’re so kind. Thank you.”

“No, thank you for keeping my child safe. Good luck.”

As I resumed my journey, my gaze fell to the pavement, catching the glint of a small pendant. Its cool surface greeted my touch and spoke volumes about the warmth of the day. *A heart.* I looked around, but there was no likely owner in sight. A simple stone, yet a keepsake for that moment of my journey. *Cool.*

Moving on, I carried the festival’s vibrant energy and the warmth from the reunion I’d helped create. Both the literal and metaphorical detours had enriched my trek with unexpected threads of community, compassion, and human connection.

As the laughter and melodies of the festival faded from thought, the sky shifted, casting a foreboding shadow over my path. Glancing upwards, I couldn’t help but hope against hope. *Please don’t dump buckets.*

But within seconds, tentative sprinkles gave way to a sudden, fierce downpour, drenching me in seconds. *Great, just what I needed. Could this day get any worse?* I lamented while the rain’s bitter touch seeped deep.

Yet, the thought of reaching my destination spurred me on. My clothes, now heavy and clinging with the weight of the rain, reinforced my resolve. *I can’t stop now, not when I’m this close.* Pushing through the deluge, I moved forward with a determination that mirrored the storm’s intensity.

In my haste, I slipped on the slick sidewalk, shooting a sharp pain through my ankle. "Ouch!" I cried out as my frustration boiled over. *This is the last thing I needed.* Limping, battling pain and relentless rain, my vision blurred with tears. *Suck it up, Em,* I encouraged myself, trying to push through the discomfort. *Just think of something else. Mind over matter.*

My imagination soared, conjuring up Storm Guardian, who met the challenge head-on, undaunted by the storm. Clad in her suit, Storm Guardian faced the raging storm, her resolve as unyielding as steel. The villain, Tempest Wrecker, a master of the elements, unleashed torrents and gales aiming to break her spirit. But with every lightning bolt and gust of wind, she stood firmer, fueling her powers by the very forces meant to deter her.

Storm Guardian harnessed the raging fury, redirecting it against Tempest Wrecker with precision and grace. Her every move became a testament to her strength and ingenuity. The city watched in awe as she battled the storm. Her figure, a beam of hope amidst the chaos, illustrated each ounce of courage.

As the final confrontation peaked, she channeled the storm's energy. Crafting it into a radiant spear of light that pierced through the darkness, she vanquished Tempest Wrecker. In the aftermath, as calm returned, her silhouette against the dawn's first light was a reminder of the power of resilience and courage.

Inspired by the superhero's tenacity, I mustered the strength to press on. Each painful step brought me closer to my goal, now within reach. *I made it.* The museum door closed behind me with a finality that echoed the day's trials. I stood drenched and limping. My clothes clung to my skin like I'd emerged from the depths of a tempest-tossed sea.

Upon glancing around, I saw that the museum's interior blended the old and the new. Polished wood floors carried



the sheen of history, while glass cases housed artifacts gleaming under soft lighting. Tranquility, the kind where every sound seemed to be an intrusion, prevailed.

With trembling hands, I approached someone who appeared to be an attendant. I reached out with urgency in my eyes, exhausting my last shred of hope. "Excuse me. I'm looking for Bea Garrett. Is she around?"

"Oh, she passed a while back."

With every step, pain shot through my ankle, but it was the weight of disappointment that felt most crippling. Hurting and soaking wet, I sat down with tears and rain-water mingling on my cheeks. *All this effort for nothing. I'm no closer to the answers I need than I was when I started.* With my fingers tracing the grain of the polished wooden bench, I paused while the dampness of my clothes seeped into the wood. Each droplet that fell from my hair to the floor seemed to echo the silent debate within—walk away or keep searching for the truth.

As I stood, resigned to leave, my distress caught the attention of an elderly woman. "My child," she said with a concerned and curious tone, "what in the world happened to you?"

"Your question should be what didn't happen." Each word came out heavier than the last, accompanied by a sigh and the subtle sag of my shoulders. As if the day's burdens had become too much to bear, "I've come all the way from Denver looking for answers, and I'll probably end up with pneumonia for my troubles."

"Maybe I can help."

With a single eye closed, "I doubt it. I came looking for Bea Garrett. The grapevine said she knew everything."

"The lady was a treasure trove, but your day just got a bit brighter. I taught Bea almost everything she knew. What are you looking for?" I dug to the bottom of my backpack before producing the hourglass and its enigmatic symbols. "May I?" she asked.

“Sure.” After handing it to the lady, she gave it a quick inspection, rubbing her thumb over the symbols and turning it to inspect the bottom. “Hmm ... Museum of Boulder.”

“Pardon?”

“These letters, MOB, Museum of Boulder. Not sure what to make of that, but I’ve seen these symbols. My, isn’t life strange? Come with me.” The woman introduced herself as Margaret and guided me to an inaccessible shelf. With the ease of familiarity, she climbed a ladder and retrieved a dusty tome. Bound in rustic leather and thread that resembled gold, the exact symbols of the hourglass adorned its cover. “Now, isn’t that a coincidence?”

My eyebrows raised slightly, and the corners of my mouth twitched into an intrigued half-smile. “That’s a lot of coincidence, Margaret.”

“Help yourself,” she said, gesturing.

As I brushed off the dusty treatise, the cover, worn yet resilient, bore the enigmatic etchings of six symbols. Each a mystery that invited unraveling: a heart, its lines simple yet profound in their implications; an open hand, lines traced deep like the paths of a life well-lived; a lion, its mane flowing like fire; an anchor, steady and unyielding; a pair of scales, balanced with a precision that spoke of careful judgment; and a mirror, its surface a promise of reflection and truth. Each symbol seemed to pulse with an energy, an invitation to delve deeper into their mysteries.

I flipped through the ancient pages until a drawing of the hourglass caught my eye. Feeling compelled, I traced its outline. The world blurred as a leap through space and time catapulted me into an unseen realm. In an instant, the surroundings morphed into a vast chamber, its ancient, vibrant air wrapping around my senses. A surreal blend of awe and disorientation tangled within me.

“Young lady,” spoke a voice.

I blinked, disoriented. “Where am I? Who are you?”

“I am the Caretaker, Emily.” Though I’d just met him, his voice resonated with a familiarity that reached deep into my soul.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *The Caretaker Encounter*

As my gaze swept across the chamber, I asked, “Caretaker of what?” as shadows danced along the walls, casting a spell of ancient whispers.

“Of time, Emily. A guardian of the crossroads where past, present, and future converge.” Amid the storm, his calm voice tethered me while dreamlike echoes bounced off the cavernous walls. As I stood, my heartbeat drummed in harmony with the chamber’s pulsing thrum. “Your composure surprises me,” he said, decoding my tranquility like an exposed manuscript.

“You shouldn’t be.” My response was immediate and almost reflexive. “My life revolves around dreaming up characters like you and places like this.”

Then, with great deliberation, he nodded. “Yes, I should have connected those dots. You are quite familiar with the fabric of stories and what they can unveil.” He looked at me with an inquiry that searched without overstepping. “Your journey, Emily, is both rare and purposeful. Time’s current has steered your path to this juncture.”

A deep sigh escaped me as I took in the chamber’s unyielding coldness, a chilling reminder of the strangeness surrounding me. “Do you always speak in riddles?”

With his voice lowered and his eyes mirroring the chamber's soft luminescence, he mused, "Ah ... you seek clarity in a world of shadows." His eyes gleamed like twin moons in the dim light. "But, Emily, life is woven from a spectrum of grays, each thread a story of its own."

His words wove around me like threads spun from an indescribable truth, binding me with an unseen intensity. "Please, Caretaker. Why am I here?"

"It was you," he said as a cryptic smile touched his lips. "It was you, child. I merely facilitated your presence."

Puzzlement creased my forehead. "Huh? Me? I didn't do anything."

"You did, more than you know." His voice, a blend of mystery and assurance, wrapped me in the wings of a phoenix, offering comfort yet leaving a trail of unanswered questions.

"Your appearance here is not by chance. It is a convergence of destinies."

The chamber's atmosphere was dense with unspoken history. Conjured as if from the chamber's breath, the Caretaker gestured the appearance of a stone chair. Take a seat, young Emily. A wealth of discussions awaits us. It is not often I get a visitor. And I promise, you are in no danger. Sit. Please. The coolness of the rock seeped through my clothes and grounded me further into the reality of his domain.

"I'm sitting. Happy?" My shoulders slumped ever so slightly. The burden of the hours mirrored the exhaustion woven into my tone as if each syllable carried the day's toll. "Now tell me what I did to be brought here."

"The Heartseer Codex, Emily."

"Excuse me?"

"The book. It has mystical powers. When you traced the hourglass, you awakened something ancient, something that recognized a kindred spirit in you."

"A kindred spirit?"

"Yes, the resonance of an old soul that brushed against the edges of time." His gaze settled on the amulet at his chest and then rose

to meet my eyes. “The Codex also sensed your strong connection to the past.”

“What kind of connection?”

“The symbol you wear.”

“My bracelet?”

“Without it, would you be here?”

“I suppose not. The picture. The hourglass. My grandmother. Everything seemed to connect.”

“Your grandmother. She, too, stood at this crossroads,” he said, gesturing towards the ground where ethereal footprints seemed to momentarily glow.

“Nana was here?”

“In that very chair, leaving behind echoes of her existence embedded in the fabric of time. She chose her path as you must choose yours.”

“Fabric of time. Choose my path. Enough metaphor and Shakespeare, Caretaker. English.”

“Life has many paths, Emily. Time is both constant and ever-shifting. What you perceive as the present is but a fleeting moment in the vast tapestry of existence.” I sighed. “Your journey here transcends the boundaries of time and space. Although here, you are actually nowhere and nowhen.”

The Caretaker’s realm, shrouded in eternal shadows beneath an arching gateway, stood at the merge of countless paths and lifetimes, ripe with untold narratives. There, I found myself on the brink of enlightenment, guided by an enigmatic figure whose riddles wove through truths as intricately as the chamber’s spiraled engravings.

“Even with my wild imagination, I could never come up with that story—nowhere and nowhen. I guess that makes you Father Time. You even look the part.”

“I must say, Emily, you are a bit of an enigma.”

“Moi? I’m not the one older than dirt here.”

That brought the slightest of smiles to his face. “Most who have found themselves where you sit are initially quite uncomfortable.

It speaks to the vastness of your imagination. It seems to have no limits. You remind me of your grandmother.”

“Is she the reason I’m here?” My question lingered between us, a plea for understanding.

“Not directly, Emily. Aside from the clues she left, this has little to do with her—perhaps with the exception that you are much like her.” The Caretaker’s voice was gentle, like the quiet whisper of the chamber. “You’re here because you carry a yearning to flee your reality, a longing so potent it echoes through time. That desire brought you here, coupled with tracing the hourglass.”

My heart skipped, then hammered against my chest as his words unraveled the tightly wound threads of my defenses. I so wanted—needed—to be anywhere but trapped in the confines of my own life. “I’ve never told anyone that.”

“The Heartseer tugged at your yearning. Your life is recorded in the annals of time. Why can’t you understand? Sound familiar? You yearn for your grandmother’s understanding, her hope chest, and the clues she left. Finally, the Heartseer. You found the hourglass inside. Instinctively, you traced it.”

“But why? You still haven’t answered that question.”

“But I have, young Emily. Your yearning to escape your existence. The question is why?”

“What’s it matter?”

“To determine if you are a worthy candidate.”

Tinted with confusion, “Candidate? For what?” I asked.

“To escape your existence, of course.” His gaze was probing. “The Heartseer knows the desires of your heart. I’m the arbiter of your motivation.”

“Escape? Why am I surprised? You’re Father Time, for witches’ sake.”

“We need to examine your life. May I?”

A hesitant nod was all I could muster. “It’s not pretty.”

Waving his hand, images flashed into existence and hovered like ghosts of my past. “This is you and your mother shortly after your birth.” Pointing at the hologram, “Tell me about her.”

At the sight of my mother, my hand reached out involuntarily, hovering as if to touch the smiling face of a woman I'd never known. The gesture, fleeting and laden with unspoken yearning, pulled me back to reality as the hologram's intangibility settled in.

"I never knew her. She died a few days after I was born from a postpartum hemorrhage." My voice was a mere whisper. "She met my dad in the Philippines, Subic, while he was stationed there. I hear it was common back then for Filipinas to finagle their escape from the islands with the help of a sailor."

"You have her beauty. See? You have her dark, flowing hair and chestnut eyes." I averted my gaze, and the Caretaker took notice. "What troubles you, Emily?"

"Beautiful isn't a word I would use for myself, not while sitting in the shadow of my sister."

"There is no hiding from the truth, young one. Not once it has been recorded."

"Dad lied. He told me there weren't any pictures of her."

"Perhaps he was unaware. You mentioned your sister. That would be Madison, your half-sister?"

"That's the one."

The Caretaker pulled an image from one of Madison's piano recitals. "Yet, you're about the same age."

"Dad had an affair with my stepmother while my birth mother was pregnant with me." I couldn't hide the bitterness that seeped into my words.

"And that bothers you." His inflection wasn't a question. Suddenly, the chair's discomfort and the stone's coldness beneath me intensified. I shifted, looking away from the Caretaker's piercing gaze.

"Let's find a happier memory." He swiped the air, and another scene materialized—a younger me in front of a birthday cake with three candles.

"That's my stepmother, Michelle, and Madison."

"But you call her Mom ..."

"I do. She's the only mom I've known." The Caretaker allowed our conversation to sit in stillness, waiting. "Fine. None of them



understand me—not like Nana. I’m the odd one out. I get it. Can’t hold that against them.”

“And your dad?”

“Working, I’m sure.”

“And that absence, it left a mark?” He was perceptive, unsettlingly so.

I swallowed while my hands gripped the arms of the chair. “Dad’s always working.” Images continued to cascade, each one a slice of my life.

The Caretaker’s voice softened. “This journey through time isn’t just about revisiting the light but understanding the shadows as well. They shape us, Emily.”

He swiped the air again. A hospital room emerged with a much younger me, sketchbook in hand, surrounded by colorful drawings that plastered the stark white walls. Nana sat beside me, filling the sterile air with stories of adventures and magic.

“That’s when it started,” I mumbled, almost forgetting he was there. “My stories. To escape ....” Nana’s unheard voice seemed to echo through the memory, her tales a balm to my confined spirit. She handed me crayons, each a key to a door away from the pain, fear, and endless waiting.

“And your parents?”

“Work ... always work. But Nana ... she understood. She was there.” My voice cracked, betraying the fortress I built around those years.

“In her absence, the stories grew, didn’t they? Became your sanctuary.”

I nodded, unable to speak, watching as my younger self, weakened, smiled at Nana’s whispered promises of faraway lands.

“The leukemia,” he continued, “it was a crucible, wasn’t it? Transforming fear into imagination, loneliness into worlds teeming with life.”

My arms wrapped around me, shielding me against the flood of memories his words unleashed. Unbidden tears welled up. “I don’t want to be that girl anymore—the one who’s scared, who needs ...” My voice trailed off, lost in the depths of the memory.

“But she’s part of you, Emily. Your resilience and creativity were forged in that crucible. Your grandmother saw it and nurtured it. And now, they’re your gift to the world. Your art and stories are not just escapism. They’re your strength.”

Closing my eyes, I let the scenes dissolve, taking a shaky breath. When I opened them again, the hospital room was gone, replaced by the comfort of the surrounding shadows.

“Understanding our past,” the Caretaker said, “helps us navigate the present and shape the future. Your journey, Emily, is only beginning.”

Again, the Caretaker waved his hands, bringing another image to life. “Here I am, no older than eight, presenting Mom with a drawing.”

“A knight and a maiden. Your talent was emerging even then. But your expression, you’re not pleased.”

“Mom’s attention was, is always commanded by Madison.”

“And this?” He gestured to a picture of me on a bike. “Your father?” I sighed, the pattern all too familiar. “Working, I’m sure.”

The Caretaker’s eyes never left mine, even as the holograms transitioned around us. “These moments, they’ve shaped you, Emily. The resentment, the feeling of being overshadowed—”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“But it does.” His voice was firm. “Every emotion, every experience, they’re the tiles that expose the mosaic of who you are and ... who you might become.”

The chamber suddenly felt smaller as the vastness contracted around the raw truths of my life. Here, under the Caretaker’s watchful eye, my story unfolded.

“You mentioned escape. What did you mean?”

“Ah, yes.” With a dramatic sweep of his arm, “Into the past. Whenever you like. Wherever you like. A chance to start anew. No shadows. No parents. No teachers.”

“Sounds enticing.”

Then, as quick as a dragon’s sigh, the Caretaker’s face was enshrouded with shadows of austerity. “There is one aspect you must understand. Crossing through the portal carries a condition.

Something you might call ‘the fine print.’ Returning to your current reality is only possible if you desire it with the same intensity as when you escaped. The Heartseer shall sense the shift in your desire if such an awakening occurs.”

My breath caught. *Holy Spock! A one-way ticket.* “If I decide to go, what can I take?”

“Only what you’re wearing and a small bag or backpack. It won’t be easy. You’ll have nothing.”

“Not true, Caretaker. I’ll have the freedom to be me without judgment. Can I think about it?”

“Of course,” the Caretaker replied with a nod. “Take all the time you need. And as you do, ponder the real reason for your desire to escape. Is it merely a habit, a pattern you’ve always followed?”

“That’s what my family would say.” My admission was quiet, almost lost in the chamber’s vastness.

“Perhaps there’s another reason, one you haven’t yet acknowledged. Be truthful with yourself, Emily.”

“I always am.” But even as I said it, doubts sprung from my heart. “What happens now?”

“I’ll return you to the moment you left. It will be as if you never departed. Ask to borrow the Codex. The Heartseer will see to it.”

I nodded, and in an instant, I was back at the museum, standing before Margaret. The transition was seamless, yet the significance of the experience lingered. Each heartbeat pulsed a degree of uncertainty, echoing in the museum’s silence.

Pulling me back to reality, “Find anything useful?”

“Maybe,” I replied, my mind still reeling. “Can I borrow this book?”

“Of course, dear. It’s been gathering dust for years.” *That was easy.*

Steadying my voice, I called my dad, but my mind was a swirl of thoughts. “Dad, can you pick me up? I twisted my ankle, and I’m soaked.”

Hanging up the phone, I clutched the book to my chest. Its cover, laden with symbols, served as a bleak reminder of the

choice before me. The Caretaker's words echoed in my mind and challenged me to confront the truths I'd always avoided. As I waited for my dad, the world outside transitioned, marking a threshold between places and choices—the familiar path I tread and the new one I could only dare explore.

At that moment, my decision could not have been more significant. Standing in the museum's quiet, I realized the journey would always start within me, no matter when or where I went.

## CHAPTER FIVE

# *Reality's Shadow*

“**K**nock, knock. Can I come in?”

Looking up, “Sure, Dad.”

Actually, he didn’t bother entering, just his head. “Your counselor called again. We have a sit-down after school tomorrow. Be there.”

The enchantment of my fantastical world faded as reality’s shadow crept in. Whispers of the impending disaster at my counselor’s office haunted my dreams. Then dawn turned to afternoon. While standing outside Mr. Jamison’s door, tension coiled within me like a serpent, winding tighter with every passing moment. With a deep breath, I pushed the door open.

The room’s beige walls and gray carpet seemed to mute the world. Mr. Jamison, lost in his old computer, finally looked up, meeting my gaze over his glasses.

Gesturing to the cloth chairs facing him, “Come in, Emily. Have a seat.” Perched on the edge with my back rigid, I eyed the empty chair beside me. Dad rushed in five minutes later, flushed and panting. “Sorry, I’m late.”

Mr. Jamison’s hands rested atop a folder. “No problem, Mr. Reynolds,” he said with a tight smile.

*Then why do you look so annoyed?*

“I was about to discuss some serious concerns that several of Emily’s teachers have raised.” He rambled on, describing my daydreaming habits and questioning whether I was really present during class. Then, he brought up my slipping grades and missing assignments. “Given these issues, we should consider academic detention.”

I clinched the arm of my chair as my cheeks burned. “That’s not fair! Thinking differently isn’t a crime.”

Mr. Jamison’s eyebrows rose at my outburst. “I understand your feelings, Emily.” After pushing his glasses higher on his nose, he continued. “But we need to balance your imagination with your responsibilities.”

My lips parted to counter, but Dad’s hand on my shoulder silenced my protest. As a storm brewed within, Mr. Jamison’s words suggesting paths less severe sparked a glimmer of hope for the likely landscape of my fate. As he blabbered on, my eyes drifted to the window. There, daydreams of daring rescues and mythical heroes offered a silent refuge.

“But I don’t think these other options provide the same opportunity for Emily to focus.”

Dad nodded—my fate was sealed.

The car pulled out of the parking lot and onto the familiar streets of our neighborhood. Meanwhile, the tension between us lingered, heavy and unchallenged, as if it were a thick fog that neither dared to dispel. After a moment, Dad broke the silence. “Emily, we need to talk about this. It’s not just school. Withdrawing into your world is also an issue at home.” Although his voice grew softer, I couldn’t dismiss the hint of unease.

“Everyone seems to think I can turn this off. I can’t.” My palms began to sweat as I groped for words. “Besides, my world is way more interesting. What you call reality ... it’s boring.”

Dad reached out and placed a hand on my knee. “Accepting that is difficult because you hardly give this reality a chance.”

His words were valid, but they faded into insignificance. They were like whispers against the fortress of my imagination. “I

know you love your drawings and stories, but life ... real life is passing you by."

"Even if I could turn my imagination off, my world is where I'm happiest. Why can't you see that?"

Dad sighed, his expression a mix of concern and frustration. "Happy for the moment, perhaps, but you can't learn from life with your head in the clouds. Hopefully, you'll understand one day."

As our neighborhood blurred past, Dad's lingering words ignited silent questions. Meanwhile, my fingers encountered the photo of my birth mother tucked in my pocket—a woman I never knew—a secret kept and a truth untold.

Breaking the tension, "Dad? You told me there were no pictures of my birth mother."

He glanced at me briefly, confusion then realization crossed his face. "Sounds right."

"In Nana's hope chest, I found this." I pulled out the photo, its edges creased from my tight grip. "Isn't this her? Teresita Rodriguez?"

He sighed a deep, weary sound. "Yes, it's her." His hands tightened around the steering wheel as his eyes fixed on the road ahead.

"Why would you lie about something like this? About not having a picture of her?" The words tumbled out. Each was laced with a mix of anger and hurt.

"It wasn't a lie, Em." His voice was soft and regretful. "I truly believed there weren't any. Your grandmother must have taken that. I was deployed. I ... I'm sorry you found out this way."

As we pulled into the driveway, I sensed the conversation was far from over. Despite our efforts to ignore it, the stinging tension between us lingered. With his words remaining with me, I found myself confronted with a tough decision.

The following day, the bell's grating chime greeted another dreaded day. English established the beginning of my monotonous daily schedule. "Emily, come here, please," said Mrs.

Gonzales. I turned and detected her eyes narrowing behind her spectacles. “I asked for a written analysis, not art.”

“No, ma’am. You asked for an analysis. This is my analysis,” I said as my fists tightened. “Why does it have to be in words, anyway?”

Her lips pressed into a thin line. “This is an English class, Emily. Written should be understood. While creativity is encouraged, it must align with the scope of this class. I expect a traditional, written analysis by tomorrow. Any later, your grade will suffer.

My heart pounded as frustration and disbelief swirled within me. “So, my perspective is only valid if wrapped in prose? That’s crazy!”

As the classroom’s atmosphere tensed, Mrs. Gonzales rose. Her chair scraped the floor like a sword drawn from its sheath. “Respect is non-negotiable, Emily. Discuss your grievances with the vice principal.”

Trembling and head held high, I gathered my artwork and marched out of the room. The air in Vice Principal Larkin’s office was thick with judgment as he sat behind his massive mahogany desk.

“Emily, you have little choice here. I see that you’re already on academic detention.” Mr. Larkin took a deep breath. “Apologize to Mrs. Gonzales and redo the assignment as requested, or I’ll be forced to suspend you.”

“I completed the assignment,” I said, clutching my art tighter. “Not with words but she never specified words. My art speaks for me. Isn’t finding our voice what school should encourage?”

“It’s an English class, Emily.” My adversary leaned back in his chair, considering me with a wrinkled brow. “I understand you want to express yourself, but school is also about learning to work within certain frameworks.”

With each step away from his office, my legs grew heavier, shackled by my impending choices. *This is so not fair.* As soon as my foot crossed into the hallway, the bell for next period rang. Hushed tones fluttered around me like a swarm of judgmental whispers.



Heads turned my way. Their eyes trailed me, and every silent judgment pierced my skin. *There she goes, the girl who talks to dragons more than people.*

Their gazes intensified as I made my way through the crowd of smirks and whispers. I could almost hear my footsteps echo louder with each stride, a drumbeat to the rhythm of hushed murmurs. My fingers tightened around the edges of my sketchbook. Its corners dug into my palms with a slight pain that kept me anchored against the tide of their faint buzz. I was used to being the odd one out, but today, it felt like the entire school had tuned into my frequency of weirdness.

While nearing my locker, I spotted my sister. She stood there with her usual entourage, like a queen holding court. Her gaze locked onto mine with a teasing curl at the corner of her lips. *Here it comes.*

“Heard you’re becoming quite the celebrity with the teachers, Emily.” Her voice surmounted the banging locker doors and the hum of gossip filling the hallway. “A fantasy artist in English class, huh?”

I took a few steps away, the urge to flee rising with each movement. My hands tightened around my sketchbook. It was my only refuge in a sea of mounting swells. Then, I stopped. My breath caught, and a sudden surge of resolve rooted me in place. With purpose, I turned back, facing Madison. My grip on the sketchbook shifted from a hold of retreat to one of determination.

“What do you care, Madison?” My voice quivered. “As if you’ve taken the time to understand anything beyond your popularity.” The hallway fell silent. Even Madison’s minions seemed to hold their breath, waiting for her response. Madison closed the distance as her eyes narrowed. “At least I live in the real world, Emily. Not in some childish fantasy.”

A tightness gripped my chest, and my hands trembled as the hallway murmurs closed in. Around us, the crowd seemed to grow, and students lingered to catch the latest drama.

“Right, real world,” I shot back. “Where appearances and cliques are everything. I don’t need that. I don’t need any of you.”

Madison tossed her hair. “Keep telling yourself that, Em. But one day, you’ll realize that dragons and fairy tales won’t get you friends or a life.”

I bit my lip. My gaze remained steady and defiant while I struggled to control my emotions. Madison’s taunting words lingered as did her confident smirk. “Maybe, but I’d choose my dragons and fairy tales over losing myself in the pretense of fitting in. At least they’re honest about what they are.”

My words seemed to strike a chord. Her smile faltered and eyes widened just a fraction. The casual tilt of her head straightened as if jolted by my defiance. For a split second, the queen bee persona slipped, revealing an inkling of surprise. Then she shrugged, “Whatever, Emily. Stay in your little dream world. See if I care.”

Their laughter receded down the hallway while mingling with the echoes of my racing heart. Despite the odd sense of triumph bubbling inside, the aftertaste of the encounter was bittersweet. I’d stood up for myself, a small victory. Yet a shadow of doubt lurked. *Was that worth it?*

As classes melted into the background, detention awaited me. Vice Principal Larkin’s ‘options’ weighed heavy like a dragon’s shadow over a moonlit path. The words of Polonius mocked in my thoughts, “To thine own self be true ...” *What a pile of crap. Not in the halls of this school. OK, I can do this. Just stay true.*

Unveiling Sin and Redemption: An Analysis of *The Scarlet Letter*

*The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne explores themes of sin, guilt, and redemption. Within a Puritan society, the poignant story of Hester Prynne ...

*There, another assignment done their way. Possibly, Hester Prynne and I aren’t so different after all—misunderstood and marked by society.*

Later, in the sanctuary of my bedroom, I added the finishing touches to my latest superhero sketch. With a few bold strokes of my pencil, I brought the character to life, battling a ferocious dragon amidst a burning cityscape. Just as he was about to unleash his power, a rap at my door startled me out of my muse. “Dinner.”

Sighing, my hand lingered on the page before setting aside my pencil. "Coming." *You, my friends, will have to wait.* As I pushed back from the desk, my eyes glimpsed the comic-con flyer pinned above it. *I can always hope.*

The tension around the dinner table swirled like a storm trapped in a wizard's orb. Dad picked at his food, avoiding eye contact. Mom sat ramrod-straight with her critical gaze darting between Madison and me. And across the table, Madison stabbed at her plate with annoyance painted across her perfectly made-up face.

The shrill ring of Dad's cell phone cut through the silence. He answered, his expression serious before it clouded over. "Yes, I understand. Thank you for letting me know." He was about to slam it down before he stopped himself. "That was your counselor. He said you were drawing again."

I sat back and crossed my arms. "It was just a little doodling. It helps me think."

"Doodling, too?" said Madison. "You had a banner day, didn't ya, Em? Maybe if you spent less time on those childish drawings, your grades might improve."

Dad lifted his eyes from his plate. "Banner day?"

"She cussed out her English teacher and ended up in the VP's office." Madison offered a smile with the corners of her mouth turned upwards, her eyebrows raised, and her eyes holding a gleam of superiority.

"I didn't cuss."

Madison rolled her eyes. "Not according to the grapevine."

"Shut up. You weren't there." My hands clenched into fists under the table.

Dad slammed his hand down. *Easy, you'll give yourself a coronary.* "This has to stop, Emily. If you can't show some responsibility, I'll have to take your art supplies." His eyes bored into mine. "We have a family BBQ coming up. You're participating. There'll be no hiding out in your room."

I wanted to argue more, but his stern expression left no room for debate. Through gritted teeth, "Fine, I'll go to your stupid

BBQ.” *But you can’t make me leave my world behind. You’re not the thought police.*

Around the table, the clinking of silverware and passing of dishes filled the air. Then, like a phoenix’s squeal, Mom’s voice pierced the quiet with sudden enthusiasm. “I have an idea! Why don’t we turn the family BBQ into a block party this year?”

Trouncing on the idea, “Ooh, fun!” said Madison. “I’ll invite some friends.”

Dad pulled back his chin at first but then nodded. “I suppose we could make that work.”

My appetite vanished with Dad’s yielding words. *Thanks, Dad. The BBQ was punishment enough, but this is a full-blown nightmare. Endless small talk and a sea of strangers. Hydra’s heads.*

The urge to protest screamed within me, but I swallowed my words. Even Dad couldn’t resist Mom and Madison’s excitement. My fate was sealed: endure this party or die trying. With escape routes closed, I stared at my plate as a silent surrender to my inner sanctum crumbling.

## CHAPTER SIX

# *Life Isn't Fair*

**D**uring kitchen cleanup, my thoughts centered on the comic-con flyer above my desk. *Surely, he'll say no. Won't he? But then ... he might surprise me. I should just suck it up. He agreed to the block party. Maybe he's in an agreeing mood.*

I hovered in the doorway of Dad's home office while fidgeting with the hem of my oversized hoodie. "Hey, Dad ... there's this comic convention coming to town. I've been dying to attend. Could you, maybe, lend me some money?"

Removing his reading glasses, he swiveled his chair to face me. With a raised eyebrow, "A comic convention?"

I nodded with multiple bounces of my head. "Yeah, it will have artists, writers, costume contests ... everything. I'd be around people who love the same stuff I do."

Dad leaned back in his chair with his hands clasped behind his head. "Hmm, Em, considering your current grades, I'm not convinced it's the best idea."

"I am trying, Dad, really. I attended that counselor meeting, went to every detention session, and even redid my English assignment. Mrs. Gonzales said it was the best she'd seen. Plus, I'm on board with the BBQ. Please?"

"I have to admit. Those are some pretty good points."

Yes! “This could inspire my art, and I’d meet some of my favorite creators.” I fished the crumpled flyer out of my pocket. “See, Neal Adams is going to be there. He draws some of the best Batman comics.”

Dad took the flyer and scanned it before setting it aside. “But, Em, as much as I understand, those conventions won’t pave your way into the real world. School should be your focus.”

I felt my hopes sinking. “But Dad ...”

He held up a hand. “OK, I’ll loan you the money but in exchange for showing some responsibility. You’ll need to help with the BBQ as part of the deal.”

“What kind of help?”

“I’m sure there are lots of places where you can contribute. We’ll figure it out.”

“It sounds like a blank check.”

Dad looked up at the ceiling. “Sort of.”

*Sort of? What’s that mean?*

“One more condition—you find a job. It’s only a loan.”

*Banana peels.* “A job?”

“You heard me. Deal?”

“You don’t leave me with many choices. Deal.” *There’s always renegotiating.*

Dad nodded, satisfied, and returned to his computer. Lingering in the doorway, I felt a whirl of excitement and a twinge of apprehension. *What have I just committed to?*

I’d just reached my bedroom door when the living room echoed with the sharp claps of Mom’s hands. She summoned us like a sorceress conjuring spirits from the ether. Her voice brimmed with vigor and left no room for doubt. “OK, team, this block party won’t plan itself. All hands on deck.”

*Wizards!* Mom’s summons felt like an anchor dragging across the shores of my creativity. After making my way to the living room, I took up with my favorite chair. While Mom went on about this and that, half of my attention was directed to my sketchbook.

“Emily, you’re on decorations and seating duty. Oh, and your flair would be perfect for signs and flyers,” she said with the efficiency of a seasoned general.

Diverting my attention from half-drawn heroes, “Seating duty? As in arranging chairs? For what exactly?”

“Madison’s piano recital.”

With Mom’s announcement, Madison’s eyes widened like two full moons in a starless sky. “What a great idea, Mom.”

*Piano recital ... if that isn’t just like them.* Despite the weight of dread settling in my chest, I managed to utter, “Uh, sure, I guess ...” Open confrontation with Mom was as futile as resisting a Borg drone.

From the corner, Madison’s voice carved through the growing list of ideas. “How about a dunk tank? Or a pie-throwing stand? Ooh, ooh! I got it. We could set up a karaoke corner.”

“Could we maybe add a fantasy art booth?”

“This isn’t one of your comic book conventions, Emily.” With my lip between my teeth, I tightened the grip on my pencil.

As Mom doled out tasks, enthusiasm and anxiety passed through the room like conflicting currents. That is, until she reached the last. “And we need someone to look after the little ones. Emily, that’ll be you.”

My head popped up, and I gasped. “Babysit? Those little rug rats? Absolutely not. I retired from Simon Says years ago.” Images of chaos churned in my head. I could already hear the screams, the ceaseless questions, the sticky hands ...

Dad leaned forward with a half-smile.

*What’s that about?*

“Em, do you recall that blank check you signed?”

“But, but Dad ...” My protest died in my throat.

“I’m all ears.”

Beneath my breath, “So unfair.”

“I heard that, Em. Life isn’t fair, but you can do this. It’s just for one day.”

I sank deeper into my chair with the taste of bitter defeat on my tongue. “Fine, I guess. I’m in. But this doesn’t mean I’m happy about it.”

As the room emptied and silence fell, my vibrant inner world dimmed. *Life isn’t fair ... Dead straight, Dad! Why do you think I try avoiding it?* The thought lingered as I closed my sketchbook, and my vibrant inner world suddenly seemed galaxies away.

Two weeks had passed since our family meeting, and we were within a touch of a wizard’s wand of crunch time. The household was in a frenzy, with Mom and Madison fretting over every detail. Meanwhile, I was deeply engrossed in hunting for job opportunities. Atop my bed, the Help Wanted section lay sprawled before me, splattered with a mix of no-gos and dead ends.

“Emily ...”

*Nothing for storytellers. How about cartoonists?*

“Emily, I need you to pick up some things for the party.” Mom extended her arm with a list dangling from her hand.

“Huh? What, what’s that?”

“A list. The store ...”

I looked up at the ceiling and took a deep breath. “But, Mom, I have job hunting planned.”

Mom pulled in her chin. “Job hunting? You?”

“Yes, me. Dad didn’t fill you in? Do you guys ever talk?”

She shrugged. “You know your dad.”

A sigh oozed from my lungs as I took the list. “Well, he and I made a deal. I have to do this.”

“And now, this too,” Mom said, unfazed. “Some of these things are for the pies you’re baking tomorrow. Here’s my card.”

“Pies? That wasn’t part of the plan ...” I said as she turned to leave.

In haste, I showered while the water droplets echoed the ticking clock in my head. Dressed and with the list in hand, the echo of responsibility chased me down the driveway. As I drove, the overwhelming thoughts of job applications and party preparations consumed my mind. *Why did everything fall on me?*



The supermarket swarmed with frantic shoppers. As I navigated the aisles, the squeaky wheels of shopping carts and the fluorescent lights buzzing overhead added to my growing anxiety. But anxiety turned into dread when I attempted to check out.

“ID, please.”

“ID? What?” *You’ve never asked before. What gives?* “Here.”

“I can’t take this card. It’s not in your name.”

A mix of embarrassment and panic churned within. “Could you call”—my voice caught in my throat—“your manager, please? There’s been a misunderstanding.” The clerk sighed but obliged. Minutes ticked by until a man approached with a weary but attentive expression.

“Your clerk won’t take my card.”

“I told her it’s store policy,” said the cashier.

The manager’s eyes met mine. “I’m sorry. New rule.”

I leaned in. “Call the number on the back of the card. They’ll tell you I’m authorized. I suggest you don’t make me call my dad. He’d love to chew your ass over such a stupid policy. Your choice. Make his day or authorize this clerk to take it.”

After a brief pause and silent power struggle, the manager signaled the cashier. “Go ahead.”

Gratitude immersed me as I finally exited the store with the party supplies in tow. Mom’s card had worked, but the ordeal left me questioning if the real world was always this persnickety. My sketchbook, with its unfinished worlds, seemed like a distant, tranquil island now.

The following morning, with sunlight striking the kitchen, I stood among the scattered apple pie ingredients. As I set out to conquer my culinary task, the kitchen countertops transformed into the front lines of an impending battle. Each appliance and utensil poised itself as an ally or adversary in the upcoming skirmish. Beginning with determination, I measured, peeled, and sliced. Each successful step restored a little confidence until the shortage of butter echoed the sudden emptiness of my resolve. *Dragon scales! How could you miss the butter, Mother?*

With no other choice, I grabbed my keys for a quick store run. In the lot, preoccupied with thoughts of golden crusts, the crunch of bending metal jolted me back to reality. *What next?* Examining the fender, “Seriously?”

The other driver, a woman in a cherry-red coat, rushed over. “I am so, so sorry. I was in reverse and—”

“It’s alright.” I exhaled. *I bet Aquaman never had days like this.* “Just ... one of those days, you know?” We exchanged information and, with a mutual sigh, parted ways. I could already feel the day slipping through my fingers.

Back in the kitchen, the adrenaline from the accident morphed into a persistent throb of anxiety as I faced the pie dough again. I reclaimed control ingredient by ingredient until salt masqueraded as sugar.

As I glared at the gritty dough, the butter, now sitting on the counter, seemed to smirk at my plight. *Take that.* Sticking my tongue out at it did nothing to cure my predicament, but I found some solace in my minor act of contempt. With a quick pep talk, *come on, Em, focus.* I tossed out the dough and started anew. Each careful measure symbolized a small act of revenge against the day’s chaos. The kitchen rhythm was solitary but soothing, moving alone in a dance with the flour, sugar, and spices.

As the scent of apples and cinnamon rose from the oven, I couldn’t help but smile, weary but victorious. Basking in the quiet triumph, I took a moment for myself, retreating to the sanctuary of my room where my sketches awaited. It was there, deep into sketching an epic clash of heroes and villains, that a scream pierced the air, yanking me back to reality.

Tossing my pencil aside, I sprinted from my room to the source. Madison, standing with tears carving paths down her face, cradled her finger while blood dripped crimson against the white tiles.

“Madison! What happened?”

“I was slicing onions, and ...” Her words dissolved into sobs.

I snatched a paper towel and squeezed it against her wound. “Hold this. It’ll help.”

Moments later, she risked a glance at her finger, throbbing with each beat of her heart. In a whisper, “I think I need stitches.”

Surrounded by the clinic’s sterile walls, Madison sat on the edge of an exam table with her hand aloft like a trophy. “I can’t believe this. My piano recital ... it was supposed to be the centerpiece tomorrow.” Lost in doodling the somber faces around us, “Emily! Are you even paying attention?” Mad’s plea snapped me back to the moment.

“I heard you. Centerpiece.”

Dad’s arrival brought a measured smile to Madison’s face. “I need stitches.”

With an expanding chest, “Then I guess we’ll need a new highlight for the block party.” Dad’s expression brightened as I was about to retreat to my sketchbook. “Emily, what about showing off your artwork? Your graphic novel sketches?”

Rolling back my head, “But the party’s tomorrow. There’s no time ...”

Dad lifted his chin and then lowered his eyes to mine. “You’ve got a treasure trove of illustrations already. Just pick your favorites.”

Thick with sarcasm, “‘This isn’t a comic convention.’ Ring any bells, Dad?”

He waved his hand. “Perhaps she shouldn’t have been so ... dismissive about your idea, but we have an agreement, remember?”

The unspoken obligation hung between us. “OK, I’ll ... I’ll see what I can do.”

“I knew you could step up.”

When faced with public scrutiny, I decided that if my art were on display, it would be on my terms—undiluted and unabashedly fantastical.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# *The Block Party*

The morning light spilled across the kitchen, painting the chaos of the block party preparations in a soft, forgiving glow. Meanwhile, batter sizzled as it met the hot pan, filling the kitchen with the comforting aroma of cooking pancakes. Clad in an apron, I flipped each with an enthusiasm even lower than for Ms. Bronson's biology class.

My fingers worked from muscle memory, leaving my mind free to wander. I couldn't shake the images from my sketchbook. Its pages brimmed with unspoken words and worlds that only I seemed to understand. Then, a clatter at the door jolted me back to reality. Unexpected as a dragon landing in the backyard stood Uncle Harry.

In a voice worthy of an army general, "Good mornin', Emmy!" *It's Emily.* Forcing a smile, I tried to hide the tension that knotted my stomach.

"Uncle Harry. It's been a while."

He grinned, revealing a mosaic of coffee-stained teeth. "Still doodling those superheroes of yours?"

Gripping the spatula tighter against my palm, "They're not doodles," I said. "They're stories—art."

Harry's laugh grated against the morning still. "Stories, huh? Next, you'll be saying they're masterpieces."

Mom's voice broke the tension. "Why don't you show him, Em? Your work is ... fascinating."

*Is that fascinating good or fascinating bad? You've always mocked my art.* "Maybe later."

The room felt smaller, and the air was thick with unspoken judgment. With my attention fixed on Harry's mocking gaze, I flipped too hard, and a pancake soared, landing with a soft plop. As I watched it teeter on the edge of the pan, heat crawled up my neck as I listened to suppressed giggles and muted whispers. At that moment, I longed to vanish into my sketchbook's pages where embarrassment didn't exist.

With a flip of my wrist, I salvaged the pancake and set it on the growing stack. Avoiding Harry's eyes, I focused instead on the tangible task at hand. In a morning that had spiraled into chaos with the turn of a doorknob, each flip became a moment of control.

As I placed the final pancake onto the stack, I steeled myself for the real challenge of the day: staying true to my identity as I navigated through it.

Later that morning, the sun hung high with its rays filtering through the leaves, casting dappled shadows on the lawn. With my sketchbook shielding against the swell of guests, I hovered at the edge of the party. The laughter and chatter swirled around me like a merry storm I longed to escape.

My pencil hovered over the page, poised to dive back into my safe haven, when a raucous burst of laughter erupted from the patio. Surrounded by amused onlookers, Uncle Harry's lively behavior stood out against my calmness.

Taking in my latest creation, the lines I drew were bolder now, knowing no judgment, only freedom. And the scenes I'd shaped bore a trace of the world surrounding me. *Perhaps a little of that reality won't hurt.*

Sharp and jarring, a child's cry cut through the merriment. As I looked beyond a group of chattering neighbors, I spotted a young

boy who couldn't have been more than five years old. His tiny body trembled with weeping beside an isolated patch of blooms.

Setting my sketchbook aside, I walked over to him. "Hey, are you lost?" I crouched down to meet him at eye level.

He nodded, tears streaming down his face. "I can't find my mom."

"OK, what's your name?"

"Timmy," he said, followed by a hiccup.

"Alright, Timmy. I'll help you find her," I said, offering him my hand. With a small but firm grip, he took hold.

As we wove through the crowd, Timmy's sniffles punctuated the party's lively whirr. Sharp as thorns, snippets of conversation caught my ear. "There goes Emily, the artist. Always lost in another world."

And another, "Nothing like her sister." Each word cut small, but Timmy's reliance grounded me amidst the swirling judgments. In time, we found his mother near the buffet table. Her relief was evident as she hugged him with a tight embrace. Thank you, she mouthed.

A small smile escaped as I slipped back to my nook, feeling a rare flicker of pride. Timmy's trust had offered a silent elixir against the day's pricks. The once-piercing whispers dissolved into the background by a boy's simple need. It seemed the world held nuances I'd yet to pencil into my sketches.

The party's laughter and music seeped into my drawings as I guided my pencil into vibrant life. Then, while etching a smile into my character, Dad appeared beside me with his mouth twisted in a half-smile. "Em, you're on the sidelines again."

I looked up, offering a shrug. "I reunited a kid with his mom. That's something, right?"

He rubbed his neck with a weary sigh. "It's time to face your exhibit, not hide from it."

My eyes darted to my showcased art, where Madison and her crew were stirring up trouble. "Too loud, too much, and I saw vodka in the mix."

Dad's gaze shifted across the yard before he finally spoke. "I can't control what everyone brings into this party. But you, Em, need to be out there with or without the chaos." Each step became heavier as I made my way to my art display, feeling overwhelmed by the growing laughter and voices. With only my sketchbook as a shield, it felt like walking into a lion's den.

As the afternoon progressed, the party's atmosphere unraveled, spiraling into unchecked wildness. Madison had orchestrated her latest stunt at the heart of the chaos—a wet T-shirt contest.

*You've got to be kidding, Madison. You're elevating juvenile to an art form.*

Soaked to the skin, Madison sauntered over with her T-shirt plastered to her chest, leaving little to the imagination. She was all grins and booze-fueled bravado. Grabbing my arm with a slosly tug, she slurred, "Come on, Emily, be our, our judge."

I recoiled. "No, Mad. This is so wrong."

"Ev ... ever the fair maiden, Em. Loosen up."

"Madison, you're wasted." *What to do ...?* A few guests, with unmistakable discomfort in their tight smiles, shook their heads as they excused themselves. Others, caught in the spectacle, cheered on, oblivious or indifferent to the awkwardness they caused. "This stunt of yours is enough to give the older guests a coronary."

"Check out those knockers, guys," I heard from the crowd.

*Enough.* "Mad, you and your friends need to dial it back. This isn't appropriate."

Madison made a grab for my shirt, almost falling to the ground. Righting herself, she swept an arm across the yard with theatrical flair. "This, Emily, is life—real life. Time to ditch the prude routine and have a little f-un."

Mom must have noticed our disagreement. With a wineglass in hand, she tottered over with determination in her unsteady steps. Squinting, she asked, "Are you two arguing?"

I gestured toward Mad's figure-hugging bodywear. "Look at her, Mom. No one wants to see that."

Mom, with a tipsy giggle, leaned in closer. Her words weaved through the air. “I think they’re kind of c-cute when they poke out and sort of say hel, hello to ya. Looks like fun.” She then raised her glass of wine above her head in a toast to the absurd. With a slight sway, “Hose me down, Mad.”

Madison laughed as her eyes sparked with mischief. “Em will do it, Mom. She’s our, our judge. Aren’t you, Em?” nudging me with her elbow.

I leaned forward, standing rigid with my arms tense at my sides. “No! Get that through your thick, inebriated skull.” Amid the festive chaos, my voice resounded with a sharp and unmistakable refusal.

Madison, rolling her eyes, “Kill ... killjoy.” Then, turning the hose on Mom, she sprayed her from head to toe. Blood flooded my cheeks when she added Mom’s well-endowed chest to the cuteness squad. As the water cascaded down, her laughter joined the chorus of the party’s revelry.

At that moment, Uncle Harry wandered up, impeccable in his poor timing. “Nice hooters, sis, though not as perky as they used to be.” He chuckled, then turned to me with a smirk. “So, Emmy, why hasn’t my favorite mutt joined the fun?”

Despite the debauchery, I rejected his slur with a hint of elegance. “Perhaps because this ‘mutt’ prefers quests of valor over jests of folly.” Standing taller, my icy gaze met his.

Dad, absorbed in neighborhood small talk, remained oblivious to the escalating scene behind him. I attempted to pull him aside, but he brushed me off, urging me to relax and enjoy the party. Unable to bear it any longer, I grabbed his arm and hissed. “Dad, you need to see this.”

Following my gaze, his eyes widened as they took in the chaos and then froze in shock. With more urgency, I hissed again. “Dad, squash this now before Mom does something truly stupid.” Yet, he stood paralyzed by the situation. Panic clearly showed in his eyes. Feeling a surge of responsibility, I took a deep breath and stepped forward. In a loud, clear voice, I addressed the group.



“This needs to stop. This is a family party, and you’re all acting like children.”

Madison glared, yet a glimmer of shame showed in her eyes. Mom, too drunk to realize the gravity of the situation, laughed and headed for the liquor table. After filling her glass, she threw back the merlot like an elixir from a mystic’s cauldron. Now, with a flushed face, her giggling grew louder and more erratic. As she made her way through the crowd, interrupting conversations to repeat the same stories, I saw guests exchange uneasy glances.

As the situation deteriorated, I stepped forward and touched her arm. “Hey, Mom, why don’t we get you some water? Maybe you could use a little rest inside.” She tossed a wet T-shirt at me, nearly toppling a cheese platter as she lost her balance. “Oh, Emily, stop being such, such a buzzkill!”

I bit my lip as anxiety gnawed at my gut. Heads shook, and whispers were shared. *This incident is gonna fuel gossip circles for weeks.* Martin and Sue, family friends up the street, gave me pitying looks. As Mom drew more and more attention, I felt powerless to stop the impending car wreck.

Cutting off a neighbor’s toast, Mom seized the microphone for an impromptu karaoke session. She attempted a sloppy rendition of “Danke Schoen,” screeching into the mic. I wanted to disappear as guests recoiled and covered their ears. All the while, my face burned as if a hot iron had seared it.

Mom added little dance moves that soon proved to be a mistake. On a clumsy pirouette, she lost her balance and spilled merlot down the front of Great Aunt Mae. The crowd gasped. And just as I resolved to abstain from further involvement, Dad stepped in. “Alright, I think it’s time you called it a day, honey.” With a gentle but firm touch, he escorted Mom, stumbling toward the patio doors.

Experiencing a combination of humiliation and hesitant satisfaction, I made my way back to my art display. *And these guys wonder why I hold up in my room. What an embarrassment.*

As they disappeared inside, a collective breath of relief seemed to spread across the lawn. The impromptu musical stylings of

“Mom the Bombed” were finally silenced. I stood motionless, with pulses of shame and anger pounding in my temples. *This day cannot end soon enough.*

Usually shielded from the world, my drawings began garnering recognition and interest. A guest, captivated by a sketch of Catwoman, leaned in. “Did you draw this?” His tone brimmed with genuine interest.

Before I could respond, another person joined, pointing to a phoenix-looking creature. “This is amazing. Tell us about it.”

And then another. “You are one talented young lady.” With the star of the show gone, the spotlight took a sudden turn, leaving me exposed and vulnerable.

Then Uncle Harry, visibly intoxicated, swaggered over. Draping his arm around my shoulders, I stiffened. “Emmy, how about a caricature of your favorite uncle?”

Performing on command was the last thing I wanted. “I don’t draw people,” I said, hoping he’d drop it.

But he didn’t. Instead, he raised his voice, calling to the gathering crowd, “Hey, everyone, let’s get Emmy to draw me!”

The chant picked up, “Em-my! Em-my!” echoing through the backyard. I felt like a trapped animal as the eyes of the partygoers bore into me. My heart raced, and my hands trembled. This wasn’t just exposure. It was a spectacle.

Torn between fleeing and conforming, I stood paralyzed. The chanting grew louder and the expectation heavier. At that moment, every fear and every insecurity I harbored about my art and myself lay bare. Taking a shaky breath, I snatched my sketchbook and darted off, weaving through the crowd. I didn’t look back, even as the calls of Emmy followed me.

I dashed toward the house as tears streamed down my face, unrestrained as a spring downpour. With Dad preoccupied, tending to Mom, I snuck past, closing my bedroom door behind me. I grabbed my backpack and filled it with clothes, art supplies, and the hourglass. My hands trembled as I retrieved the mysterious Codex from its hiding spot. After flipping through the pages, the hourglass drawing emerged. *Found it.* Without hesitation,

desperate to leave this existence, I traced the hourglass with my finger.

Stillness enveloped me as the surrounding walls dissolved into nothingness. In a mere heartbeat, I stood in the dimly lit chamber of the Caretaker's realm. Staring at his ethereal form, he leaned forward on his gnarled staff. Regarding me with eyes that seemed to pierce through time, "You've returned, Emily."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### *Rain and Refuge*

**H**is voice echoed off the chamber's ancient walls. "I sense a shift in your resolve."

Nodding with a nervous lump in my throat, "I want to know more about the portal. How does it work?"

The Caretaker smiled, though his eyes remained solemn. "In all my millennia of guardianship, the intricacies continue to elude even me. But know this. The portal transcends the normal bounds of time and space and offers passage, not just distance, through the veils of reality itself."

His cryptic words sent a chill down my spine, but my desire to leave my painful existence drove me forward. "I've given this a lot of thought, and I'd like to travel to Boulder, back to the spring of 1948."

"I'm curious. What presents so special about 1948 Boulder?"

"My grandparents would have been recently married. I have fond memories of their laughter echoing through their home. Their love, the kind that makes you believe in forever. Grandpa's eyes would light up whether he was looking at Nana or telling one of his tall tales about them. She had a way of smiling at him, always with one reserved just for him. Their world ... like they were the only two people who truly understood each other."

“But I must caution you, child. It likely took decades to write their fairy tale. Your romantic notions about their love may not have manifested until years later.”

His words deflated my spirit like air escaping from a balloon. *Never thought of that.*

“And you can’t very well take 2005 money to 1948.”

*No money. Scary.* “How will I manage?”

“You must rely on your ingenuity and talents,” said the Caretaker. “But hardship can nurture creativity and resilience.”

“I have my art and endless stories. I could introduce graphic novels to 1948.”

The Caretaker tilted his head like a nod and then studied me with his ageless eyes. “You returned to your fiefdom to consider the portal. What led you to your decision?”

Sighing, “The tension over my world is intolerable.”

“Your world? And where might that be?”

“Where my creations dwell, and my stories live. There, superheroes reign, and fair maidens are rescued. There’s no loneliness, only new possibilities.”

“And this is what you hope to find?”

“I’m not that naïve, Caretaker. I do know the difference between the realms of fantasy and the reality of the here and now.”

The Caretaker listened intently and nodded. “Few souls have dared cross the threshold you now stand before. But for those bold enough, it offers a chance to behold humanity through a different lens.”

*Can it be any worse than now?* I closed my eyes while picturing my family and the loneliness I felt, even among them. *I can’t imagine.*

“Young, Emily, do you remember the fine print?”

“Yes, Caretaker. I haven’t forgotten. Unless I’m walking into hell itself, I can’t imagine a scenario to return.

The Caretaker studied my face. “The choice looms before you, Emily. On one path lies the familiar pains of your present. The other holds the potential for growth through hardship. You’re certain?”

Imagining stepping through the portal into the unknown, “I’m ready,” I whispered. Then louder, with growing conviction, “I’m ready to pass through.”

The Caretaker’s eyes crinkled with a smile. He raised his staff toward the shadowy portal. Its surface shimmered like sunlight dancing on water. “Then go bravely, Emily Reynolds. Discover your truths among the tides of time.”

I took a deep breath while my heart hammered against my ribs. Then, before my courage failed me, I stepped into the shimmering doorway. A mesmerizing blend of light and sound surrounded me as if immersed in a kaleidoscope. I felt like I was descending through vibrant patterns that blurred the boundaries of different realities. All the while, voices echoed with fragments of music, laughter, and even screams.

Then silence fell like a heavy curtain before stumbling forward, blinking against the bright sunlight. Cars honked, and people swarmed the streets. Besieged by the rumble of engines and the chatter of strangers, I stood amidst the bustle of 1940s cars and storefronts. However, the portal’s success was a fleeting triumph, as it became overshadowed by the gnawing reminder of my growling stomach.

A passerby’s head-to-toe gaze lingered on my jeans and hoodie—a silent critique of my alien attire, no doubt. *Talk about a fish out of water.* I turned full circle, taking in the whispers of the city. Its alien yet familiar vibe echoed an unwelcoming sentiment: freeloaders not welcome. *I guess I’d better get busy.* In the distance, a park beckoned. *Why not?*

I found a grassy spot and spread my sketchpad and pencils before me. Meanwhile, the tide of the block party tugged at my feet. Uncle Harry’s chant, Em-my, Em-my, rang loud in my memory. *No running. I can do this. The alternative is ...* A wave of nervous excitement swallowed me as I prepared to draw before an audience.

Mustering confidence, I delved into the world of Spider-Man, expecting his charm to captivate spectators. As I became en-

grossed in sketching the web-slinger into action, I could almost hear Spidey's heroic adventures coming to life.

A young boy wandered over, his eyes wide and filled with curiosity. "What you drawing, lady?" *Lady?*

"His name is Spider-Man. Like him?"

The child nodded and watched, enthralled as my drawing took shape. When I finished, his face lit up. "Wow, that's so cool! Can I keep it?" I tore the page out and handed it to him. The boy took hold with an eager grasp and then turned to his mother nearby. "Look, Mom! Look what she drew."

Digging in her purse, the mother walked over and dropped a coin in my hat. "You've got quite a talent there." Warned by the validation, I thanked her.

As they walked away, my focus returned to my sketchpad, envisioning my next drawing. As the day unfolded, I remained busy sketching fantasy scenes and superheroes. But one man approached and asked, "Do you do caricatures?"

*Forget about Uncle Harry.* "Sure. If you can think it, I can draw it."

"How much?"

"Whatever you think it's worth." *Maybe I need standard prices*

...

Absorbed in exaggerating his features, I reveled in bringing amusement to my art. Then, out of nowhere, a shadow flashed at the edge of my vision as a hand snatched coins from my hat. My head jerked up, but the ghost vanished into a sea of people before I could blink. Stunned, I stared at my now near-empty hat. The harsh realities of this unfamiliar time stared back at me and smirked.

I was tempted to call it a day but persevered despite my setback. Resolute, I continued sketching. By dusk, my diligence paid off, recouping the stolen amount plus a little—a humble sum but hard-won. As I packed up my supplies, a slight glow of pride emerged, and the faint sounds of Em-my faded with the sun.

Nearby, I found a local market. With only a dollar in my pocket, I hoped against hope that I might find any morsel that

could quell the gnawing hunger within. Pushing the door open unleashed the nostalgic chime of a bell and the rhythmic ka-ching of old-time cash registers. The soft, welcoming light cast a golden hue throughout the store. Wooden shelves, rich with the smoothness of age and care, stood in ordered rows. Women in dresses cinched at the waist, and men with slacks and suspenders meandered through the aisles. Above, vintage advertisements and price signs dangled from thin wires. Hovering in the air, they stirred as shoppers passed by.

*Fifteen cents for a loaf of bread? Goblin's grin.* The price of bread brought forth the realities of an era gone by. *Of course, I'm in 1948.* Excitement rushed through me as I darted for the meat section. *Yes!* A pound of bologna was on sale for a mere thirty-five cents. I was happier than a wizard on a broomstick.

Stepping from the market, I claimed a secluded bench and devoured a simple sandwich to tide me over. Then, with my remaining food stored away, I continued walking through the calming streets. As daylight waned, my first small victory turned into a desperate need for shelter.

I made my way to a dingy motel with a flickering vacancy sign. My heart sank when my glare took in the prices. Even their cheapest room was a dollar a night—just beyond my means. I moved on, the bread now like a rock in my twisted stomach.

When darkness fell, I found myself in an industrial area on the edge of town. Spotting an overpass ahead, I explored what it offered for the night. Other forms huddled in the darkness, homeless, like me. I slunk into a quiet corner of the cavern's isolation, still clinging to my paltry but valuable possessions.

No sooner had I settled in than a figure emerged from the shadows. A large man with matted hair and tattered clothes. Age and grime obscured his features, but his eyes were alert and calculating.

"Well, well . . . fresh meat," he said, flashing his blackened teeth. "You gotta pay the toll 'round here, girlie."



I recoiled when his menacing presence shattered my sense of security. Leering closer, “What ya got? Ain’t nothin’ free in this life.”

Heart thumping, I stammered, “I don’t want any trouble. I just need a place to sleep.”

He laughed a harsh sound, echoing off the concrete. “Then you gotta pay up,” he said, grabbing at my backpack.

I clutched it in desperation. “No! Get away from me!” Fear and anger rose in my throat.

The man’s eyes narrowed, and his tone turned sinister. “You either pay up, or you pay another way. Ain’t no charity cases here.”

Gripped by terror, I mustered the courage to meet his gaze. “I said no. Now leave me alone.” He hesitated, seeming surprised by my resistance. After a tense moment with my eyes locked on his, he backed off, spitting a curse.

Still shaking, I scrambled to my feet and donned my backpack. His laughter echoed in the cavernous space as I stumbled away with my heart racing. The cold reality of 1948 Boulder wrapped around me like a vice—unforgiving but real.

I fled into the night, seeking refuge anywhere but there. One drop, then another, fell on my fright. The sky opened, soaking through my clothes and chilling me to the bone. As I walked, my mind raced with fear and uncertainty. *Where to?* The streets, once an escape, now felt like a maze with no exit.

Then, amid a downpour, I spotted an old root cellar with its door ajar. Desperation pushed me forward. With the darkness inside as intimidating as the storm outside, I hesitated at the entrance and took a deep breath. *It’s shelter, at least.* I stepped inside as my heart throbbed. For the moment, I was out of the rain and away from prying eyes.

At the sound of footsteps above, I moved, knocking something over with a clatter. Freezing, I held my breath, but panic surged through me. *Run.* I turned and fled back into the storm while the rain washed away my tears. I didn’t know where I was going, only that I had to keep moving to find safety and a place where

I belonged. While running, a misstep sent me tumbling into the muddy ground, my head colliding with a thud. I lay unconscious.

## CHAPTER NINE

# *Bursting Emily's Bubble*

Rain pelted with a relentless rhythm, and the droplets drummed a constant beat in the dark of night. With mud clinging to my clothes, I lay sprawled, inhaling the scent of the rain-soaked earth. Struggling to open my eyes, each blink pushed against the weight of exhaustion and turmoil.

As a sudden strike of awareness hit me, I heard voices approaching. Attempts to move or shout met with my body's stubborn refusal. A light piercing through the darkness cast scattered shadows around me. As I squinted, the brightness intensified while the figures approached through the haze of my confusion.

A concern-laden voice penetrated the rain's barrage, calling, "Ellie, look what I found." The tone was male. "Can you hear me?" A man and a woman, both in their mid-twenties, peered down at me with concern etched on their faces. "Are you alright?" His words were steady but filled with worry.

A feeble nod came as I attempted to sit up, but my body failed me. "Let's get her inside, Ellie. She's drenched." As they helped me to my feet, I glimpsed the name stitched onto the man's overalls—Tom. My heart leaped. *Grandpa?* Questions flooded my mind, yet words remained elusive.

As I sat at their kitchen table, the warmth of the house enveloped me, leaving damp marks on the wooden chair. Pulling up a seat beside me, Ellie asked, “Do you have a name, dear?”

“Emily.”

“And your last name ...?”

*Do I lie?* Still dazed and confused, “Reynolds.”

The couple exchanged a wary glance. “Reynolds?” Tom echoed as his brow furrowed. “That’s our name too.”

*Coincidence? Impossible.*

“Do you have kin around these parts?”

Nana’s hand reached out and rested on mine as I shook my head. “You’re safe now, Emily.” Grateful for the shelter, I nodded, but a storm of emotions brewed inside. Stumbling upon Nana and Grandpa was almost too much to process. I needed rest and time to think.

“Here, dear, let’s get you out of these wet clothes before you catch your death.” Nana helped me to my feet with a careful hand. Grandpa’s eyes, full of suspicion, followed my every move. His weathered features hinted at a life carved by untold challenges. Nana guided me to a bathroom, offering dry clothes and a towel. I couldn’t help but feel a sense of gratitude mixed with unease.

The clothes were a welcome change, but Grandpa’s distrustful gaze haunted my thoughts. Sitting on the couch wrapped in a warm blanket, Nana brought a steaming cup of tea. Its comfort contrasted with the uneasy glances Grandpa shot my way. Doubt’s storm cloud hovered as he paced the room. Standing rigid, he spoke in a voice edged with suspicion. “Where are you from? What brings you to Boulder? What were you doing out there in the storm?”

Telling the truth about time travel and my search for a new life seemed absurd, even to me. “I ... got lost.”

“Lost? Where are you from?”

*What to say?* “Denver. I was just exploring and got caught in the storm.”

Grandpa raised an eyebrow. “Exploring? All the way from Denver? Alone? That’s a long way for a young girl to wander

alone. What about your parents? Shouldn't they be worried sick about you?"

Nana stared at Grandpa. With a disapproving look, she shook her head. "Tom, the poor girl's been through enough tonight. Let's not bombard her with questions."

A tingling sensation prickled at the nape of my neck. Undeterred by Nana's reprimand, Grandpa continued. "And how is it you end up in the mud in the middle of nowhere?"

Fumbling for a believable explanation, "I ... I was taking a shortcut and lost my way when the rain started. I must have slipped and hit my head."

"Wasn't that you that we heard in the root cellar?"

*Witch's brew!* "Uh ... I was just looking to get out of the rain. I'm sorry."

Grandpa's gaze, sharp as dragon's teeth, carved through the air between us. "Shortcut, huh? Where to? And with few belongings and no identification? It doesn't add up, young lady."

"Let's not jump to conclusions, dear. We should give her a chance to rest before we start interrogating her."

Grandpa shook his head, unconvinced. "Don't like it, Ellie. Something about this whole situation feels off. We need to report her to the authorities. They'll know what to do."

The mere mention of the authorities sent a jolt through me. My breaths were short, my skin clammy, and my fingers quaked as if they were already in handcuffs. My voice cracked in desperation. "No! Please ... I just need a place to stay for the night. I'll figure things out in the morning."

Nana's expression softened. "We can't just turn her out, Tom. She's just a girl."

Grandpa's stature stiffened. "Sorry, Ellie, but I can't in good conscience let a strange girl stay in our home without knowing more about her. It's for our safety and hers."

As the argument between Nana and Grandpa escalated, a restless energy pulsed through my limbs, the physical echo of my inner turmoil. Clearly torn, Grandpa rubbed his chin. "Ellie, we

don't know anything about her. For all we know, she could be in trouble with the law."

Nana sighed and gave me a sympathetic look. "Don't worry, dear. We'll make sure you're taken care of." Hearing her words was reassuring, but they did little to ease the dread building inside me.

As I sat wrapped in the warm blanket, the steam from the teacup wafted up. It carried a sense of homeliness that contrasted with the tension in the room. Grandpa paced back and forth with his eyes darting between me and Nana. The silence was punctuated only by the occasional clink of my teacup.

In what seemed like an attempt to change the subject, Nana mentioned her nursing job. "There's this young boy I've been treating," she said with a hint of worry. "He's been suffering from these frequent, unexplained headaches."

Without thinking, I chimed in. "Could be migraines triggered by a food allergy."

Nana looked at me, surprised. "That's an interesting thought. How did you come to that conclusion?"

Realizing my error, "Oh, I read about something like that in a science fiction novel," fingers crossed.

With his pacing stopped, Grandpa raised an eyebrow. "A science fiction novel? That's a peculiar source for medical advice."

I could sense his skepticism. "Elenore, this all stinks like a kettle of fish. I'm calling the authorities."

Nana, alarmed, "Tom, you're overreacting. Do you really think that's necessary?"

With his jaw set in a firm line of resolve, Grandpa strode to the phone—each step a thunderclap sealing my fate. "I'm sorry, young lady. There are too many things that don't add up."

I watched, feeling fear and despair as he picked up the receiver and began to dial. My heart pounded. Each ring of the phone echoed like a countdown. Grandpa, speaking into the receiver with an unwavering voice, "I'd like to report ... uh, a lost young woman."

Nana perched beside me, her brows knitted in a mosaic of concern and confusion. She reached out, placing a comforting hand on my shoulder. "Don't worry, dear. We'll sort this out." Her words were soft, but her eyes betrayed her uncertainty.

Grandpa's conversation seemed to last an eternity. Finally, he hung up and turned back to us. His face was a mask of mixed emotions—concern, suspicion, and a hint of regret.

"They're on their way," he said. "They'll figure out what to do with you."

As the rain continued to beat against the windows, I felt a profound sense of isolation. I had leaped through time to find a place where I belonged, only to realize that belonging could not be found in another era.

In the tense aftermath of Grandpa's call to the authorities, the room felt smaller and the air heavier. Grandpa's gaze kept shifting between me and the backpack I'd brought from my world. With curiosity and suspicion in his eyes, he reached for it. "Fancy thing," he remarked, eyeing the modern design. "Never seen anything like it." His eyes lurched to mine, gauging my reaction as he unzipped it.

I felt a pang of anxiety as Grandpa pulled out my sketchbook. The characters and scenes, so vivid and otherworldly, sprawled across the pages. With his eyes in a squint, he leafed through it. The images, fantastical and sometimes dark, seemed to unsettle him. "These drawings ..." his voice laced with concern, "they're quite ... unique."

As I steadied my voice, "Sometimes, my imagination flows like the Colorado, constant with many twists and turns."

Grandpa raised his eyes and cringed. "But these pictures are so strange, so different from anything I've seen. What do they mean?"

"They don't mean anything," I said. "I have stories like the stars. My art is my lens."

"And a poet as well?"

Nana, who had been observing, softly added, "It's just self-expression, Tom. I think they're quite good."

But Grandpa was not reassured. “So dark. Why not landscapes or something ... normal?”

I took a deep breath. “Graphic novels inspired them. It’s a kind of storytelling—a bit like comic books.”

Grandpa shook his head, unconvinced. “I don’t know. This all seems very odd. Unsettling, even.”

Nana reached out, touching Grandpa’s arm. “Tom, she’s just a young girl with a talent for drawing. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

But Grandpa’s expression remained troubled. “I just don’t understand these ... drawings. They make me wonder about who we’ve brought into our home.”

I felt a mix of anger and helplessness. The art that once offered me an escape was now used to pass judgment and brand me as an outsider, even a threat. The gap between my world and this one suddenly felt insurmountable. I’d wanted to find a place where I belonged. Instead, I found myself more alienated than ever, misunderstood in a time that wasn’t my own.

As Grandpa continued scrutinizing my sketches, each page felt like an invasion, an examination of my art and me. At that moment, my passion, which had once been my refuge, now felt like a barrier. Walls that had separated me from the world now left me vulnerable in a way I’d never expected.

The single red light of the police cruiser cast a steady glow through the rain-drenched windows. I sat on the couch wrapped in a blanket with my hands clasped tightly in my lap. Though their voices were muffled, the officers’ presence filled the room, reminding me of the precariousness of my situation.

Officer Dombrowski, a man with a weathered face and kind eyes, turned to me. “Miss Reynolds, can you tell us a bit about yourself?” His tone was gentle but probing.

I swallowed as I searched for words that wouldn’t betray my secret. “I’m alone.”

“We can see that, Miss Reynolds, but why?”

With a deep breath, “My family ... they’re dead. I’ve been getting by. Today, maybe not so much.”



"Tom says you claim to be from Denver," said the other officer, a younger man with sharp features.

"I arrived from there this morning, but it's not my home."

"Then where do you call home?" he asked.

"Right now, Boulder."

"Homeless then ..." Officer Dombrowski nodded and jotted something down in his notebook. "We checked with the station. You're not wanted or missing. But wandering alone in a storm is risky, especially for a young girl."

A lump formed in my throat. The scrutiny, the questions, it was all too much. I felt exposed, like a specimen under a microscope. Grandpa stood by the doorway, his arms crossed, a cloud of skepticism still hanging over him. Nana's face, etched with worry, hovered nearby, casting sympathetic glances.

As the officers wrapped up their questioning, Dombrowski spoke up. "Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds, unless you want to press charges for unlawful trespass, there's not much we can do here."

Grandpa exchanged a glance with Nana. They stepped away. Their voices were low but intense. I couldn't make out the words, but the weight of their decision pressed heavily upon me.

Outside, the rain continued its relentless rhythm. Each drop was a sharp reminder of my situation's uncertainty. I stared out the window as I watched the droplets race down the glass. Each seemed to mirror my turbulent thoughts.

Nana returned first. Her expression softened as she approached. "You can stay the night, Emily. We'll figure out the rest in the morning."

Relief flooded through me, offering a brief respite in the storm of my emotions. But then Grandpa's voice cut through sharp and clear. "I'll be watching you. One false move ..."

The walls seemed to inch closer while compressing the space around me. It was as if the room itself was shrinking into an oppressive embrace. My charm bracelet felt heavier, like a chain linking me to a past I was beginning to question. As the police left, their cruiser's lights faded into the night, and I felt relief and

unease. I was safe for the night, yes, but tomorrow was a chasm of uncertainty.

Peering through the window into the impenetrable darkness, I twirled my charm bracelet around my wrist. Its tiny reflections shimmered on the wall like fleeting memories. It anchored me to my past and hinted at an uncharted path ahead. With each cautious twist of the bracelet, I resolved to navigate this unfamiliar world one deliberate step at a time.

## CHAPTER TEN

# *The Long Road Ahead*

I stirred on the narrow cot in a room no larger than a closet. Its walls barely spanned my outstretched arms. Sunlight filtered in through a small window, casting a grid of light on the wooden floor. The distant sounds of activity drifted in—clanking tools, muffled voices, and the occasional neigh of a horse. Stiff from the unfamiliar bed, I sat up.

Peering out the window, I saw Grandpa and Nana standing sculpted against the backdrop of the sprawling ranch. They seemed deep in discussion, and I had a sinking feeling that I was the subject. Putting on my hoodie, I stepped out into the morning chill.

Nana spotted me first, waving me over with a gesture that seemed both welcoming and purposeful. As I walked toward them, my mind churned with apprehension, bracing for the inevitable bad news.

“Good morning.” Nana greeted me with a warm smile as I approached. “Did you sleep well?”

“Like a log,” I replied, attempting a grateful smile. “Thank you for your gracious invitation to stay the night. I don’t know what I’d have done without it.”

“You’re more than welcome.”

Grandpa interjected, “But your continued stay isn’t entirely up to us. That would be up to Mr. Blackwood.” The seriousness in his voice caught my attention. “He owns this ranch, so that’s your first hurdle. Me, I’m just a ranch hand. Ellie helps out as well when she’s not working.” His words landed a cold splash against my delicate flame of hope.

“What are the chances he agrees?”

Grandpa shook his head, a gesture that spoke volumes. “You never know with Blackwood. Considering you’re a girl from some Asian persuasion and wandering the streets in a thunderstorm, not good.”

His blunt assessment stung, and a sinking feeling settled in my stomach. Raising my Filipino heritage as an issue made me realize I was more like an anomaly than an outsider.

Grandpa continued, his gaze steady and unwavering. “The thing is, Emily, even if we set aside your dubious arrival, that small room you slept in is all we could offer. And truth is, we can’t really afford to keep you. You’d either need to work here or get a job. Neither of which bode well for a hundred-pound teenager from questionable origins.”

Grandpa’s words, unguarded and raw, felt like a dragon’s flame scorching the ground beneath my feet. In this strange moment, adrift and without direction, the shadow of Mr. Blackwood tangled my fate with dread. The reality of Boulder, so distant from my dreams and past streets, veiled my future in a dense fog of new challenges.

“I just had a thought, hon. Emily could stay at the hunting cabin. I can’t imagine Mr. Blackwood objecting. She can shower here.” Nana’s words and her soft tone wove a delicate thread of hope.

Grandpa paused, giving her a long, thoughtful look. “That might work,” he said, finally. “Five dollars a month.”

“What would you like to do, Emily?” Nana turned to me with eyes searching mine for an answer.

“If Mr. Blackwood allows me to stay, would he give me a job?” However temporary, the prospect of having a place to call my own ignited hope within me.

Grandpa’s expression hardened. “We are short, and dependable hands are hard to find. Never was an issue before the war. It’s just that you don’t have anything going for you.”

I felt my throat tighten, making it hard to speak as I tried to maintain a steady voice. “I don’t mind hard work.”

Grandpa shot back with an appraising gaze. “You don’t look like you’ve done a hard day’s work in your life.”

“Tom, that’s not nice.”

Undeterred, “But true. And look at her. She can’t be one hundred pounds soaking wet with her clothes on.”

“I’m 102.” His gaze met mine with a mix of defiance and anxiety. “I can do this. I’d like to stay.”

“Well, Blackwood’s truck is here, so he’s here. We’d better get on over. I told him earlier we might be by.”

As we approached Mr. Blackwood, my heart pounded like a drumroll thundering into the unknown. His stern face, weathered by the sun and wind, bore the marks of a life spent outdoors. Regarding me with a critical eye, his unspoken assessment offered scant hope.

“You the kid Tom and Ellie taking in? You don’t look like much. Half chink, are you? Hard workin’ people, those chinks. At least you have that going for you.”

I opened my mouth to explain my situation, but Blackwood cut me off. “I don’t care where you came from. But being here means you’re gonna work. I’m not made of money. I don’t run no charity for strays. Three days probation. No pay. Keep up, or you’re gone. \$120 a month if you stick around.”

He stepped toward me, invading my space. Shrinking back, I raised my chin. Blackwood glowered down at me. “No lip neither, or you’ll be dealing with me directly. I catch you lazing or causing trouble, you’ll be outta here so fast a jack rabbit couldn’t catch you.”

Nana moved close and placed her arm around me. “Can she stay in the hunter’s cabin, Mr. Blackwood?”

“It ain’t much. Why not? You start tomorrow. Sunrise. Don’t be late, or there’ll be hell to pay. You two ... get her settled in.” Blackwood turned to leave, took a couple of steps, then stopped and turned around. “Oh ... one more thing,” pointing at Grandpa, “you’re responsible for her.”

Grandpa stood open-mouthed with his face contorted into a slight wince. The gravity of my new reality settled over me like twilight, and the long road ahead seemed longer and more daunting than ever.

“Let’s check out your new home,” said Nana.

As we walked toward the cabin, our footsteps crunched on the gravel path, and the morning sun cast long shadows, painting a serene picture of ranch life. “Having my own place is gonna be terrific.”

“It’s nothing to get excited about, Emily.”

“If it’s warm and dry, I can make do.”

Nana looked my way. Her eyes seemed to reflect a mix of empathy and nostalgia. “Life on the ranch has its ups and downs.” Continuing, she shared a couple of snippets of her life, the dreams she harbored, and the sacrifices she’d made. Afterward, her curiosity turned to my art. With genuine interest coloring her words, she said, “Your drawings are quite something. You have a genuine talent, Emily.”

Her comment engendered a moment of pride and gratitude, but as we approached the cabin, any lingering warmth quickly dissolved. The structure bore the scars of time, standing spartan and solitary. Sun-bleached planks, warped and cracked, clung to its frame while moss and lichen claimed the roof as their own.

As we stepped inside, Nana surveyed the room with a hint of regret. “I’d forgotten how bare it is,” she said, her voice soft and apologetic.

The interior was as bleak as its exterior, containing a bed with no linens, a cold and unused pot-bellied stove, and no firewood

in sight. The reality of my new home settled in, a far cry from my romanticized vision of cabin life.

“Well!” she said, determined. “Let’s get you some essentials.” Upon returning to their home, she gathered bedding, matches, and basic kitchenware. It wasn’t much but enough to tide me over. Handing me the items, “You’ll need to ask about an ax for firewood.”

*Ugh.* I nodded, absorbing her guidance. “Who do I ask?”

Nana glanced at her watch. “Any minute now, you’ll hear the clang of the triangle. That marks lunchtime. I’m sure any of the men can point you toward the toolshed.

Encircled with ranch hands, my gaze locked on the lunch table. *I can do this.* Leaving my things on Nana’s porch, I squared my shoulders and took my first determined step. As I approached, Roy, the ranch foreman, placed a sturdy hand on my shoulder and guided me to our communal lunch space. “Folks, this here’s Emily,” he said. “She’s gonna try her hand at ranch work.”

“But she’s hardly out of diapers, boss.”

*At least I managed to graduate to the big-girls’ potty. Jerk.*

“But she’s determined, and we can use that around here.”

Standing alone as Roy walked away, I scanned the group for a friendly face or an open spot but found neither. Murmurs of “just a little girl” and “won’t last a week” reached my ears. With a deep breath, I chose a spot away from the main table.

Conversations about ranch life buzzed. Two men nearby argued about horse training. “No, you’ve got to break ‘em in rough,” one said. I cringed, imagining the harshness of their methods. Another conversation caught my attention, if not for a brief moment, spoke of cattle feed. But my lack of knowledge on the subject left me focused on my beans.

Laughter erupted from a corner where a group of jovial hands debated the best local fishing spots. “You wouldn’t know a suitable spot if it bit you!” The memory of a quaint pond from a travel guide came to mind. But feeling ever out of place, I kept my thoughts to myself.

A heated discussion about rodeo techniques followed, with participants advocating traditional methods over modern ones. Eyes widened, gestures flew, and voices rose, falling like the tide. Their fervor etched their stance as words clashed and intertwined, forging scenes as visible as the dust beneath our boots.

Laughter followed a crude joke while the language around me turned coarser. Shifting in my seat, a younger ranch hand's voice about dog training caught my attention. "Nah, you gotta be gentle with 'em," he said. His words flashed memories of a neighbor's well-trained pet dog.

The conversation then shifted to wildlife management. Strong opinions were voiced about dealing with predators. "You can't be soft on coyotes." *Coyotes?*

The triangle rang out. *Holy orbs! The ax.* Mustering all the courage I could, I approached the group. "Excuse me, where can I find an ax?" My voice was small and barely heard above the surrounding chatter.

Heads turned with a laugh erupting from the back. "What's little Emily gonna do with an ax? Chop down the forest?" Heat rushed to my cheeks, but I stood my ground. "I need it for firewood."

A hand, still smirking, pointed toward the toolshed. "You'll find one there. Good luck, little girl."

As the voices and laughter of the ranch hands faded behind me, my resolve hardened with each step away from the lunch area. *Cretins.* I collected the items Nana had set aside and made my way to the toolshed. Its structure appeared larger and more imposing than I'd expected. As I drew near, something closer to a small barn revealed itself. *Ax. Ax. Man, how does anyone find what they're looking for?* Ten spider webs later ... *this should work.*

Golden rays kissed my skin, a gentle warmth as I ventured into the woods. With each step, my confidence grew. *How hard can it be? There's wood everywhere. For the love of trolls and orbs, this is Boulder.* But upon arrival at my cabin, nature's reality painted a daunting picture of towering sentinels, broadcasting long shadows of doubt. *I'll be chopping till the snow returns.* In search of



a bonsai, I found a patch of ground littered with branches that whispered of past storms and forgotten shades. *Bingo*.

With my first swing, the ax met wood in a clumsy kiss, more of a graze than a cut. Undeterred, I adjusted my grip, rolling my shoulders to shake off the unfamiliar strain. The blade arced through the air once more, finding its target with a satisfying thud. The branch gave way, not completely severed but yielding.

My heart pounded, not just from the physical exertion but from a surge of unexpected pride. Each crack of split wood became a note of triumph. Sweat dotted my forehead while the ax's grip wore at my palms. *Ow!* The discomfort morphed into a raw reminder of the task at hand. Each piece provided evidence of my determination as the pile of firewood grew. But the blisters on my palms, throbbing with each impact, surfaced memories of lunchtime jeers and snide comments.

Engrossed in battling the stubborn branches, Nana's presence escaped me until her shadow mingled with mine. Her gaze swept from the wood I'd amassed to where I stood, a slight figure amidst the mighty pines.

I paused, ax in hand, meeting her gaze. At that moment, with her eyes sweeping over the modest results of my labor, I saw a glimpse of understanding, perhaps even concern, cross her face.

Eyeing my ax, "What are you doing?"

With confidence, "Getting firewood. What's it look like?"

"With that? You need an ax, sweetie. That's a hatchet." My face flushed with embarrassment. "Keep that up, and you'll get a blister right quick."

"Too late on that one."

"Come on. Let's find you the proper tool."

With the sun's descent, I hurried to collect my chopped wood, racing against time as a chilling wind carved its way through my clothes. As dusk's hue devoured the cabin in darkness, my matches flared and died against the stubborn, damp wood, refusing to catch.

Desperate, I sacrificed a page from my sketchbook to the flames, only to watch it curl and vanish in a wisp of smoke.

Stepping outside, I scoured the ground for anything dry, but the dampness of the night clung to every leaf and blade of grass. Above, the sky answered with a faint, mocking drizzle.

Choosing between braving a rainstorm and staying dry, I remained sheltered. I did manage to get a small flame going, but it quickly fizzled. Eventually, I gave up and spent most of the night shivering while the cold temperatures penetrated my lone blanket. Yet, as I lay there, I realized that not only was I in a fight for survival, but I was also forging a new identity.

Amid the vast skies and the unyielding land, I was no longer just Emily, the city girl out of place. I was becoming a part of something greater, a story still unwritten but full of promise. Here, under the vast canopy of stars, I embraced the challenges ahead, knowing they would shape me into someone stronger, more resilient, and unafraid to carve out my place in the world.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

# *A Ray of Sunshine*

The first light of day filtering through the window jolted me awake. *No ... no. Wizards! I can't be late.* Each slipping second hurried my actions as I raced against the sun to dress. Heart pounding, I came to grips with the reality of my first day as a ranch hand.

As I bolted from the cabin, the chilly morning air hit me like a splash of icy water. In my haste, I stumbled, and my hands and knees sank into the wet, muddy ground. *Troll's teeth.* I quickly regained my footing and pressed on.

The ranch hands had already circled up when I finally came into Roy's view. His eyes locked onto my mud-splattered figure as I sprinted toward them, and his shaking head was visible even from a distance.

I arrived, panting and breathless, just as he was about to start. I tried to stammer out an apology, but Roy's stern face stopped me mid-sentence. "Late on your first day," he said, his voice carrying clearly over the group. "This happens again, and your pay's docked."

I stood there, trying to catch my breath as his words echoed in my mind. *Dock my pay? I'm working for free.* Despite the irony,

the warning was clear: no more late arrivals. This was ranch life—harsh, unforgiving, and now my reality.

The morning muster with Roy was a brisk affair. Gathered in a semi-circle, steam rose from their coffee cups amid the cool air. Feeling every bit the newcomer and my clothes still stained with mud, I stood at the edge. Roy's gaze swept over the group, pausing on me. "Emily, you're with Cowboy today. He's gonna show you the ropes in the stables," he said, pointing toward a wiry man with a sun-creased face who nodded at me.

Cowboy led the way to the stables as the crunch of gravel under his boots broke the morning silence. As we neared the barn, the mingled scents of hay and horses grew stronger.

"You're on stall mucking duty today," said Cowboy, sliding the stable door open. I stepped inside, trying not to react to the overwhelming smell. "Ever been around horses?"

"Nope," I said, shaking my head.

"Ain't no animal like 'em."

Cowboy slid open the lower latch, then flipped the upper. "First thing we do is remove and secure the horse with these here cross ties." He carried on with explaining the nuances of mucking, which I discovered to be more boring than anything else. "When the wheelbarrow is full, take it to the compost. Simple."

"Sounds easy enough."

Handing me a manure fork, "Use your legs and keep your back straight," his voice echoed. "It 'll pay dividends by the end of the day."

As I followed his advice, each scoop became a little easier, and the work's rhythm second nature. Cowboy's occasional comment served as a guide, and his tone offered a mix of instruction and faint encouragement. "You're doing good."

Lost in monotony, daydreams took me away until a nicker brought me back. Cowboy leaned on his fork and nodded toward the sound. "That's Mama's Boy. He's been off since Mrs. Blackwood's passing. You want to be careful with him."

As I neared his stall with my fork in hand, our eyes locked—a silent conversation in the briefest of moments. His deep and knowing gaze pulled me in, and his serene presence contrasted with the surrounding bustle.

“Mama’s Boy? How’d you get that name? Hmm?” I said with a playful tease. “You always cling to your mama’s apron strings? Hard to believe.” I studied him, his stature noble, his eyes a deep well of wisdom and stories untold. “Standing tall and handsome to boot, I bet you got all the girls around here swooning over you.”

He whickered a gentle sound that seemed to carry a mix of amusement and pride. It was as if he understood, acknowledging the role I’d cast him in my mind’s narrative. I smiled as my imagination wove tales around him. “You know, I think you’re the secret guardian of this place. Yeah, that’s it. The silent protector watching over your herd, always alert, always ready. But there’s a mystery about you, isn’t there? A tale of courage hidden beneath that calm exterior.”

As I reached out, he muzzled against my palm. It was a moment of connection, like an unspoken agreement between us. “I can see it now.” My voice whispered as if sharing a secret. “The night the storm hit and chaos threatened to take over, it was you who stood firm. With the wind howling and the rain lashing, you were the pillar of strength for the others, weren’t you? Guiding them, protecting them from the storm’s fury.”

His mighty eyes remained fixed on mine as he listened, filled with a silent understanding. It was as if my words had woven a bridge between us, perhaps a link of shared understanding and mutual respect. “Mama’s Boy, the steadfast guardian of the night. Your story’s just beginning.”

“Emily, that was impressive.”

“What was?” Stepping back, I picked up my shovel and glanced again at Mama’s Boy.

“Your connection. He’s been just shy of unapproachable since Mrs. Blackwood passed.”

I reached out with care. “Missing mama, huh, boy?” Mama’s Boy nudged his muzzle softly against my palm. It was a slight moment, but in the ranch world, it felt significant. “You just need a little attention. Yes, you do. A little attention.”

I lingered, whispering to the horse, sharing words of comfort that were as much for him as they were for me. It was a heart-warming moment of connection, a gentle reminder that acts of kindness should never be missed. Finally, I pulled myself away and returned to my task. With blistered hands and an aching back, Mama’s Boy had given me a sense of purpose and worth.

“Time for lunch, Emily.”

Dragging my feet coated in dust and sweat, I made my way to the communal meal area. The rich scent of stewed beans promised a brief respite from the morning’s grueling work. Yet, as the laughter and chatter of the ranch hands reached my ears, a familiar unease settled in my gut.

Seizing a bowl, I hesitated, surveying the scene. The tables were alive with camaraderie I longed to join but felt barred from. Opting for solitude, I found refuge on a nearby log, close enough to listen yet ample to feel invisible.

Their curious and assessing gazes brushed over me as if questioning my presence among them. Breaking the silence, a voice boomed across the distance. “Hey, look, everyone. The little lady survived her first morning. Did you break a nail, darling?” Big Joe’s voice, heavy with jest, drew a wave of laughter.

I clenched my bowl tighter as the warmth of embarrassment coursed through my veins. “Just some blisters.”

With amusement traced on his face, “You sure you’re cut out for this, city girl? Seems a bit rough for you.”

Like a spark to tinder, his words ignited a fire within me. “I’m doing just fine,” I replied, louder than I intended. “Hard work doesn’t scare me.”

Silence descended with a blanket of tension. Eyes that grew wide with surprise or narrowed in reconsideration fixed their gaze on me as I wiped away a single tear.

From the corner of my eye, I spotted Cowboy and Blackwood. When their conversation paused with their attention directed my way, a wave of anxiety seized me. *I think I'm screwed.*

The meal ended in an uncomfortable hush. My outburst had cast a shadow over the once lively gathering. Standing up, I left my unfinished meal behind with a sense of isolation that wrapped around me tighter than before.

After lunch, Roy caught my eye and signaled me to come over. His voice carried a hint of concern mixed with curiosity. "Cowboy says you impressed him. That's no easy chore. Says you connected with Mama's Boy."

Brushing off a stray strand of hair, "I guess. Not sure what all the fuss is about. He seems perfectly fine to me."

Roy's eyes narrowed. "You've got a touch with him that no one else here does. Blackwood observed the whole thing. Wants you trained to groom the horses."

With his easy but purposeful gait, Cowboy strutted over in response to Roy's call. "Go for it. Teach her how to groom."

Cowboy glanced at me with a glimmer of respect. "She's got a knack, boss."

Roy mused aloud, "Could be she's a girl."

Cowboy shrugged, the corners of his mouth twitching in a faint smile. "Maybe. Let's go, missy."

As I worked on a chestnut mare, my hands found a rhythm. Cowboy watched with his usual impassive expression, giving way to a slight nod of approval. "You read them well," he said, leaning against the barn's wooden frame. "They respond to you. Not everyone's got that gift."

A sense of pride warmed me as my hands moved over the mare's coat, drawing out its natural shine. Later, as we took a break, Cowboy leaned against a stall door while his eyes studied me.

"So, you're from Denver?"

"Kinda."

With a slight squint, "Kinda? Sort of makes sense, I suppose. I've met folks from Denver, and you're different. These horses, they're telling me so."

I paused with the brush in my hand. *There's that word again—different. How much should I let on?* Finally, I let out a soft chuckle, more to myself than to him. “If I had a nickel for every time someone called me different ... well, I wouldn't be here.”

Cowboy's expression softened. “Fair enough. But to these horses, you're something special. No one's been close to Mama's Boy since—we all feel her absence.” As I returned to grooming the mare, a realization dawned on me as his words hung in the air. In the eyes of these horses, being different wasn't just acceptable. It was a gift.

The day's end brought a familiar ritual. All ranch hands gathered to report their status. Standing firm and authoritative, Roy signaled me to stay behind as the others dispersed. Once alone, Roy's gaze landed on me with an appraising yet kind eye. “You are one lucky girl.”

I frowned slightly, perplexed. “Lucky? How's that?”

Roy leaned back against a post with his arms crossed. “If not for having a way with Mama's Boy, you'd have been out of here. Anyone can muck a stall. Blackwood looks for those who can contribute in other ways.” He paused, studying my reaction. “Cowboy says it wasn't just with Mama's Boy. You've connected with all of them. Where'd you learn that?”

“First time around horses.”

Roy nodded with a hint of respect in his eyes. “Like I said. Lucky. Blackwood told me to split your chores. Half the day mucking stalls. Half the day grooming horses.”

“Cool,” I responded as a small smile broke through.

Roy's expression turned serious. “Cool, huh? A word to the wise. You need to toughen up. Those boys are gonna give you a hard time for a while—at least until they're convinced you can handle ranch work. Crying at mealtime only gives them more ammo. Don't sit off alone. Assert yourself. Find a spot at the table. They won't bite.”

A knot formed in my throat as I swallowed. “I'll try,” my voice barely above a whisper.



“You’ve got to discover a way to fit in. We’re like a family here. Disjointed at times but a family just the same. Right now, you’re the red-headed stepchild. Ya got me?”

I nodded. A newfound determination stirred within me. “Yeah. I got it.”

Roy’s eyes narrowed a touch. “Oh ... not that it’s right, but you being—what are you, anyway? You look like a mix of something.”

The question, abrupt and personal, took me aback. “I’m half Filipino,” my voice steady despite the discomfort.

Roy shrugged. “Don’t bother me none. But some of these boys—well ... you know.”

I met his gaze with a mix of defiance and understanding. “Yeah. I know.”

“See you tomorrow. On time,” he said as he turned to leave.

“On time. Yes, sir. Got it.”

As I stood there, the weight of Roy’s words sank in. I realized this was not only a job but a challenge to prove that I was more than just the red-headed stepchild.

After my talk with Roy, a surge of emotions propelled me to the Reynolds’ doorstep. A mix of trials and triumphs, eager to be shared, bubbled within me. I knocked, and Nana answered, her face lighting up at my presence. “Emily! What brings you here?”

“I got promoted today,” I blurted, unable to contain my excitement. “I’m now a horse groomer. Can you believe it?”

Nana’s eyes widened. “That’s wonderful, Emily!”

Tom appeared behind her with a smile that spread across his face. “Congrats! That’s quite an achievement.”

“Thanks! It’s ... it’s just so unbelievable.”

Nana tilted her head as her eyes softened with a growing crease in her brow. “You look worn out. Why don’t you stay for dinner?”

I hesitated, the offer unexpected but appealing. “Really? I don’t want to impose.”

“It’s no imposition,” Grandpa assured me.

Gratitude consumed me. “I’d love to, thank you.”

After a refreshing shower, Nana handed me some clean clothes. “Here, these should fit.” The simple yet thoughtful gesture made me feel cared for and almost like a part of their family. Dressed in clean clothes, I joined them at the table as the aromas of the home-cooked meal filled the air.

We sat down to a family-style meal, each dish more enticing than the last. Helping myself to plenty, the food offered a delicious remedy to my hunger. As we ate, Grandpa and Nana’s curiosity became apparent. “So, how did you get promoted so quickly?” asked Grandpa.

Cautious with my response, “Just lucky, I guess. I kind of connected with the horses.”

Nana nodded, accompanied by a gentle gaze. “That’s a special skill to have.”

The conversation flowed, and I found myself relaxing, enjoying the comfort of their company. But then Nana’s hand rested on her stomach, and without thinking, I asked, “Are you excited about the baby?” Their expressions glinted with surprise. I bit my lip, realizing my mistake.

Grandpa raised an eyebrow but then smiled. “Yes, we are. How did you ...?”

I stammered, “Oh, I just ... I mean, you seem like you’d be great parents.”

The moment passed, and dinner continued with an offer to join them for meals for a small monthly fee. My heart swelled with gratitude.

“I can’t thank you enough,” I said, my words pouring out in a rush of excitement.

Nana smiled. “We’re glad to have you join us, Emily.”

When I said goodbye, their warmth stayed with me. “Thank you again,” I said. Stepping into the night, their home became an unexpected sanctuary, concluding a day full of promise.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### *Emily's Moment*

As the sun rose higher, an unfamiliar truck appeared on the horizon with a cloud of dust, catching the attention of the ranch workers. Blackwood emerged from his house, a pipe in one hand, his other tucked away in a pocket. With a commanding presence, he strode toward the truck with an air of expectation.

The truck, sleek and out of place against the rugged backdrop of the ranch, pulled to a stop. The driver, a man with a camera slung over his shoulder, stepped out, immediately greeted by Blackwood. They exchanged a brief handshake and a few words, then turned and walked toward the muster area. Curious eyes followed their every move.

Blackwood cleared his throat, commanding our attention. "Roy, everyone, this is George. He's a freelance photographer here to capture ranch life for some promotional material. Keep doing your work, but if George needs anything, accommodate him. Understood?"

A wave of murmurs of agreement rippled through the group, and a mix of curiosity and slight apprehension hung in the air. George scanned the crowd and paused on me. "What's your story, young lady?" he asked with a tinge of curiosity.

Taken aback, "Uh, story?"

“My apologies,” George said, turning briefly to Blackwood. “She’s a bit out of place, don’t you think? What’s your name?”

Feeling dozens of eyes on me, “Emily.”

“There’s something about Emily here,” George said. “Avant-garde possibilities, Mr. Blackwood. May I have your permission to follow her today?”

Blackwood regarded me for a moment and then nodded. “Emily, you OK with George tagging along?”

My stomach fluttered, but I nodded. “No problem, sir.”

“Excellent,” Blackwood said. “Carry on then.”

While George and I made our way to the stables, I could feel his eyes observing me, not with intrusion but with genuine interest. “So, Emily, tell me about your role here.”

“Well, I started off just mucking stalls, but now I’m grooming the horses too.”

As he raised his camera, the morning sun glowed around him, framing the moment with an ethereal light. His camera clicked as he captured our approach to the barn. “And how’s that working out?”

“Something is calming about it,” I said. “Each one of them is like a character from a story. They have their own personalities and own unique quirks.”

Intrigued, George lowered his camera. “Characters, you say?”

I nodded as a smile stretched across my lips. “Can’t use their real names. Mama’s Boy and Sugar Foot don’t exactly work with a team of horse heroes.”

“Horse heroes?”

“I have an active imagination.”

“I see. So, Emily, how did you come to work here? It’s not your everyday job, especially for someone your age.”

I shrugged, attempting to seem casual, though my heart was anything but. “Needed a change, I guess. Plus, I’ve always had a thing for horses. They’re ... I don’t know, kind of like living art.” A smile found its way to my lips while I thought of the majestic creatures that had somehow become integral to my life.

George's interest seemed to pique at my words. "Living art. That's an unusual way to put it. Do you have an artistic side?"

"A bit." Caught in our pleasant conversation, I felt relaxed. "I like to draw and create things, but that's not really what the ranch is about."

"True, but it's fascinating how different worlds intersect," George said. "What's been the most surprising part for you?"

"These horses. Each is like a new story with a unique temperament."

"Any favorites?"

A genuine and warm smile brightened my face. "Mama's Boy, here. For sure. He's the one responsible for getting me the grooming work." Reaching out, a sense of kinship blossomed with each gentle stroke.

"There must be something special about forming a bond like that. Feels rewarding, I imagine."

"It does. Sometimes, it feels like they understand me more than people do."

"Animals often do." A soft chuckle escaped him. "So, Emily, aside from drawing, what do you like to do in your free time?"

"Well, between ranch work and just trying to get by, there's not much room for free time ... but stories. I think up stories. The best part is that spare time isn't required."

"Stories are powerful. They can change perspectives, even lives." George's voice pulled me back as his words resonated with my own beliefs.

"I guess, in a way, that's what I'm doing here. Trying to capture a new part of my story."

"And what a story it must be." His smile was encouraging and a light amidst my uncertainty. "You're young yet here, doing something most people wouldn't dare to. There's a sense of adventure in that."

"That's what I love about graphic novels and ..."—oops—"sketching my own characters. It's the adventure."

“Graphic novels? Can’t say I’m familiar with that term. Is that some sort of comic book?” George’s confusion reminded me of the gap between my time and this one.

I scrambled for an explanation, and my heart raced at the slip. “Oh, um, yeah, it’s sort of like comic books but more ... elaborate, I guess.”

“Tell me more. Why haven’t I heard of them?”

His intrigue was noticeable and a telltale sign that my attempts at deflection had only fueled his curiosity. “Oh, they’re ... um, they’re kind of a niche thing. You know, just a different way of telling stories with pictures and words, more detailed than your typical comics.” I struggled to keep my composure, aware that each word could save or sink me.

“That sounds pretty revolutionary. I’m surprised it hasn’t made more of a splash. What kinds of stories do they tell?”

“All kinds. It’s not mainstream ... yet.” My voice was steady, but inside, I was anything but. “People are just beginning to experiment with the format.”

“Interesting.”

As George fiddled with his camera settings to capture the ranch’s shifting light, I stuffed stray bits of kindling into my backpack. *There, that should be enough.* Chestnut nickered as I approached, his coat gleaming under the barn’s dim lighting.

“You seem to have a way with these horses, Emily.”

“Maybe because I don’t treat them like horses. No doubt, the other ranch hands do. To me, they’re characters in a story. Take Chestnut here. I call him Blaze. He’s the leader of our superhero team. Strong and dependable, but he can be a bit too serious.” My voice carried a mix of fondness and amusement while Blaze nuzzled my hand, seeking treats.

George chuckled. “Superheroes ... like Superman and Wonder Woman?”

“Exactly, but a team.” Motioning toward a spirited black mare, I continued. “This is Shadow Dancer. She’s the stealth expert—quick, alert, and always snakes her way on you. She’s Blaze’s right-hand horse, always ready for action.”

As George's camera clicked, capturing the moment, his intrigue grew. "I can see that. And the others?"

Pointing out a sturdy bay, "Over there stands Boulder. He's the muscle of the team. Not the fastest horse in the stable, but you can always count on him to hold firm his ground."

"A powerful presence, indeed," nodding in agreement.

Leading George toward a playful palomino, "And here's Sunbeam. She's the light of the team, always cheerful, brightening everyone's day. She has a way of making even the toughest days seem easier."

"Got that certain glow about her, huh?"

Approaching a wise old gray, "That's Silver Sage. He's the wise one, the mentor. He's been around and knows a thing about life on the ranch. The younger horses look up to him."

George's voice, laced with respect, "A sage, undoubtedly," he echoed.

My gaze then fell on a frisky pinto. "Meet Patchwork. He's the team's wild card. Unpredictable, always full of surprises. Keeps everyone on their hooves."

George's laughter filled the stable. "Quite the character."

Then, we stopped by a large draft horse. "And last but not least, Titan. He's our gentle giant. Strong and big-hearted. He might look intimidating, but he's the most caring of them all. Together, they make up the Mighty Hoof."

"You've given them quite the personas. It's like you've created a magical world for them," George said, impressed.

"Just some stories I think up while working with them. Makes the day more interesting," adding a modest shrug.

"You have quite the imagination, Emily." With a spark of genuine interest in his eyes, "Ever thought about writing your stories down?"

"Why for? It's not like I'd ever read them. It's more fun to make up brand-new adventures."

"Just like that?"

"Care for a demonstration?"

"Off the top of your head?"

“Certainly! Like when Mighty Hoof had to save the ranch from the Storm of the Century. Blaze led the team, guiding them through the howling winds.”

“Sounds intense.”

“It was. Shadow Dancer used her speed to round up the scared calves while Boulder shielded them against the debris. Without him, we would have lost more than just a few fences.” My heart swelled with pride as I recounted their story.

George’s lens found my face, capturing a mix of nostalgia and joy. “And what about Sunbeam during all this?”

“Sunbeam was the one who kept everyone’s spirits up. She nudged and nuzzled the younger horses, reassuring them. Even in the darkest hour, she was a flame of hope. And Silver Sage, he was the strategist. He’s seen a zillion storms, so he advised where to take shelter and avoid the worst. His wisdom was invaluable.”

“A true veteran. And Patchwork?”

“Oh, Patchwork was the brave scout. He ventured out to assess the damage, even when it was risky. His reports helped us prepare for repairs the next day. And Titan, the gentle giant, was our anchor. In the heart of the storm, as chaos reigned and fear threatened to take hold, Titan stood unwavering. His actions were evidence of his unspoken vow to protect those in his charge.

“Not once did he falter, even as the barn trembled under the storm’s fury. Titan reinforced his position as our anchor with every door he nudged back and every frightened horse he comforted. His courage was silent, his resolve as deep as the roots of the ancient oaks that sheltered our home.

“The extent of the night’s havoc became clear as dawn broke. Titan hadn’t just saved the horses from injury. He’d preserved our sanctuary, sense of home, and safety amidst the chaos. In his quiet strength, I found a guiding star. His heroics were a reminder that true leadership is not just about facing the storm but being an anchor that holds fast for others. Titan ensured that we’d emerge unscathed and united when the winds passed, stronger in the knowledge that we are not alone.”

“Wow, quite the hero.”



“And the next day, when the sun finally shone, Sunbeam led the charge. She frolicked in the fields, reminding everyone that life goes on, and we grow stronger from our trials.” As I concluded, a smile spread across my face.

“What a team! You’ve given life to each of them in such a unique way.” George’s words wrapped around me like a warm blanket. “That was fantastic.”

“Thank you, but no biggie. I could do that every minute of the day and never repeat myself—kind of a curse.”

George probed, “How a curse?”

“It’s all I think about. Gotten me in trouble a few times. Want to hear about the Midnight Mystery?”

“Love mysteries. I’m intrigued!” George leaned forward with his camera ready.

“One night, the ranch was eerily quiet when suddenly, all the horses became restless. It started with Titan. He heard a faint sound coming from the old barn. Usually, nobody dares go near it at night. It’s full of strange shadows and creaky noises.

“The team, led by Blaze, assigned Shadow Dancer to scout, her eyes adjusting quickly to the darkness. Boulder and Titan were right behind, ready for anything.” My voice dropped to a suspenseful whisper as I continued.

“And the discovery?” George asked, pressing his camera to capture every flicker of emotion on my face.

“In the far corner, under some old hay, they found a litter of kittens. Their mother, a stray cat, was nowhere to be found. The Mighty Hoof stood guard all night, keeping the kittens safe.”

“Heartwarming. What happened to the kittens?”

“The next morning, the ranch hands found them, thanks to Sunbeam, who refused to leave their side. And Shadow Dancer, she became their unofficial guardian, checking on them until the ranch families adopted them.”

“Seems like there’s no end to their heroics.”

“Each day brings something new for the Mighty Hoof. But that’s life at the ranch—full of surprises and minor miracles. The Mighty Hoof is always ready for their next adventure.”

“And you can do this till the cows come home?”

“Or until dragons roost. Pretty much.”

“You have a gift, Emily,” George said, his voice sincere.

“Thanks, George,” humbled and heartened by his words. “But a gift? I don’t know about that.”

George shook his head. “I don’t know, Emily. Few people can create such imaginative characters and stories without some measure of thought.”

“The triangle. It’s time for lunch.”

Lunchtime found us perched on hay bales. With the sun high and fierce, a gentle breeze that carried the scent of earth and wildflowers tempered its intensity. Ever the instigator of new experiences, George announced his intention to fetch his pad and pencils from the truck. “Might be fun for Emily to sketch something,” he said with a glance my way. “Perhaps you can do caricatures of the ranch hands.”

“Uh ...”

Undeterred by my hesitation, George said, “Hey, what do you say we get a portrait session with Emily, men?” A smile followed his words. “It’s just for fun, Emily.” My desire not to disappoint and somehow make right what had once gone wrong nudged me forward. *No different from the park. I can do this.*

George fetched a pad of paper and pencils with a swiftness that allowed no room for second thoughts. As the ranch hands encircled us, I held a hesitant pencil. My first strokes were timid as if testing the waters of an unknown sea. Yet, as lines formed, a semblance of comfort overcame me as my pencil’s motion grew more assured.

The ranch hands, a mix of rugged faces and weathered hands, peered over my shoulder with growing interest. The atmosphere, charged with my initial apprehension, softened into light-hearted banter and laughter.

“Hey, that kinda looks like me!” Surprise colored his voice while I captured his likeness with a humorous twist.

“Make sure you get my handsome side,” said another in jest.

Caricatures took shape on the paper one by one, and with each completion, the ranch hands' appreciation grew. Even the most stoic among them couldn't hide a chuckle or a softened gaze when presented with their exaggerated portraits.

George, ever the observer, moved with unobtrusive grace. He captured the smiles, candid moments, and subtle transformation unfolding. Through his lens, a different facet of ranch life emerged—where laughter bridged gaps and art drew people closer.

Among the crew was a hand known for his reserved nature. From the get-go, he eyed the drawing session with smoldering skepticism. Yet, his expression softened when faced with the caricature capturing his essence with warmth and wit. A genuine smile broke through, speaking volumes of the silent appreciation blooming within.

George's perceptive gaze unveiled a narrative of connection, where barriers vanished and respect triumphed. And at that moment, I realized that maybe, in the grand tapestry of stories that made up Blackwood Ranch, there was room for my own.

With a smirk, one of the ranch hands tossed a challenge into the mix. "Why not give Blackwood a go, Emily? Imagine capturing that stern mug of his on paper." The idea, audacious and fraught with potential pitfalls, quickly gained traction.

Caught in a whirlwind of encouragement and playful jibes, my mind raced. The thought of refusing crossed my mind. Yet, George, the instigator of deeper connections, leaned in. "It might just show him in a new light, you know." To sketch or not to sketch—a question not just of artistry but of belonging.

With a resolve that surprised even me, I let my pencil prance on the paper, guided by a mixture of trepidation and exhilaration. The sketch that emerged was one of respect, laced with a touch of humor that I hoped would not offend but endear. My sculpted lines told a story about a man who led the ranch and the myriad emotions beneath his stoic surface.

The moment of reckoning came all too soon. Laughter and indistinct murmurs faded into a tense hush as Blackwood himself

approached. The ranch hands stood back, revealing the sketch now the center of all attention. My heart pounded like a rogue drum against my ribs as his gaze fell upon the paper. Time, it seemed, held its breath.

Then, breaking through the silence came a chuckle—a rare and unexpected sound from the man before us. Blackwood studied the sketch, and then a smile cracked the stern facade we had all grown accustomed to. “Not bad, Emily. Not bad at all.” His words, simple yet laden with unexpected warmth, washed over me like the first rains of spring.

As Blackwood turned to leave, shaking his head in bemused disbelief, a sense of accomplishment settled over me. In that sketch, lines and laughter had woven a new narrative, one where respect and recognition painted a brighter horizon.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### *Daybreak*

As we left the lunch area, I rode high in my morning's success. My caricatures had thoroughly entertained the ranch hands, revealing a more lighthearted side to the rugged men. Even stoic Henry smiled at my exaggerated drawing of his nose and chin.

"Your talent," said George, his boots kicking up dust with every step, "it's something special, Emily. With such skills, your work could be featured in the paper or displayed in town. I've got a contact at the *Daily Camera*. They're always looking for artists and cartoonists. Your sketches ... they deserve an audience."

I offered a polite smile, though his enthusiasm bordered on overwhelming. "That's kind of you to say, but I'm just happy that folks enjoyed the drawings." While flattered, I also felt the creeping claws of expectation taking hold, so I tried to steer the conversation back to the tasks at hand. "We should return to the horses."

George followed me toward the stables, either oblivious or indifferent to my attempt at redirection. "Have you considered submitting anything to the county fair? There's an art exhibition that draws huge crowds. Gets your name out there, at least locally."

“Oh, I don’t know about all that. Nobody wants to see my stuff.”

Within mere feet from the stable door, the sound of hooves startled us. In a burst of untamed energy, Mama’s Boy charged from his stall and pummeled George to the ground. My heart leaped to my throat, sidestepping just in time.

“George!” My hands trembled as I rushed to his side. “Are you OK?”

“I’m fine,” though the dust on his shirt and the shock in his eyes told a different tale. “But, Emily—Mama’s Boy ...”

Realizing what had occurred crashed over me like a tidal wave, leaving me feeling shattered and helpless. *The latch.* “I—I have to go after him,” I stammered, though my limbs felt like lead. The urge to flee, to run from my mistake, gripped me. The weight of failure, the sting of disappointment in George’s gaze, and the stain on earlier triumphs rendered their verdict.

In the immediate aftermath, the air at Blackwood Ranch grew heavy with tension. Ranch hands, once scattered, converged with a sense of urgency to retrieve the wayward horse, their movements swift and practiced. Others, drawn by the commotion, gathered with wide eyes of shock and curiosity as the tranquility of the morning shattered like dropped glass.

Blackwood’s approach broke through the crowd like a ship through calm waters. His presence, always commanding, seemed even more imposing as he neared the epicenter of the disturbance. Concern etched his features, and frustration colored his tone. But his stern voice underscored the gravity of the situation. “What happened here?” he asked.

His eyes locked onto mine while I stood frozen. The earlier exhilaration of my morning’s achievement gave way to the wreckage of embarrassment and guilt. Each step felt like the ground beneath me had frozen over, and my heart raced with the fear of losing my footing. The ranch hands’ murmurs and Blackwood’s commanding voice swirled around me, a clamor that seemed to amplify my internal turmoil.

As Blackwood awaited an explanation, words failed me. My throat tightened, and a bucket of emotions threatened to spill over. The weight of disappointment in his eyes pressed down on me with the heavy hand of responsibility. I had been part of this ranch, a cog in a well-oiled machine, but my negligence had thrown everything off balance.

“I must not have secured the slide bolt.”

“It’s there for a reason, Miss Emily.”

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Blackwood. It will never happen again. I promise.”

“See that it doesn’t.”

When Blackwood turned to leave, Cowboy stepped forward. His somber demeanor signaled an undertone of concern. His voice, when he spoke, carried a blend of disappointment and a measured reprimand. “Emily, we rely on everyone to pay attention. It’s not just about the task you’re doing. It’s also about keeping everyone safe, including the animals.” I’m sure he intended his words as a lesson, but they echoed like a sentence, sealing my fears about my place among these seasoned ranch hands.

Cowboy shifted his gaze. “Excuse us a minute, George. We won’t be long.”

His camera now a mere afterthought in the unfolding scene, George took a step back while Cowboy pivoted. The brim of his hat cast deep shadows across his eyes, yet his face’s unyielding lines were stark under the midday sun.

“Emily,” his voice carrying the weight of unspoken expectations, “this life is about commitment. Every moment, every breath here demands your full participation, not just a part of it.” He paused, letting the gravity of his words hang in the air.

A lump formed in my throat. With my voice just above a whisper, “I understand, and I’m truly sorry. I just ...” The rest of my apology got lost, tangled in a maze of self-doubt and introspection.

Cowboy took a deliberate step closer. As he stood there, his shoulders squared, and his eyes locked with determination. “Emily, your talent with the horses doesn’t go unnoticed. That’s a rare

gift,” he conceded. A slight lift of his hat exposed a glimmer of optimism in his eyes. “But talent alone doesn’t cut it here. Be present, not only physically but also mentally, for the animals and your fellow ranchers.”

My hands wrung the fabric of my shirt as if trying to squeeze out my anxiety. “I didn’t intend to cause any issues. I’ll make it right.” The strength of my conviction surpassed my emotions. He offered a nod, more austere this time, an acknowledgment laced with the expectation of immediate improvement. “We all stumble, Emily. But realize that every misstep here affects everyone at the ranch, not just you.”

As Cowboy walked away, reabsorbing himself into the rhythm of the ranch, I stood with a complex cocktail of emotions brewing inside. His words, sterner and more admonishing than any I’d encountered, weren’t just a critique of my work ethic. They were a fundamental lesson on life’s interconnectedness—especially in a place as unforgiving and rewarding as a ranch.

I rejoined George with my tail between my legs. “Still want to shadow me, George?”

“You bet.”

“I’m so sorry. Mama’s Boy could have done a number on you ... or worse.”

“Accidents happen.”

“That was no accident. I screwed up.”

With his expression easing into softness, George set his camera down and turned to face me. “Emily, you’re being too hard on yourself. This isn’t about screwing up. It’s about learning, growing.”

Avoiding eye contact, I shook my head while watching the dust swirl beneath us. “I knew better. I even asked about—” My cracking voice exposed my frustration and disappointment.

“Hey,” George’s voice was gentle, coaxing me to look up. He stepped closer, offering a reassuring presence. “You’ve had successes today too. Don’t let one moment overshadow all the strides you’ve made.”



A laugh, more bitter than amused, seeped out. “Strides? Feels more like I’ve tripped at the finish line.”

He chuckled, his sound warm and genuine. “Well, if you’re going to trip, the finish line’s the place to do it because it means you ran the race, Emily.” Finally, I looked up and met his gaze. In his eyes, I found an unwavering belief running counter to my doubt and internal struggle. “And you know what? Tomorrow, you’ll be better for it. The ranch, this life . . . it’s tough. It demands a lot but gives back in ways you can’t yet imagine.”

His words, kind yet firm, chipped away at my wall of self-reproach. “You really believe that?”

George rested his hand on my shoulder. “With all my heart. Today, you learned a lesson. That’s not failure. That’s invaluable experience.”

I took a deep breath and let George’s words seep through the cracks of my resolve. Amid the day’s weight and the shadows of my self-doubt, a glimmer of hope dawned. “Thank you, George.” My words felt small and inadequate, but they were earnest. “I guess tomorrow’s another day, huh?”

His smile returned, bright and encouraging. “Exactly,” he said. “And who knows what victories it’ll bring? Let’s capture what’s left of today. Many stories remain to be told.”

I heeded Cowboy’s words for the rest of the day—commitment, full participation—while George continued to snap pictures. But the exploits of the Mighty Hoof remained in my mind, raging a constant battle against the monotony of my immediate focus.

The clanging triangle reverberated through the afternoon air, signaling the end of the workday muster and report. George’s words of encouragement echoed as we parted ways, but an internal chorus of self-reproach quickly drowned them out. With the day’s mistakes weighing me down like stones in my pockets, my footsteps felt heavy as I made my way to the Reynolds.

Upon entering the kitchen, the warm, bustling atmosphere usually brought comfort, but today, it felt suffocating. Nana, always the heart of the household, greeted me with a knowing

look. She handed me a knife to chop vegetables and said, “You’ve had quite the day, huh?”

“I ... I just want to forget about it,” I said. Focusing on the rhythmic slicing of carrots, I hoped the task would mute my troubled thoughts.

Nana sighed, leaning against the counter with a dish towel in hand. “That’s not how things work here, Emily. You gotta face things head-on, learn from them.”

“I am,” I said. The knife in my hand paused mid-air. “I just want this day to end.”

The kitchen door swung open with a force that seemed to carry the weight of the ranch’s entire history. Grandpa’s frame filled the doorway, and his expression was as stormy as the gathering clouds outside. The air in the room shifted, growing tenser by the second as his gaze found mine.

“Emily,” his voice stern, “what happened today? I expect better judgment with the horses. You know the risks.” His words felt like punches, each one hammering at my gut. With the knife now lying forgotten next to a half-chopped carrot, I braced myself against the counter.

My voice carried just above a whisper. “I’m sorry, Tom. It won’t happen again.” Grandpa’s disapproval pressed upon me. It felt as if he squeezed the very air from my lungs.

His frustration seemed to grow with each passing second. “Apologies don’t prevent injury or death, Emily. Thing is, you know better, which means you got distracted. Distractions have no place on a ranch. I need to know you’re taking this seriously. That you got your head in the game, for your sake and ours.”

His words, meant to be a wake-up call, felt like a sentence. My knuckles whitened as I clenched the edge of the countertop. His voice’s cumulative pressure, sternness, and the hint of doubt in his eyes pushed me past my breaking point.

Without another word, I pushed away from the counter, leaving the knife and the unfinished vegetables behind. I couldn’t bear another moment of scrutiny and disappointment. The kitchen,

once a place of warmth and belonging, turned unbearable. I needed air. I needed space. I needed to be anywhere but there.

Each step away from Grandpa's disappointed gaze, lingering like a heavy cloud, felt like a desperate grasp for freedom and a chance to breathe again. As I stepped outside, the air felt crisp and piercing, mirroring the chaos that raged within me.

By the time I reached my hovel, the weight of the day had crushed me into silence. The air grew calmer, and a sense of tranquility filled the surroundings as I labored to start a fire. With each sharp strike of the matches, the sound echoed through the silence, amplifying the sense of urgency in my racing thoughts. The small flames that finally took life seemed like a meager victory, but one I clung to, nonetheless. Sitting back, I let the growing warmth seep into my bones. My dinner—a humble bologna sandwich—added an unremarkable end to my day as I watched the fire dance its crackling ballet.

In the heart of that dance, a form emerged amidst the flicker and sway. A lion, its mane a cascade of fiery tendrils, took shape within the flames. Its eyes, fierce as glowing coals, held mine with unyielding audacity. It stared back at me with a silent roar that spoke of the strength that lay coiled within me.

Bathed in the growing light, the fire became a wise confidant, its crackling whispers revealing profound truths. In a majestic display, the lion of flames moved, exuding a sense of comfort and a fearless embodiment of courage that defied the encroaching night. Its fiery eyes locked onto mine, searing a challenge to rise above my fears into my soul.

The lion's tale, a narrative of trials faced with unwavering bravery, fought fierce battles in the arenas of its own making. It spoke not of victories without loss but the boldness to continue despite them. In this fiery pantomime, the lion imparted its wisdom by reminding me of Nana's words: bravery is not the absence of fear but the courage to face it.

The more I watched, the more the lion's fiery tale became my anthem, stirring a fierce desire to confront the unknown. As I surveyed the options before me, the intricate web of potential

outcomes overshadowed the utter simplicity of each choice. Stay and confront the consequences of my mistake or escape the heavy weight of guilt and judgment that threatened to consume me.

The fire crackled, indifferent to the storm raging in my mind. Each snap and pop echoed in my ears, pushing me towards a precipice. Then, like a sudden burst of light, the clarity that surged within me was as bright and blinding as the lion's fiery gaze. I had to leave but not to escape any expectations or judgmental stares. *My imagination and I don't belong here.*

With each leap and twist of the flames, I felt my resolve harden, and the embers of my determination fanned into a blaze. The lion's fiery essence, a mirror to my inner strength, would carry with me into the world beyond my hovel's confining walls. Tomorrow, I would set forth, armed with a courage that burned as brightly as the flames before me. The lion in the fire had roared just for me tonight, and I heeded its call.

The hours slipped by, marked only by the diminishing pile of wood and the steady decrease in the fire's life. As the first gray hints of dawn erased the glimmering stars, I packed my few belongings. *You're next, Codex.* My fingers brushed against its cover, pausing at the embossed figure of a lion. *Freaky. What are you doing on there, Mr. Lion?* Once forgotten, the lion's image now gnawed at me. *Are you trying to tell me something, Caretaker?*

With sunrise approaching with every heartbeat, I slipped the Codex into my pack before one last look around the cabin. Leaving just before first light allowed me a silent exit and an amicable goodbye to a place I could no longer call home. A mix of relief and apprehension filled me, leaving me dizzy as I stepped onto the road.

My boots ground against the gravel with purpose as I made my way to the main highway, each step a beat in the farewell song of my past life. With my arm extended and my thumb out, I waited for a ride, a stranger to ferry me toward an uncertain future. The open road stretched before me, both daunting and liberating in its vastness. As the first car slowed, its headlights shined through the dim morning light. A swirl of thoughts filled my head, but

only the road would tell if I was running from my problems or toward a new beginning.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### *Lost or Found*

The chill of the morning air bit at my face. And with every car that zoomed past, my hope to hitch a ride disappeared into the distance. With my thumb jutting out in a silent plea for mercy, a relic from years past finally pulled over in pity. Its body displayed a patchwork of earth tones, rust, and a sign that read Shorty's Hay. Yet, it exuded a sense of sturdy reliability.

The driver, his face etched with lines of kindness, motioned me in. And the engine, as if it understood my plight, hummed while I approached. "Need a lift?"

Gratitude flooded me as I clambered into the passenger seat. "Thank you. I appreciate it," I said in a voice laced with relief.

As we drove, the truck's cabin filled with polite chit-chat. The driver, who introduced himself as Hank, had a gentle curiosity about him. "Whatcha got in there?" he asked, nodding toward my bag.

"Just my life ..." I replied, pulling out my sketchbook. With each turned page, a realm of ink and imagination unveiled stories of dreams whispered and memories recalled. Hank glanced over, and his eyes lit up. In what seemed to be genuine curiosity, he inquired about my thoughts behind them. I obliged, sharing several stories that inspired a multitude of sketches.

With sincere admiration in his tone, “Those are pretty good, missy.”

“Thanks.” *Seriously? Or are you just being polite?*

I set the sketchbook beside my feet while Hank turned our conversation to the weather. “Yep, hardest winter I can remember. Considering I’m older than dirt, that’s been a few years.” I couldn’t help but chuckle at the comparison of his age.

The town eventually emerged on the horizon, a collection of hope and despair mingled together. “Know where yer goin’?”

“The park would be great.”

After a few moments of silence, “Here you go. Good luck out there.”

“Thanks again, Hank. Take care,” I said, stepping out into the bustle of town. The sound of the truck’s engine grew fainter with each passing second. But as it faded into traffic, the realization of my blunder hit me like a punch to the gut.

*My sketchbook!*

Panic seized me, icy and sharp. “Wait!” I yelled, but the vibrant sounds of the town’s heartbeat swallowed up my voice. My arms flailed, desperate to reclaim a piece of my soul, but it proved futile. The truck, and with it my sketchbook, had vanished.

As I stood there, a sense of numbness engulfed me, like a relentless tide of despair pulling at my ankles, ready to drag me down. *How could I have been so careless?* As I wrapped my arms around myself, the streets grew more hostile, the shadows deepened, and the road ahead became uncertain.

Breathless and heart-pounding, I sprinted down the bustling street while the echo of the truck’s engine still haunted my ears. The first person I encountered was a street vendor. Laden with abundant fresh fruits and fragrant flowers, her cart brought a burst of vibrant colors that only deepened my despair.

“Excuse me,” gasping and struggling to catch my breath. “Did you see a truck pass by? Shorty’s Hay written on the side?”

The vendor, a kind-faced woman with streaks of silver in her hair, paused her meticulous arrangement of apples. “Dear, trucks

come and go. But Shorty's? He's likely heading toward the feed store. That way, down a fair bit."

With a grateful nod, I hurried away, clinging to the vendor's directions as a glimmer of hope. The streets blurred as I maneuvered through the morning crowd, each step fueled by urgency.

A local shopkeeper's bell jingled as I pushed through the door. The cozy interior offered a welcome respite from the busy streets. Lifting his eyes, the man behind the counter seemed surprised, possibly at my disheveled appearance.

"I'm sorry to bother you," I said, my voice laced with desperation. "I'm looking for the feed store."

Leaning on the counter, "Feed store. Ya ... Two more blocks. Turn right. Can't miss it."

"Thank you. Thank you so much."

The shopkeeper offered a sympathetic smile. "Good luck, young lady."

*There it is.* Amidst my turmoil, the sight of its rustic sign brought relief. Inside, the air was thick with the scent of hay and the soft murmur of customers. I approached the clerk, a young man with a friendly demeanor, my heart hitching with hope.

"Hi, I need your help," I said, steadying my voice. "I'm looking for Shorty. It's very important."

Pausing, he tilted his head and eyes to the right. "I believe I saw him a bit ago. You might catch him at Stumpy's Diner. Shorty's a regular around lunchtime."

A mixture of relief and renewed panic settled in. "Stumpy's Diner ... Where?"

"Not far. Thataway," he pointed. As I turned to leave, "Good luck," the clerk called out.

Closing the door behind me with a soft click, I stood outside the feed store, collecting my thoughts. The lead to Stumpy's Diner was vague, but I clung to it as my only hope. The fate of my sketchbook's future loomed in the balance with each passing second, its weight pressing down, impossible to disregard.

With a deep breath, I set off again. The streets of the town, now a map of possibilities, stretched before me. With each step,



I promised I wouldn't give up, not while a part of me was still waiting to be found.

"Stumpy's Diner?" I asked a passerby.

"One more block. Turn right. Keep going until you come to it."

"Thanks."

*There's his truck. Please ...*

My heart raced as I sprinted toward my life's blood, pumping adrenaline through my veins. Stepping onto the floorboards, my eyes searched the cab. *No ... Shorty, please be here.*

With a flutter of hope, I pushed open the diner door, only to be met with the echoing sound of fear, intensifying my desperation.

"Shorty?"

"This way."

"I see him. Thanks." As I approached his burly figure, I trembled.

"Young lady ... never expected to see you again."

"My sketchbook. Please tell me you have it."

Shorty inhaled deeply and shook his head, displaying his obvious frustration. "I'm so sorry, Emily. I stopped for a donut just after I dropped you off. Figuring you were long gone, I tossed it in a dumpster at Jake's Bakery."

My heart sank to my stomach. "I'm sure it's still there. Which way?"

"It's on the other end of Broadway. About a mile."

With a mix of sorrow and a faint sense of optimism, I stepped out of Stumpy's Diner. Like a dense fog, Shorty's revelation enveloped me. Broadway, bustling with energy and endless shops, made the distance between me and my cherished sketchbook feel dubious. Determined, I began my trek.

The morning sun smiled upon the city and warmed the pavement ahead, contrasting the turmoil inside. Each step was a fight and a desperate attempt to retrieve a fragment of my soul that I'd stranded in a careless blunder. Yet, driven by a force stronger than despair, I pressed on. My art, my dreams captured in ink and paper, propelled me forward.

Shorty had said a mile. It seemed both insignificant and insurmountable. My mind raced with possibilities. *What if it's gone? Lost forever in a heap of forgotten refuse?* The thought tightened my chest, making each breath a struggle.

A kind-eyed woman noticed my distress as I navigated the crowd. "You alright, dear?" she asked. Amidst the chaos of my thoughts, her voice emerged like a gentle anchor, providing solace and stability.

I offered a small, grateful smile. "Just trying to find something important I lost." The truth was far more profound than my words conveyed.

"Well, keep your chin up. Things have a way of working out," she said, gently patting my arm. Her words, simple yet sincere, bolstered my spirits.

Dashing down Broadway, I dodged pedestrians and leaped over minor obstacles, driven by a singular goal. The bakery, the last known location of my precious sketchbook, seemed miles away despite the reality of a few blocks. My lungs burned with the effort, and my heart pounded against my chest, echoing my frantic thoughts.

Upon arrival, I burst through the bakery's door. The sweet smell of fresh baked goods did little to soothe my racing heart. "Excuse me," I panted to the woman behind the counter, "could you tell me where the dumpsters are?"

With a puzzled look, she pointed toward the back. "Around the alley," she said, her curiosity piqued by my urgency.

I muttered a quick thanks, feeling a surge of determination fueling my every step. The alley greeted me with a grim sight: two dumpsters standing like guardians of despair. I approached the first, and the smell hit me before I even reached its side. Climbing up, I peered inside, hoping for a miracle. Instead, I found nothing but garbage and food scraps. *Gross.* My heart sank further.

I moved to the second dumpster, praying for better luck. Peeking in, I saw only garbage bags and broken-down boxes—a disheartening sight. With little choice and a deep breath, I chose

the second dumpster—it seemed a skosh more bearable. Upon entering, the overpowering stench served as a grim reminder of my desperation. Hope and dread filled my every movement as I sorted through the wreckage of scraps and soggy paper. Time seemed to expand as I searched, stretching out with each passing second.

A clattering noise jolted me back to the real world with the sound of a garbage truck. Panic surged as I watched it approach the bin next to mine. Frantically waving my arms, I tried to catch the driver's attention but to no avail. I could only watch in despair as the truck swallowed the bin's contents, taking with it any lingering optimism.

Climbing out, I stood for a moment, covered in grime. I almost screamed at the sky. *But what good will that do? My sketches, those pieces of my soul laid out on paper, were gone. Suck it up, girl.* Exasperated and defeated, yet as I walked away from the alley, a sense of calm settled over me. *Why? That's what plagued me. Why am I not distraught? Maybe it's the finality of it. Perhaps because my past is now officially buried.*

With each step burdened by the day's letdowns, exhausted and puzzled, I moved through Boulder's noonday sun. As I trudged along, my gaze fell upon an old man sitting on a park bench, solitude his only companion. His attire spoke of better days past, yet his eyes held a glimmer of deep-seated wisdom.

"Mind if I join you?" I asked, motioning to the space beside him.

He shook his head as a warm smile broke across his weathered face. "I'd enjoy the company." His voice sang with the echoes of yesteryears. Settling beside him, an unspoken connection took root as his perspective of the world revealed layers unseen to the casual eye.

As I sat, I couldn't help but feel a strange sense of familiarity. It was in how he looked at the world—as if he saw beyond its surface, into its very essence.

"You appear to have lost something precious."

Taken aback, “You’re either a mind reader or unusually perceptive.”

As he placed his hands in his pockets, “Your concern is evident.”

A soft chuckle escaped from my lips. “Maybe not so perceptive. Confused is what I am.”

“Forgive me, Emily, your—”

My eyes narrowed. “How do you know my name? We’re strangers!”

His eyes shifted to my backpack bearing my name. “Your tote. Now, where was I? Ah ... it’s your confusion that’s causing your concern. This item, it’s playing games with your emotions?”

“Big time. My sketchbook ...” I sat shaking my head. “It was a part of me.”

The old man nodded as if he understood the implications of my words. “The shadow has passed, revealing the sun’s true brilliance. You’re at peace,” he leaned closer—“mostly, but you don’t understand why.” Sitting straight, he said, “Emily, those sketches ... were mere reflections of you, not your essence.”

Staring at my hands, “I don’t understand.”

He offered a gentle smile. “The calm you feel? Deep down, you understand those pages didn’t capture your true self because none depicted life through your eyes. You have thousands of images of dragons and kings within you. Your sketchbook ... a loss, yes, but it’s replaceable.

“Your essence, your soul’s narrative, remains untouched and waits to be captured. When you finally let go and put Emily on paper, you’ll understand why your emotions are the puzzle they are.” Nodding again, “We often cling to possessions as if they define us. But it’s the passion that fuels those creations that truly matters, right? They’re the ripples that continue long after the stone has settled at the bottom of the river.”

His words felt like a potion, soothing yet stirring something within me. I opened up about my art, my escape from the ranch, and the haunting feeling of being lost. The way he listened made me feel heard, finally.

As our conversation continued, he spoke of life and time in metaphors that danced around the edges of familiarity. “We chase the wind, hoping to grasp it, yet it slips through our fingers like the fading daylight.”

While his gaze fixed on the enchanting sway of the leaves, his analogy hit home. As perplexing as it was, this loss signaled a new beginning, not a conclusion. The future was a blank canvas, and I was the artist ready to fill it with new dreams, challenges, and triumphs.

“Every choice is like a drop in a river.” Before continuing, his eyes locked onto mine with an intensity that seemed to reach my soul. “What is it you desire most, Emily?”

The question hung in the air, and at that moment, I realized I’d been chasing a ghost from my past—a past I’d left behind. “I want to be me,” I said, but the words carried my resolve.

“Is there a millstone attached to you, holding you back?”

Turning to the old man, “Not anymore. The only thing standing in my way is me.”

He nodded and stood as if his purpose had been fulfilled. “Then go, child. Let the river flow and with it, your life.”

As he walked away, blending into the crowd, I felt a renewed sense of clarity. His presence had been a guiding star in the confusing night of my life. The encounter, echoing the Caretaker’s wisdom, fortified my resolve. Ahead lay not the replication of past mistakes but the canvas of possibility, ready for my hand to shape its destiny.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# *Of Ariella and Lightning Boy*

**A**s the day dwindled, I ate my last piece of bread and bologna. Checking my pockets with abounding hopes ... *fifty lousy cents. Food or art supplies? Be smart, Em.*

Across the street, a Woolworths beckoned. I'd heard about the old five and ten-cent stores and thought, just maybe. Stepping off the curb, the store's lights promised new beginnings. With what I hoped was enough for a few sheets of paper, I faced the threshold, ready to sketch the unwritten chapters of my life.

With a push of the door, a bell chimed overhead. Greeting me with a curious but welcoming gaze, a lady said, "Welcome to Woolworths. Can I help you find something?"

Barely above a whisper, I asked, "Do you have any art supplies?"

"We have a few things, not much though. Follow me," she said, striding to a small section of the store. "What are you looking for?"

"Ideally, a sketchbook. Just some paper if need be." My fingers traced the edges of the sparse selection. "Something I can afford."

She directed my attention to a nice-sized and bound pad of paper. *No way I can afford that.* “This one’s two bits. Can you manage that?”

I scrunched my face. “Two bits?”

“Twenty-five cents.”

*Pixy dust!* My face relaxed.

“I take it you’re an artist?” she said with a slight tilt of her head.

Feeling a bit relieved, I mustered a small smile and said, “Yeah.”

“What of? If you don’t mind me asking.” Her interest seemed genuine.

A faint smile crossed my lips. “Most anything. Cartoon characters. Superheroes. Caricatures.”

The lady raised her eyebrows. “Caricatures? What’s that?”

“People, but exaggerated.”

“Any good?”

“Some people seem to think so. I’ll take it. The price is perfect, and it suits my needs.” Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out a quarter. *There goes my bologna.* “Would you like a demonstration?”

“You want to sketch me?” she asked with widened eyes and a hand to her chest.

“Why not? Besides, it will help pay for this.”

The lady raised a brow. Not a lot, but enough to indicate a bit of surprise. “How much do you charge?”

“Ten cents if you’re happy with it. Free if you’re not, but I know you will be.”

“That sounds quite reasonable. Deal.”

I searched for a pencil with a renewed sense of purpose. Right when I started sketching, the bell above the door announced a new arrival with a cheerful tinkle. “Dorothy Walker! I haven’t seen you in weeks.”

Our new arrival strolled to the counter and announced that things had been crazy. “Bob was sick, then I came down with it. Couldn’t shake it.” The lady turned and asked, “What’s happening here?”

“Oh, this—sorry, dear. I didn’t get your name,” the lady said.

Focusing on the sketch, “Emily, Emily Reynolds. And you are?”

“Helen Miller, dear. Look, Dorothy. She’s drawing an exaggerated version of me. What did you call it, Emily?”

“Caricature. You work with people’s prominent features. Your eyes, in your case, and then you go from there. Simple.” My pencil flew across the paper. “It doesn’t take me long.”

“It sure doesn’t. You are good. What do you think, Dorothy?” she asked.

“Amazing.”

“I see you in my mind immediately. No thinking. I just sketch what I see. Would you like a superhero persona? No extra charge. I’ll make you Ms. Congeniality.”

“That sounds terrific.” As the door opened yet again, Helen called out, “Dave! What can I do you for?”

“Chesterfields. What’s with the gaggle?” With a teasing tone in his voice, “You hens cooking something up?”

“Check it out, Dave,” Helen waved the finished caricature with pride.

Dave’s eyes widened. “Wow!”

“Yes, wow,” wearing a satisfied smile. “Here’s your quarter back, dear. This is worth every penny.” She pointed to a spot on the wall and said, “I’m going to find a frame and put this on display right up there.”

Already reaching for his wallet, Dave asked, “Would you like to do me next, Emily?”

“Hold the phone,” said Mrs. Walker, “but I believe I was here first. Emily, dear, make me Super Mom.”

“It’s ten cents if you’re happy. No charge if you’re not.”

The lady smiled and shook her head. “Sweetie, if you sketch me anything like the one you did for Helen, a quarter’s a bargain. My, you are talented.”

“Well, thank you, Mrs. Walker. That’s very kind of you to say.”

She spoke in a voice tinged with awe and said, “Call me Dorothy. Wherever did you learn to draw like this?”



Already starting on her caricature, “Never had a lesson. It just comes to me.”

It didn’t take long for a line to form, and it stretched long enough for Mrs. Miller to ask us all to step outside. “I still have a business to run, dear.”

Curious, I asked if she had a spare chair I could use. Before long, a crowd had gathered around me, their curious gazes fixed upon me in complete silence.

“Alright, folks. You’re all blocking the sidewalk. Break it up, people,” a stern voice said from behind the crowd.

“Nobody’s hurting anyone, officer,” I heard.

“Let me through. What’s going on?”

“We’re taking in the show, officer,” said a voice from the crowd.

“Show? Young lady. You need to move along. We don’t allow panhandling in Boulder. We have a strict city ordinance,” he said with authority.

“She’s not panhandling. The girl’s performing a service,” yelled out another voice.

“Yeah. Leave the girl alone.”

Straight away, I heard the door open. “What’s the commotion?” Mrs. Miller asked.

“This clown of a cop is trying to shut down this talented young artist, Helen.”

“It’s against the law,” said the officer.

“She’s not hurting anyone,” said yet another voice.

“Mrs. Miller. Sorry for all of this. I’ll have this cleared out pronto.”

“Officer Billings! You’ll do no such thing. Leave the girl be, and pull that stick out of your ass. Emily’s not breaking any laws, and she’s good for business. Don’t make me call Chief Bower. We’re friends from way back.”

Then, a timid little girl, about ten, approached me. Her eyes sparkled with curiosity. She’d been looking on while my sketches took shape. “What would you like me to draw for you?” I asked, followed by a soft smile tugging on my lips.

She fidgeted, twisting a strand of her hair. “I . . . I don’t know.”

“How about I turn you into a princess?” followed by a tilt of my head. “A princess locked in a tower, waiting for her knight to rescue her?”

Her eyes sparkled with delight, and her face beamed with an infectious glow. “Yes, please!”

As my pencil flitted across the page, I began narrating a story. “Once upon a time, in a kingdom far, far away, lived a princess with hair as golden as the sun and eyes as deep as the ocean. She lived in a magnificent castle, but an envious witch trapped her in the highest tower.” The little girl listened, enraptured, as the princess on the paper took shape. “This princess wasn’t just beautiful. She was brave and smart. Knowing her knight would come, she had plans of her own. From the old books hidden in the tower, she learned magic. She would fight right alongside her knight.”

I added final touches to the drawing—a fierce yet hopeful look in the princess’s eyes and a secret spell book under her arm. “There!” I said, presenting the drawing. “You, as the brave Princess Ariella, ready for adventure.”

The girl beamed. Clutching the sketch, “It’s beautiful!” As she ran off, “Thank you.”

An eager 11-year-old bounced up to me. With widened eyes and excitement in his voice, he asked, “Can you make me Superman fighting a bad guy?”

“Wouldn’t you rather be your own kind of superhero taking on some nasty thugs?”

His eyes grew even wider. “Can you do that?”

“Sure. How about a superhero who throws lightning bolts?”

“That would be cool.”

“Watch,” I said with an assuring smile. “Let’s create Lightning Boy.” My pencil moved with confidence, bringing Lightning Boy’s story to life. “Unlike Superman, he’s not from another planet. He’s just like you. But one day, he discovers he has this amazing power to control lightning!” The boy leaned in closer, surveying as the superhero came to life. I drew him in a dynamic

pose, lightning bolts arcing from his outstretched hands. “He uses his powers for good. Whenever villains try to cause trouble, Lightning Boy is there to stop them with his bolts of light.”

“What’s his weakness?” he asked, completely engrossed.

“Hmm, let’s see ... His power comes from the sun, so he has to recharge on clear days. That’s when he’s most like you and me.” When I finished the drawing, I handed it over. Lightning Boy had the child’s bright eyes and determined expression, surrounded by jagged lines of lightning. “There you go, your very own superhero: Lightning Boy, defender of justice.”

The boy beamed, holding up the drawing. “This is the coolest thing ever! Thank you!”

As he ran off to show his friends, I couldn’t help but smile, feeling a sense of accomplishment and connection. For a moment, the realm of superheroes and lightning bolts offered a wonderful place to be.

“I need my chair back, Emily. It’s time to close. But before you leave, can I get your phone number? I’m going to display your drawing with pride. Undoubtedly, others will ask for contact information.”

“Thank you, but I don’t have a number to give you.”

“Then an address?”

“I ... I ... don’t remember. I’m new here.”

“New here. Hmm ...” I knew she didn’t believe me. I didn’t believe me. “Are you in trouble?”

“Not the kind you’re inferring.”

“Then which kind?”

“Thank you, Mrs. Miller, for standing up for me today. That doesn’t happen often. I’ll be going.”

“Emily, which kind?”

*You aren’t gonna let this go, are you?* “It’s not trouble ... exactly. Does homeless count?”

“Oh, dear. You poor thing. Come inside. How old are you? The truth.” I dared not lie to her.

“You don’t appear to be abused or battered. Tell me. What’s going on? Have you no one who cares about you?”

I bounced my head about my shoulders. “Cat whiskers. As much as I want to say no, I know that’s not true. My situation is my doing. I screwed up. My imagination gets in the way. I know that.”

“You ran away?”

“Twice. Once from my home. Next time from a job.”

“I’m familiar. It’s called growing up, dear. For some, it’s more difficult than others. You know, when I could, I observed you this afternoon. I’ve never seen anything like you. You have a special talent. I observed you draw as you told a story. It was magic. You never even stopped to think. It simply poured out of you. It was truly amazing to witness.”

“I can’t turn it off.”

“I don’t believe that, dear. You choose not to. It’s easy in that world. Dragons and queens. Knights and fair maidens. Superheroes. You may think that reality dwarfs in comparison, but you would be mistaken. As magical and entertaining as your fantasy worlds may seem, they’re just vapor—nothing to last. The smiles you gave those kids today were priceless, as is genuine love, commitment, and sacrifice.”

“I guess.”

“Life is trying to teach you a lesson. I suggest you consider listening. Now, I could take you home with me, but I wouldn’t want to interfere with your schooling. Instead, take your young keister to the shelter on 3rd and 5th. Tell them I sent you. They’ll put you up and keep you safe. But don’t be surprised if they expect you to work to earn your keep.”

Leaving Woolworths, the cool evening air hit me, carrying city sounds and distant chatter. Each step felt heavier than the last, echoing my tumultuous thoughts. The neon lights of Boulder painted the streets in artificial hues, but the vibrancy couldn’t pierce the growing void within me.

As I made my way to the shelter, I witnessed people laughing and enjoying their evening, contrasting with the turmoil brewing inside. Turning a corner, the shelter came into view.

Its modest sign, Boulder City Shelter, was a light of hope and surrender. Standing a few yards away, *here goes . . .*

I took a deep breath and trudged toward the shelter door. Each step betrayed my silent admission of my need for help, a need I'd denied for too long. My hand trembled as I pushed open the door, crossing a threshold that felt like both an end and a beginning.

The warmth of the shelter enveloped me, a significant change from the chill of the night. Faces turned toward me, some curious, others indifferent. I was just another soul seeking refuge, yet its impact was overwhelming as if it carved a private chamber in my heart just for itself.

Just above a whisper, "Mrs. Miller sent me."

The staff person nodded. Her eyes reflected an understanding that needed no words. She led me to a small, clean bed in a communal room. It may not have been the Hilton, but it exceeded what I possessed mere hours ago.

As I lay down, the sounds of the shelter surrounding me, I couldn't help but experience a sense of relief. The day's events, the drawings, the confrontation with the officer, and Mrs. Miller's kindness swirled in my head. Grasping life's sudden shifts became an overwhelming task and served as a cruel reminder of its unpredictable nature.

My eyes shut while the vivid landscapes of my imagination surrendered to the blatant truth of my present. It was a moment of confrontation, raw and unshielded, with no sketches to veil the truth. The future approached like a silhouette of uncertainty. Yet beneath the calm of tonight's roof, the seeds of a new beginning took root.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### *In Life and Death*

The loud clatter of the shelter startled me, pulling me out of a restless sleep. Clanging pans, shouts, and hurried footsteps saturated the air inside the shelter's walls. Gone were the muffled mornings of my old life, where sunlight filtered through curtains, and the only sound was the distant hum of a waking city. Here, daylight barged in uninvited, and the air buzzed with the energy of too many lives crammed into too little space.

For a brief moment, I remained still, allowing the striking difference to envelop me. But with a resigned sigh, I swung my legs off the narrow bed, only for my feet to meet a cold and unforgiving floor. The shelter was a complete departure from the cozy, sheltered bubble of my past and an uncompromising instructor in the harsh realities of life.

As I dragged myself to a small basin, I splashed water on my face. The shock cleared the remnants of sleep and nudged me further into the realm of the awakened. I attempted to tame my hair as I pulled a brush through the tangles that mirrored my thoughts—knotted and unruly.

Just as a semblance of order emerged, a voice pierced through the morning's chaos. "Emily, you're needed in the kitchen." The

words, simple yet laden with expectation, reminded me I had no time to dwell. There was always something to do.

While adjusting to the shelter's early morning buzz, I navigated the kitchen's chaos. The air, rich with the scent of brewing coffee and toasting bread, supplied a comforting backdrop to the sounds of culinary activity.

"Emily, you're with me today," said Marlene, her voice cutting through the racket with an authority that commanded immediate respect. Her demeanor was as sturdy as her stance and evidence of years of hard-won resilience.

Assigned to chop vegetables, I could hear the rhythmic sound of the knife hitting the cutting board while Marlene observed with a watchful eye. "You gotta be tough to make it," she said, breaking the silence between us. With a fervor, she lectured about the streets, pouring out stories like the chopped veggies on the cutting board. Her candid and eye-opening perspective painted a picture far removed from any romantic notions I harbored.

"The streets don't care about your feelings," she said, sliding a pile of carrots my way. Her advice, though harsh, was rooted in a reality I was only beginning to grasp. With her gaze fixed on mine, she said, "Let me tell you about a night that could've ended me. The streets were my home, but they nearly became my graveyard one winter. Snow was like a blanket of forgetfulness, covering everything familiar, turning the city into a maze."

Marlene halted her knife mid-chop and paused. "Found myself cornered by a couple of thugs, kids really, but desperate. Desperation makes monsters of men. I had nothing but my wits and a fierce will to see another sunrise. Used my voice, my lies, and, when it came down to it, my fists. Slipped away with a few bruises and a deep cut, but I got out."

Her tale wasn't just a recount of survival. It was a lesson in resilience and a warning against the complacency of dreams. While we continued our tasks, her words echoed in my mind, redefining my concept of personal strength.

Marlene's eyes met mine as she resumed her chopping. "That night taught me the streets don't care about your plans. Survival

means adapting, fighting, and sometimes running. You can't just dream your way out. You gotta act." Her intensity ... I couldn't help but feel the weight of her experiences. "It's no game out there, Emily. It's a battlefield, fighting for survival."

By the end of our shift, my hands had pruned from the wash water, and my mind buzzed with Marlene's lessons. A gritty, authentic understanding of what it meant to stand on my own tore away the romantic veil that once clouded my perspective. "Thanks, Marlene"—gratitude and respect mingled in my voice—"for sharing, for teaching."

She nodded with a silent acknowledgment between us. "You'll make it, kid. Just remember, it's one day at a time."

Stepping out of the kitchen, the morning aromas clung to my clothes as surely as Marlene's wisdom had imparted more than survival tactics. It sparked the realization that this world demanded fortitude, confidence, and the courage to face each day as it comes.

The following day, Sarah, a volunteer whose name was synonymous with compassion, approached me. Her presence contributed a mix of warmth and comfort, flashing a beacon for anyone navigating the stormy seas of life here.

"Emily, can you help with something important today?" Sarah's firm yet inviting voice carved through the shelter's morning chaos. "We've got a plan to host an impromptu community meal tonight. It's a simple gesture to bring together our residents and a few from the neighborhood who could use the warmth."

Excitement and anxiety fluttered in my stomach. "Sure, Sarah. What do you need me to do?"

"We need to round up food donations. I've already touched base with a few local businesses willing to help, but they're waiting for specifics. Can you handle coordinating this?" Sarah's gaze met mine, exuding a confidence as assured as the morning breeze.

I took a deep breath, bolstered by her belief in me. "Absolutely. Just give me the list, and I'll start right away."



On a slip of paper, she listed three businesses ready to contribute. “Start with these. They’re expecting your call. Let them know we’re aiming for a meal to feed about fifty people tonight.”

With the list in hand, the importance of the task settled on my shoulders, adding a sense of gravity to my every movement. The first call was to a bakery known for its generous donations. “Hi, this is Emily from the shelter. We’re organizing a community meal tonight and were wondering if you could spare some bread and pastries?”

“Of course, Emily,” the baker’s warm voice came through. “We can set aside some fresh loaves and a variety of pastries. When can you pick them up?”

“Would around 2 PM work?” I asked, scheduling my afternoon. “Perfect. See you then.”

The rest of the calls went out in a similar fashion, each business expressing eagerness to contribute. By early afternoon, I had confirmed donations of fresh produce, chickens, bread, and a large batch of soup from Stumpy’s Diner.

Returning to the shelter, arms heavy with boxes, I found Sarah and a team of volunteers transforming the dining area. “Look at all this!” said Sarah as I entered. “Fantastic job, Emily. Now, let’s get to work. We have a lot to do before tonight.”

The kitchen buzzed with energy as we chopped, stirred, and seasoned under Sarah’s watchful eye. “We aren’t just feeding people,” she said. “This is about creating a moment of community, of shared humanity. Let’s put our hearts into this meal.”

Hours flew by as the kitchen hummed with activity. Then, as the clock neared serving time, we stood back to admire our handiwork—tables set with care and the aroma of a hearty meal.

As guests arrived, their expressions transformed from weary to warm as smiles blossomed with each plate served. I moved among the tables, refilling water glasses and sharing laughs. A sense of purpose had replaced my earlier nerves.

After the meal, Sarah pulled me aside with a face alight with pride. “Emily, what we accomplished today ... it’s nothing short

of amazing. This was all possible because of your initiative. You've made a real difference."

I looked around at the lingering guests, their conversations a gentle murmur in the now peaceful shelter. "I didn't realize how much of an impact something as simple as a meal could make. It feels good, Sarah. No ... fantastic."

Sarah smiled as her gaze swept the room. "It's these small acts, Emily, that knit us together, that build a community out of strangers. Tonight, you helped do just that."

As the night wound down and the last guests said their good-byes, I helped with the cleanup while my mind replayed the day's events. What seemed impossible unfolded into a beautiful web of shared experiences and new connections.

"Thanks, Sarah, for trusting me with this," I said as we cleared the tables. "Today was ... eye-opening. I feel like I've found a new way to contribute and be a part of something meaningful here."

Sarah's warm eyes met mine as she pressed a small, heart-shaped token into my hand. "This is for you, Emily. A reminder of the strength of community and the power of insignificant gestures that lift us all higher." The token, a silver charm, felt heavier with meaning. *This makes two.* From my pocket, I pulled the one I'd found in 2005. *Not so different. Freaky. A link to the hearts I've touched and those that have touched mine.*

Her words were a lighthouse, guiding me toward a future where I could make a difference one small act of kindness at a time. "The beauty of this journey is that it's only just beginning. There's so much more we can do, so many more lives we can touch." Sarah's mentorship opened my eyes to a world where my actions, no matter how small, could ripple through the lives of others to create waves of change.

With the last dishes cleaned and the lingering conversations ebbed, I stood at the edge of the room, scanning the faces illuminated by the dimming light. The warmth of shared laughter and the remnants of a meal that united disparate souls filled me with a quiet sense of pride and belonging. For a moment, the shelter

seemed less like a refuge and more like a home, a community forged from necessity and bound by compassion.

But the tranquility was short-lived. The sudden crash of a chair, followed by a sharp, collective intake of breath, sliced through the calm. My head whipped around, and my heart lurched as I caught sight of Mr. Myers, his face contorted in pain as he clutched his chest.

Without a second thought, driven by an instinct honed in a future far removed from 1948, I darted to Mr. Myers's side. Kneeling, I checked for a pulse. Finding none, my hands positioned themselves above his heart, starting compressions. The room's confusion mirrored my internal turmoil, yet the clarity of purpose I felt at that moment was undeniable.

"What in heaven's name are you doing?" someone shouted. Without time to explain, between compressions and breaths, "Someone, call for an ambulance. Hurry!" As I administered CPR, the crowd's buzz grew into a clamor of astonishment and fear. My actions, alien for sure, sparked various responses while a man's life hung in the balance.

A screaming siren announced the ambulance's arrival. Rushing in, the attendants' expressions offered a mix of skepticism and surprise as they entered the scene. At that moment, Mr. Myers coughed and opened his eyes. Under scrutiny, I backed away. "Just lie still, sir." One attendant swiveled his head, meeting my eyes with an intense stare. "Where did you learn to do that, miss?" As they carried Mr. Myers away, he cast a curious glance back at me. "Never seen anything like it."

The room was thick with questions and disbelief as I lingered on, my heart racing, not from exertion but from realizing what had just transpired. My life-saving knowledge, a shadow of my former life, had collided with the past in a way I hadn't anticipated. The implications were as elusive as a mist on the wing of an enchanted glen.

By saving a life tonight, my actions distinguished me as an anomaly. As whispers filled the room, I sensed the shift in how the shelter's residents saw me. Respect? Curiosity? Perhaps a hint

of wariness colored their glances. I was the same Emily, yet somehow different in their eyes. In search of a respite, I slipped out for a walk, choosing the familiarity of a nearby alley as my path to clear my head.

The night air enveloped me as I took a hesitant step forward, my heart still racing from the encounter with Mr. Myers. Transforming from a mere passage, the alley now emanated an unfathomable vibe. As each second ticked by, the dim light intensified, illuminating the surroundings. Ahead, my eyes fixed on a figure, a form slumped and devoid of energy. Stepping closer ... *oh no, Marlene.*

The sight of her body lying motionless and pale struck me with a force that left me breathless. *This can't be real.* The streetlight's unforgiving glow emphasized the eerie shadows that surrounded her. The contrast between the joyous moments we'd experienced just yesterday intensified the blow. My body, paralyzed by the sight, surged with a sudden sense of urgency and fear. *I need to get help—now.*

Running to the nearest street, breathless and my heart pounding, I spotted a passerby. "Please"—gasping—"we need to call the police. There's someone ... she's..." Words failed me, but the urgency in my voice spurred the stranger into action. We rushed to a nearby store, where I felt enveloped in a surreal wait filled with dread and a heavy sense of responsibility.

In just a matter of minutes, the police arrived, breaking the stillness of the night with their questions. I recounted my interactions with Marlene, each word a struggle and each memory a vivid contrast to the scene I'd just witnessed. *How? I'll remember you always, Marlene.*

As the police wrapped up their inquiries, the alley reclaimed its tranquility, and a haunting silence enveloped me as I returned to the shelter. The once comforting coolness of the night air now seemed penetrated with unsettling energy, reminding me of the harsh reality I couldn't elude. The day's camaraderie and the shared meals and stories seemed a world away from the bitter truth of Marlene's death.

*That could have been me.*

Lying in my shelter bed, the events of the day replayed in my mind, and tonight's encounter with mortality marked a pivotal moment in my new life. The warmth of the community meal, the lessons learned, and the saddened ending of the day merged into a singular resolve. I must live with intention, aware of the fragility and preciousness of life. As sleep claimed me, I embraced the complexities of my new reality, determined to navigate this world with care, courage, and a heart open to the possibilities of each new day.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

# *Crossroads of the Heart*

The bell over the door jingled a tune that had become the soundtrack to Helen Miller's days. She looked up as the door swung open, admitting a figure so at odds with the neat aisles and array of household goods that she almost chuckled. With his weathered hat and dust still clinging to his boots, Cowboy looked like he'd stepped out of a Western dime novel and into her ordered world.

He strode toward the candy section, but a lively rendition of Helen captured his attention. Following his gaze to the drawing, "What do you think? Did she capture me?"

Cowboy tipped his hat back as a smile broke through. "Quite well, I'd say. You wouldn't happen to know where I can find the young lady who drew that, would you?"

"Impressive, isn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am. She worked at Blackwood Ranch for a few days."

"Ah ... then she ran off. She told me."

As Helen and Cowboy bantered, the warm familiarity of the shop wrapped around them. As Cowboy explained the ranch situation, his voice held a mixture of concern and admiration for Emily's determination.

Leaning in with his arm on the counter, “We were sorry she left. She also has a way with horses.”

“I believe that.”

“Mr. Blackwood gave all of us orders. If we were ever to find her, we should extend an offer to return.”

Helen felt the weight of Cowboy’s gaze, understanding the magnitude of her choice. Emily had found solace at the shelter and a place that promised a different kind of survival than the ranch could offer. Yet, the invitation presented an opportunity, a turning point for the resilient young Emily.

With wisdom from experience, Helen nodded. “Who am I to stand in her way? It’s a decision that Emily needs to weigh and consider. She’s at the shelter, learning from life.” Helen scribbled down directions and slid the paper across the counter to Cowboy.

Tucking it into his shirt pocket, “Ma’am,” touching the brim of his hat.

Helen watched him go, the bell chiming once more as the door closed behind him. She turned back to the caricature and used her eyes to trace Emily’s confident lines. *She’ll make the right choice.*



Breakfast cleanup at the shelter had become my daily meditation. Chairs scraped, dishes clinked, and pans banged. The sounds of which accompanied the rhythm of my thoughts. As I wiped down the last table, my mind wandered over the past weeks. The shelter, with its structured days and a constant buzz of activity, had become a cocoon, insulating me from the world outside. Yet, deep down, a part of me ached for something beyond these walls.

Lost in my thoughts, the sound of the doorbell jolted me back to reality amidst the busy noise of the kitchen. Wiping my hands on my apron, I moved to answer it, expecting another donation or another indigent seeking refuge.

“Cowboy! What in the world? Come in.” With his lanky frame, cowboy hat, and western boots, he stood as out of place as a mermaid in a desert oasis.

“Miss Emily.” His blue eyes met mine, and for a second, I could smell the hay and horses of the ranch.

“How did you find me?”

“Chance. Maybe fate. You decide. I stopped into Woolworth’s, and there, proudly hung on the wall, was a caricature that only you could have drawn.”

“Mrs. Miller. Gracious lady. Well, come in. Come in. I’ve missed you.” Emotions hit me out of nowhere—surprise, worry, and even a bit of longing.

“We’ve missed you too. We were sure surprised to find you gone.”

While looking for words, my attention remained focused on the floor. “Yeah, well, old habits are hard to break.”

“Emily,” his voice instantly brought back a flood of memories, “Mr. Blackwood felt real bad. We didn’t realize how personally you took it. He put the word out that if we ever ran into you, we should extend an offer to return.”

After a deep breath, “Wow! I never expected this. I’d have thought good riddance.”

Cowboy started bobbing his head. “Yeah, I know the boys razzed you a bit, but that happens to all fresh blood. Please. We’d love for you to come back.”

*Gotta suck it up.* Unsure about my decision, I finally said, “Sure, Cowboy, I’ll come back with you.”

He nodded. “OK, then. We should get moving along. I need to get back to the ranch.”

“Give me a sec to gather my things.”

I said my goodbyes to the shelter staff. They seemed surprised by my decision but wished me the best. Mrs. Baker, the shelter manager, even hugged me. “You take care.”

Stepping out into the bright light of day, I felt the gravity of my choice. The shelter had given me more than just a roof and walls. It had given me a foundation to build my future, one of my



own making. So, as Cowboy and I walked to his truck, I knew that whatever lay ahead, the lessons I'd learned would guide me through.

As we left the shelter's safety behind, the pickup's engine hummed a steady rhythm. The silence between Cowboy and me was crazy loud like it could shatter glass, but finally, Cowboy glanced over. "Mama's Boy's been moping around the barn like he lost his best friend," he said with a half-smile. "Misses you something fierce."

I found myself smiling at the image. It tugged at something inside me. "He's a good horse. Just needs someone who understands what he's going through."

"What do you mean?"

"He suffered a loss. Mrs. Blackwood. He may be a horse ..."

Shifting his tone, "He's not the only one feeling some loss," said Cowboy. "We all felt it when you disappeared. But I gotta ask, Emily, why'd you run off like that?"

Although I anticipated his question, its impact was more intense than I imagined. While looking out the window at the passing landscape, I searched for the right words. "What I did was irresponsible. George could have been killed. The horse ... who knows? I didn't belong there."

"We all make mistakes, missy."

I shifted my eyes toward Cowboy. "My head was in the clouds—again."

"Ah ... George stopped by the next day to check on you. He said he felt responsible. 'I diverted her attention. All my fault. Dang, if that girl doesn't have a vivid imagination. I was taken in. Then to watch her sketch your crew ... and Blackwood—amazing. That is one talented young lady.'"

"He said all that?"

"Like one of your knights in shining armor, he done rescued you from some wicked old witch."

*How can you know that?* "Countless times, I've fantasized about a charming knight on a gleaming white horse coming to my rescue, whisking me away from reality. No one has ever defended

me like that. No one—ever. Is that why Mr. Blackwood wants me back?”

“In part.”

“What’s the rest?”

In a heartbeat, Cowboy clammed up. A minute passed like an eternity. “Beneath Blackwood’s gruff exterior, the man is soft as a marshmallow. It wasn’t until your departure that we realized what your presence meant for the ranch ... for Blackwood. His wife’s death—”

After another round of silence, “What, Cowboy?”

“Ranch life is a tough life. Rewarding, don’t get me wrong. Hard work. Gotta cowboy up to survive. Irene, Blackwood’s wife, well, she had a way. Amidst losing a foal or a horse with colic, she’d find a way to breathe life back into the ranch. That’s what you did, missy.” His words left me speechless, shattering my certainty with a few spoken words.

“You’re one of those things, you know ... mystery, riddle.”

“Enigma?”

“Sounds about right. Your departure left the whole ranch talkin’. Who was that girl?”

“You’ve given me some things to think about.”

The world’s sounds faded once more, leaving only an empty quietness. I was at a loss for words, and Cowboy seemed to be navigating the line between speaking up and respecting boundaries with care.

“You doing fine at that shelter?”

“I’m safe, and I’ve learned a few things.”

Cowboy nodded, and then the conversation paused again. But after a moment of the rhythmic sound of the tires filling the silence, he questioned again. “What’s the biggest lesson you’ve learned so far?”

I looked in his direction and saw his silhouette illuminated by the sun. “That running away doesn’t solve your problems. You have to face them, learn from them.”

“That’s a hard lesson. Took me a long time to figure that one out myself.”

The conversation flowed, ebbing and rising with the contours of the road. Cowboy's questions were like keys unlocking doors I had shut tight, and I shared more than I had intended. I couldn't help but spill out all my fears, hopes, and the peace I found in helping others.

"Sounds like you're at a crossroads, missy. You haven't decided, have you?"

"No, I haven't." The honesty of my words surprised even me. I really didn't know which road I'd choose.

As we approached the familiar gates of the ranch, a sense of understanding and closure replaced the tension that had once filled the pickup. I'd not only shared my story with Cowboy, but I'd also accepted it myself.

"Thank you, Cowboy," turning my head, "for everything."

He tipped his hat, a gesture that spoke volumes. "Anytime, kid. You ever need us, we're just a ride away."

When the ranch came into view, a wave of nostalgia passed through me. It was where I'd grown, stumbled, and ultimately found the courage to chart my own course.

As the truck rolled to a stop, I hesitated a moment before stepping out into the midday sun. It was just as I remembered it: the barn standing stoic against the sky, the distant sound of horses, and fences that needed paint. I'd made my decision. But as I stepped onto the gravel, I had to convince my heart it was the right one.

"Lunch is just about ready," said Cowboy. The scent of stew wafted out to greet us, leading me toward the dining area.

Grandpa and Nana emerged from the shadows of the porch with broad and welcoming smiles. "Emily, it's good to see you," Nana said. Her arms wrapped me in a warm hug that felt like home.

Lunch was lively, full of laughter and stories that wove the present with the past. Sitting there with familiar faces, I started to doubt myself. Whether I wanted to admit it or not, I was part of this mishmash of ranch folk.

With lunch plates cleared, Cowboy nudged me toward the stable. “Mama’s Boy’s waiting for you,” he said with a knowing look.

Stepping into the stable, I soon sensed the cool air and saw the gentle, dim light filtering through the windows. Mama’s Boy, his ears always on high alert, popped his head. At first sight, a wave of emotion surged through me as I approached with an ache in my heart and an outstretched hand. When his nose nuzzled into my palm, something inside me shifted.

There, with the gentle giant that had been my confidant, my silent strength, I let down the walls I’d built. I brushed his mane, whispered words only he could understand, and allowed myself this connection, this moment of return.

But as his trusting eyes looked into mine, I knew this wasn’t my world anymore. The ranch would always be a chapter in my story, a place of growth and challenge, but I couldn’t stay.

“I missed you too, boy.” As tears welled up in my eyes, my voice became choked with overwhelming emotion. “But this is goodbye.” As the words left my lips, the weight of their meaning settled upon me, signaling the end of our journey together. Leaving the stable, a sense of clarity settled over me. My time here was a treasured memory and a part of my pilgrimage in time, but just that—a part.

“Thank you,” I said as we returned to the lunch table. “For bringing me back here. For helping me see.”

He tipped his hat with gentle eyes. “You’ll always have a place here, missy. Remember that.”

With Cowboy’s departure, I had one remaining visit to set things right. As I approached Mr. Blackwood’s house, my heart thumped in my chest with a rhythm that precedes a storm. I knocked, and the sound broke the quiet of the ranch. When the door opened, there he stood, his face a mixture of surprise and the stoic mask I had come to know.

“Mr. Blackwood,” I said, feeling the jitters of the moment. Staring at first, his stern expression softened as I spoke. “I need to

apologize—for the gate, running away, and the chaos that ensued. I am truly sorry.”

With a soothing and inviting voice, he invited me in. “Emily, I won’t pretend we weren’t affected by your leaving. The ranch ... it’s missed your spirit.” While his words brought comfort, they reminded me of my avowed decision.

“Thank you. That means more than you know. But I came here to say more than just sorry.” With lines in his face etched with anticipation, he waited. “I can’t come back to the ranch.” Blackwood’s eyes never left mine. With my words tasting of freedom and a twinge of sorrow, I said, “The ranch is alluring. I love the horses. I even started to fit in. But my place isn’t here. I am my stories and my art. I just need to learn how to channel my fantasies, so I don’t do dumb stuff like forgetting to slide—”

“But, Emily, that—”

“Cowboy told me, Mr. Blackwood. And as much as I appreciate George standing up for me, we both know that’s no excuse. It also doesn’t change that the ranch was a way station, not my destination. I’m not sure what or where that is, but it’s why I can’t stay here.”

Blackwood spread his lips wide. “I respect that, Emily,” he said after a pause that felt like forever. “Whatever you’re chasing, I wish you the best.”

Extending my hand, “I’ll always be grateful for the home you provided when I needed it most.”

Nodding, “Wherever you go, Emily,” he said, releasing my hand, “remember that the gate is open, and the road always leads back here.”

I didn’t look back. But I found his words comforting and a reminder that no matter how far I traveled, the ranch would always be a touchstone in my life.

The ride back to the shelter was quieter than the trip to the ranch. Cowboy broke the silence first. With respect and disappointment in his voice, “You sure about this, Emily?”

I gazed out the window, watching the landscape roll by. “I am,” I said with a conviction that surprised even me. “The ranch

was a teaching moment. I left for a reason, and that reason hasn't changed, only solidified. Despite the ranch's appeal, my purpose in life lies ahead."

Cowboy acknowledged with a nod. For the remainder of the ride, we pondered our thoughts in a peaceful silence. When we pulled up to the shelter, its familiarity wrapped around me like a welcome embrace. Stepping out of the truck, my eyes took in the familiar sights of Boulder. I was home. Turning to Cowboy, standing with his hat in his hand, "Thank you for understanding. For everything."

He smiled, sad but soft, placing his hat back on his head. "If you ever need us, you know where to find us." With a tip of his hat, he climbed back into the truck and drove off. I watched him go as his figure grew smaller while a chapter of my life receded in the rearview mirror of my heart.

Turning toward the shelter, I sensed the stirrings of a new beginning. I was ready to face the challenges ahead and write the next chapter of my life, one day at a time.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### *George's Challenge*

**N**ot every day at the shelter was a workday. In fact, we only worked three, albeit grueling, days a week. For the remainder of our time, Mrs. Baker expected us to find stability—in other words, prepare to leave the nest. “Better choices, better choices,” is all I ever heard.

The moment I stepped out of the shelter, the morning air embraced me, carrying a soft murmur of the life-altering changes that awaited me. While navigating the awakening streets toward Woolworths, the vibrant energy of the morning surrounded me. I could smell the aroma of freshly brewed coffee from nearby cafes, blending with the rhythm of my footsteps.

Leaving the ranch was a leap into an unknown abyss, but the people I've encountered since have been like stars guiding me through the night. Each interaction, each moment of shared humanity at the shelter, had spun threads of confidence and purpose through the fabric of my being.

Woolworths and the sight of its familiar facade filled me with a renewed sense of determination. Upon entering, the familiar jingle of the bell greeted me like an old friend. Mrs. Miller looked up, morphing her expression of surprise to delight. Arching her eyebrows in a gentle inquiry, “Did that nice cowboy find you?”

“Yes, Mrs. Miller,” he did. Clutching my sketchbook a little tighter, “I hoped to ... to set up outside again. If that’s all right with you.”

“Now, you don’t think I’m going to let you off that easy, do you?”

I looked down at my feet. “I suppose not. Cowboy must have told you why he wanted to see me.”

“He did.”

“So ... inquiring minds want to know, I suppose?”

Mrs. Miller cocked her head just a bit. “I knew you were a smart girl.”

“Do you recall the last conversation we had?” Mrs. Miller gave me a thoughtful nod but with squinted eyes. “You were right, and you were wrong. I really can’t turn off my imagination. It’s as much a part of me as my dark eyes and Filipino mix. But you were right. It is easy in that world. You said I might think that reality dwarfs compared to dragons and queens, superheroes and villains, and knights and fair maidens. But I’d be wrong. As magical and entertaining as my fantasy worlds may seem, they’re just vapor—nothing to last. You were right again.”

“It’s nice to be told I was right, but I’m still waiting.”

“Back at the ranch, my overactive imagination almost killed a man. Could have, anyway. I can be me here, and I don’t have to worry about my next stupid move.”

Mrs. Miller came out from behind the counter and walked toward me. Opening her arms wide, she gave me the most motherly hug I’d ever had. “I’m happy about your decision, young lady. I also agree. Boulder needs you.”

I waited for her to let go, but she clung to me like a shadow at noon. It wasn’t until I hugged her back that she finally let go of our embrace.

“About you setting up outside. No problem. But you know, you should consider spreading your wings a bit. Plenty of local shopkeepers would love to have someone with your talent outside their doors.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that.”



“You don’t know how good you are, do you? You’ll see. Need a chair?”

I gave Mrs. Miller a yes, ma’am and a thank you before setting up. Besides her hug, she gave me some cellophane tape to display my art samples. I’d just finished when a mom and a young girl approached.

“These are quite good, young lady. How much would you charge for one of my little Sally here?”

“Ten cents for a simple caricature. Twenty-five cents if you want to add a superhero and story to go with it.”

“Sally loves unicorns. Can you make it a unicorn story?”

“Sure. No problem. I love unicorns too.”

“Emily!” I heard. Across the street stood George, waving. After a car passed, he jogged across with a grin the size of Texas.

“Hey, George, and thank you, by the way.”

“For?”

“Hold on. Sally, here, is expecting a unicorn story.” I positioned a fresh sheet of paper before me. With my pencil ready, I noticed the little girl’s excited anticipation, smiled, and started. “In a mystical forest, shrouded in mist and magic, lived a unicorn with a mane that shimmered like a rainbow after a spring rain.” My pencil glided across the paper, tracing the outline of our story. “This unicorn, named Luna, had a heart as pure as crystal and hooves that whispered secrets to the earth.”

With her imagination alight with visions of Luna, the girl leaned in closer. “Unlike any other, Luna had a special power. She could make flowers bloom and trees bear fruit with a single touch of her horn. But one day, an ancient dragon, envious of Luna’s magic, cast a spell to trap her in an enchanted forest, hidden from the eyes of the world.”

My pencil sketched the outlines of Luna trapped yet serene among the twisted vines. “But Luna was not alone. A young girl, brave and kind, ventured into the heart of the forest guided by the stars and her unwavering belief in the magic of friendship.”

The little girl watched, spellbound. As I drew her likeness beside Luna, the strokes of my pencil illustrated the special bond

they shared. “Together, they discovered the power of unity and hope. With a gentle touch, the girl unlocked the spell, freeing Luna. From that day forward, they roamed the forest, protectors of all magical beings.”

When I finished the drawing, I gave Luna a mane that flowed like liquid rainbows and the girl a crown of flowers. “Here,” I said, presenting the artwork. “You, as the fearless guardian of the forest alongside Luna, the unicorn of legend!”

Her eyes sparkled with joy as she took the drawing. “It’s magical! Thank you!” She hugged the sketch close, then dashed into the store to share her tale of adventure with her mom.

George stood, shaking his head. “You are the real deal.”

He received a shy smile before I responded. “Taking responsibility for the Mama’s Boy incident is the kindest thing anyone has ever done for me. Totally not true, but thank you anyway.”

“You know about that, huh?”

Another customer approached Woolworths’ door, stopped, and then turned toward me. “Your artwork is quite good. How much?”

“Just a sec, George.” Tired of repeating myself, I took a piece of paper to post my prices.

“A dime, Emily? You’re undervaluing your work.”

“He’s right, young lady. I’ll take a simple caricature.”

Ten minutes later, “Are you happy with my work?”

She smiled and gave me a quarter. “You keep the change,” she said. Before the door closed, I heard, “Check this out, Helen.”

Just as I was about to reply to George’s question, he switched gears and asked something new. “Emily, have you ever considered sketching real-life situations?”

Puzzled, I scrunched my lips and nose. “What would be the fun in that?”

His eyes sparkled with a mix of challenge and sincerity. “Knowing that you made people happy because of your work.”

“I do that already.”

George leaned in. “Have you ever heard of a guy by the name of Norman Rockwell?”

My eyes widened in recognition. "Have I heard of him? Who hasn't? The guy is incredible."

He gave a nod of agreement while his gaze held mine. "You have his talent."

The compliment sent a flutter through my chest, but humility anchored my words. "Oh, no. That man is in a league of his own."

Undeterred, George's proposal included an enticing offer. "Will you draw something for me? I'll pay you two dollars."

Intrigued, I leaned forward as curiosity tickled my thoughts. "For two bucks, I'll draw whatever you want."

He shared his vision with a gentle firmness. "I want you to draw your best moment at the ranch—real-life stuff. Have it tell a story."

I hesitated, the amount seeming extravagant for a simple drawing. "Two dollars?" He nodded, his smile broadening in encouragement. "I don't know, George. That seems a little much."

"Humor a guy." His voice carried a warmth that made the corners of my mouth lift in an involuntary smile.

"OK." Closing my eyes, I let the memory of that lunch scene at the ranch infuse me. It was all there: the laughter, the sense of belonging, and the warmth etched in my memory waiting to be translated onto paper.

When I opened my eyes, I started with myself at the center of the scene, hunched over my sketchpad with a look of intense concentration on my face. With precision, I rendered the furrow of my brow, how my fingers caressed the pencil, and the gentle bite of my lower lip in concentration.

Behind me stood Mr. Blackwood. I made him an imposing figure yet rendered him with unexpected gentleness. A soft, almost imperceptible smile spread across his lips as he looked over my shoulder. His eyes, filled with curiosity and mild amusement, fixated on the artwork unfolding beneath my pencil.

Around us, I sketched the ranch hands captured in a moment of laughter or surprise. Their rugged faces were alive with joy and amusement. And with each unique expression, the story of life at the ranch was revealed. In the background, I brought the

ranch to life with rustic wooden tables. Sunlight shining through the leaves created playful shadows, and a relaxed display of dishes told of satisfying meals.

Next, I focused on the textures, adding the interplay of light and shadow while striving to capture the essence of the moment. With each stroke of my pencil, I balanced the contrasts and the details. The result was a vibrant moment of joy and simplicity amidst the daily grind of ranch life. Each character was a narrative, yet all were woven into this larger story of community and connection.

With a sense of satisfaction, I observed my finished work. This artful depiction encapsulated the essence of a memory, complete with its emotions and the beauty of simplicity. At that moment, I realized what George saw in me—a blossoming artist with the potential to capture the world's essence in vibrant and heartfelt strokes.

Leaning in, George's eyes widened with genuine admiration. "This," he said, pointing to the detailed sketch that sprawled across my page, "is why you made the right choice turning down Blackwood. This is what you should be drawing."

I jokingly asked, "Who else would pay two dollars for my drawing?" My concern for my financial future was genuine. George swept his arm toward Broadway, encompassing the bustling row of businesses. "You see these storekeepers lining the street? Capture the essence of their business as you have with this drawing, and they'll gladly pay five, maybe even ten dollars."

"No way. They'd be crazy to."

But George, unwavering, proposed a challenge. "Let's visit a few local businesses together. I'll introduce you. Just show them this drawing. It will speak for you." With an intense stare, "Emily, it's that good."

The idea was as daunting as it was new. My heart raced at the thought of putting my talent—my passion—on the line like that. The fear of rejection knotted my stomach.

"I know this town, Emily. They love to talk and spread the latest uh ... news. When the news spreads, customers will flock to see your work."

"George, that may be fine if I'm with you, but by myself ... no way. I'd heave before I got through the door."

"I said I'll help you."

"What about the next day?"

"One day at a time. Trust me."

His challenge was both terrifying and exhilarating. The thought of capturing the essence of a business through my art was a siren call I couldn't ignore. Of course, the prospect of earning enough to support me was a tremendous bonus.

*OK. Let's do this.*

As we entered Stumpy's, the aroma of freshly brewed coffee and sizzling bacon greeted us like a chorus of fairies serenading at dawn. George led the way. The nods and smiles he received showed his familiarity with the place. Extending his good hand, Stumpy greeted George. "How you doing, old friend? Can I get you a cup of coffee? On the house ..." he said and motioned toward an empty booth.

"That'd be great," said George, sliding into the booth. I followed, clutching my sketchbook opposite him.

Stumpy poured two cups and lingered, almost like he sensed something was up. Wasting no time, he said, "Stumpy, I want to show you something," pulling out the ranch drawing I'd done. "This is my good friend, Emily, and she drew this."

Stumpy examined the drawing, raised his brows, and nodded. "Is he pulling my leg, young lady?"

"No, sir."

"Imagine what she could do with your place," said George.

Shifting his gaze to me, "You think you can capture this same sentiment for my diner?"

George was all confidence. "Absolutely. Her talent oozes from her pores." A churn of unease unsettled my stomach as I listened, and the reality of the situation settled in.

Stumpy chuckled, scratching his head. “Unlike that cup of coffee, why do I have the feeling this is going to cost me?”

“Because you’re the most perceptive and generous person I know,” George said with a grin. “But the thing is, she’s only asking for five bucks.”

“Five bucks?” he wondered about the artwork’s practicality and value for his business. “I don’t know, George.”

Sensing Stumpy’s hesitation, George leaned in and lowered his voice as if sharing a secret. “Listen, Stumpy, how about this? Emily creates a memorable rendition of your diner, and only if you’re impressed do you pay the five bucks. It’s a risk-free deal for you.”

Stumpy’s eyes darted from George to me and back to George, weighing the proposition. While he considered our proposal, I interjected, “I believe you’ll find the artwork will add something special to your diner. And if you disagree, then you’re out nothing. But then ... you will lose bragging rights for being the first in town. Plus ... I get to keep it and show it off. Where I come from, we call this a no-brainer.”

Stumpy nodded as a slow smile crept across his face. “Deal. Let’s see what you can do.”

I thanked Stumpy, trying to sound composed. But inside, I was as shaky as Mount Vesuvius. “I’ll get started right away.”

“Looking forward to it, Emily. Make me proud.” As we shook on it, a wave of relief rushed through me, tempered by the thrill of the challenge ahead.

Inside the diner, I took a moment to absorb the atmosphere. The air, thick with the aroma of brewing coffee, burgers on the grill, and the sounds of laughter and chatter enveloped me. As I scanned the restaurant for a quiet corner, I envisioned vibrant scenes that could capture its essence.

My gaze lingered on the patrons, a cross-section of life itself, from the hurried businessmen to the leisurely retirees. Yet, a table near the window that seemed to breathe with a vibrant energy mesmerized me. A group of elderly friends, regularly gathered, had created a routine as constant as the diner’s neon sign.

This was where the essence of the diner lay, not in the rush and whirl of the peak hours but in the steady, comforting rhythm of old friendships. As I sketched, trying to capture the vibrancy and warmth of this scene, I couldn't help but feel a part of their world.

The banter and laughter from the regulars' table reached me, each burst of joy a brushstroke of life that I aimed to translate onto paper. I noticed the details—the way one leaned in to share a whisper, the gentle teasing across the table, the shared glances that spoke volumes of their mutual history.

Stumpy approached to see what I was creating. While his eyes scanned my sketch, a slow smile spread across his face as he recognized the scene before him. "That's them, alright," he said with pride. "You've got it, the spirit of this place. It's not the food or the décor. It's them, these folks, who make this diner a home."

As I continued to draw, I realized that this was more than just a project or a potential source of income. It was a celebration of community and a reminder of the daily stories that unfolded within these walls. With its worn booths and checkered floors, the diner was a backdrop to the lives intertwined around the regulars' table.

When I finished the sketch, I felt a strong sense of fulfillment. It portrayed the unspoken connections and peaceful, enduring warmth of shared meals and moments. I'd hoped it would speak to the beauty of ordinary life, the kind of beauty that often goes unnoticed.

As the diner bustled with its usual afternoon chatter, Stumpy took down an old, framed photograph from the wall, its place now destined for something new. He walked over to the regulars' table, where the heart of the diner beat strongest, and presented them with my drawing. Their reaction was immediate. A chorus of amazement and delight enveloped the table. One of the regulars, overwhelmed with pride, lifted the drawing high and paraded it around the restaurant for all to see.

Stumpy returned to where George and I stood, watching the scene unfold. "Emily, I can't thank you enough," he said, a genuine warmth in his eyes. "I'm sorry I doubted you. This drawing

... it's precisely what this place needed. It's going right up there." Stumpy's decision to put it on prominent display affirmed the importance of capturing life in its simplicity.

George, ever my supporter, brimmed with pride. "See? What did I tell you?"

Despite the praise, a knot of anxiety lingered within me. "I'm grateful, but the thought of doing this alone ... I'm not sure I can. Approaching businesses ... it's daunting for me."

"Why don't you let your work speak for itself? Put together a portfolio. It will show what you can do without having to say much at all."

The idea struck a chord, yet stepping out of my comfort zone to face potential rejection was a scary prospect. Caught between the uncertainty of pushing past my fears and the security of staying within my comfort zone, I faced a tough decision.

Leaving the diner, my world shifted. Purpose and direction, once elusive, now stood illuminated by the experience. I sought to capture its essence but left instead with much more—a mosaic of laughter, whispers, and stories of the past, clamoring for a voice.

That night, under the shelter's tranquil embrace, I envisioned my portfolio, sketching Boulder's character with renewed determination. Each setting would be a challenge turned into an opportunity, nurtured by my growth and belief in my art. Amidst lingering doubts, a newfound determination paved my path. This marked the beginning of an artistic voyage, embarking toward a horizon filled with promise.



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### *Standing Firm*

Once I settled into the shelter, communal living became my new normal. Besides food, breakfast brought stories and morning company. Today, Maggie, whom I admired for her quiet strength, sat alone, showing signs of worry.

“Mind some company, Maggie?”

Her expression lightened up as she raised her eyes. “Emily. Not your kind of company.”

I settled beside her as the clink of utensils and the murmur of conversations surrounded us. “How kind of you. Any luck finding work?”

She let out a heavy sigh as if she carried the weight of the world. “None, and I need to get to my daughter. Here I am, flat busted, barely getting by myself with no way to help her.”

The urgency in her voice pulled me in closer. “What’s going on?”

She shook her head in despair. “She’s expecting a baby, and her husband is currently deployed.”

“OK. So?”

“She has an eighteen-month-old toddler.” Her hands shook as she talked about her daughter, and her voice quivered. “I’m such a terrible mom. I feel so helpless.”

“Nonsense,” I said in a firm tone. “If you were a bad mom, you wouldn’t be feeling and worrying as you are. How much do you need?”

Startled, “No, Emily. I can’t possibly ...”

Without hesitation, I reached into my wallet and extracted ten dollars. Empathy warmed my heart as I extended my hand. “Will this take you to her?”

“Emily, I can’t. I may never be able to pay you back.”

My smile was soft and my decision firm. “Then consider it a gift. I’ve noticed what you do here. You volunteer without expecting anything in return. You just want to help. It’s time someone helped you.”

Pausing, “I don’t know what to say.”

“Say you’ll take it,” I said, nudging the bill toward her.

As her hands met mine, a silent current of gratitude flowed between us. Her eyes, glistening with tears, anchored me in the moment. “Thank you, Emily,” she whispered, her voice a soft echo of newfound hope. “This ... this changes everything for me.”

“You’re welcome. Take care. I gotta get busy with the dishes.” Rising to my feet, I left her with the promise of hope and the kitchen clatter, calling me back to the day’s tasks.

The mundane chore, clinking of dishes, and the racket of a busy kitchen weren’t enough to dissipate the warm fuzzies that embraced me. But that comfort was short-lived by the approach of Mrs. Baker, whose presence always seemed to command attention.

“Emily, have you found permanent housing?”

My hands paused mid-scrub. “Uh ...”

“You know this is only a temporary solution, young lady. Have you even looked?”

“I meant to, Mrs. Baker. Really. I’ve just been—”

“Emily! Spare me. This is exactly why this shelter is temporary. Almost everyone who breaches those doors does so because they acted irresponsibly. This is only a whistle-stop. We help people

get back on their feet, look in a mirror, and realize they need to make better decisions.”

“Yes, ma’am, I understand.”

“Now, I heard via the grapevine that there’ll soon be a vacancy at the Sherman Boarding House. A room and an evening meal are only twenty-five dollars per month. It’s the best bargain in town. Mrs. Perkins can be a bit of a ... pain, let’s say. But she, too, expects you to act responsibly. I suggest you pay her a visit and claim that room.”

With a mixture of hope and trepidation, I made my way. As I approached, the building’s Victorian-era architecture appeared inviting but somewhat intimidating. Drawing a deep breath, I stepped up to the door and knocked.

“Are you Mrs. Perkins?” My voice echoed a tad, giving away my nervousness.

A woman with an air of elegance and composure raised her eyes with a look of curiosity. “I am, and who might you be?”

Mustering courage, I extended my hand, feeling the warm air of the entryway wrap around us. “My name is Emily Reynolds, and I understand you’re expecting a vacancy soon.”

She arched an eyebrow with a hint of amusement in her tone. “Word travels fast. That’s why I don’t bother advertising. Come in.” Stepping into the dimly lit foyer, I heard the faint creak of the door echo through the silence. “Yes, I expect a vacancy in a couple of days. I take it you’re interested.”

Trying to keep my voice steady, “Yes, ma’am.”

“Twenty-five dollars per month. The evening meal is included. I require first and last up front.”

“First and last?”

“Months rent, dear. Do you have that much?”

Her question hung in the air, and my breath hitched as the reality of my gift to Maggie came crashing back. “I did, but I have most of it. I don’t suppose you could make an exception?”

Mrs. Perkins eyed me with a dash of skepticism and a hint of sympathy, but her response was unwavering. “I’m sorry, but experience has dictated a no-exception policy.”

Desperation clawed at me as I grasped for any solution. “I should be able to make up the difference. I’m an artist. Want to see?”

Her reply was swift, leaving no room for hope. “Not really. Experience also dictates I keep my distance from tenants, including potential ones.” Under her indifferent gaze, my last semblance of hope vanished and dissolved like mist in a sorcerer’s grasp.

“Thanks, anyway. I guess I’d better get busy then.”

Turning away from the Sherman Boarding House, a sense of urgency propelled me forward. *I can do this.* With my sketchbook firmly under my arm, I wove through the crowded sidewalks. *All I need is two stores. Easy.* I had my portfolio, so I was armed and ready.

With my voice laced with hopeful enthusiasm, “Excuse me,” I asked the first store owner. “Would you be interested in some custom artwork for your store? Here are some examples of my work.”

He barely looked up from his ledger. “Sorry, I’m swamped. Maybe another day.”

The pattern continued as I moved through my list of potential commissions. Responses ranged from polite dismissals to outright indifference. The barber said, “Got three customers waiting, girly. You picked a bad day.” With each rejection, I felt my heart sink a little lower, but I pressed on, trying not to let the disappointment show.

But as the afternoon sun crept lower, so did my optimism. Store after store, the answer was the same. Faced with enduring more futile attempts or returning to what I knew, Woolworths seemed like my best option.

With my hand on the knob, I gave it a twist and the door a push. The familiar tinkle of the bell above welcomed me. Still, it wasn’t nearly as inviting as Mrs. Miller’s countenance when she looked up. “Emily!”

“I’m in a bind, Mrs. Miller. Can I set up outside?”

“Isn’t it time for you to embrace some other shopkeepers?”

“Yes, ma’am, but not today. I need ten dollars—fast.” I explained my predicament and how it was my doing. Naturally, I first had to listen to one of her little lectures. I guess I had it coming. Mrs. Baker was right about that ‘making better decisions’ thing.

I taped up my drawing samples and my hastened price list, then got myself set. *This is it. It’s time to turn this day around.* It wasn’t but a minute before I had my first customer.

“Hi there. What’s your name?”

“Danny.” Around ten, he reminded me of one of the ranch hands with his denim overalls and checkered shirt.

“And what would you like me to draw for you?”

“Can you make me Super Boy, saving the world from an asteroid?”

“Oh, my! Are you brave enough to take on an asteroid all by yourself?” I glanced up at his mother and caught her smiling.

“Super Boy it is, so we better get started before that space monster kills us all.” Danny nodded with enthusiasm.

As my pencil touched the paper, I began. “Under the cloak of night, Super Boy gazed at the stars, sensing a disturbance in the celestial harmony. His keen eyes caught a glimmer of an unusual light streaking across the sky—an asteroid, large and menacing, hurtling toward Earth. Without a moment’s hesitation, Super Boy leaped into action, his cape billowing behind him as he soared into space.

“The asteroid was unlike any he had encountered before. Its surface glowed with an eerie light, pulsating with energy that threatened to tear apart the very fabric of space. With the fate of Earth resting on his young shoulders, Super Boy, unafraid, pushed forward. Reaching into his belt, he pulled out a device for such a crisis—a Gravity Disruptor.

“As he neared the asteroid, Super Boy activated the device and aimed it at the heart of the looming rock. A beam of concentrated energy shot forth and enveloped the asteroid. Slowly, the pulsating light dimmed, and the asteroid’s deadly course began to shift. With precision and determination, Super Boy redirected the as-

teroid. Now heading into space, it would harmlessly disintegrate in the sun's fiery furnace.

"With Earth safe once more, Super Boy returned to the planet, not as a conqueror but as a guardian and silent protector, watching over humanity from the shadows.

"So what do you think, Danny?"

The young boy marveled at Super Boy's heroics, and his heart swelled with pride and wonder at the tale of the young hero who saved Earth from disaster. With the grin of an elf and eyes lit like a full moon, "That's the coolest thing I've ever seen. Look, Mom!"

"Emily, is it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Smiling, "You made him one happy boy. Here you go ..."

"It's only a quarter, ma'am."

"The rest is for the smile you put on his face."

By now, the line had grown, almost all kids. Young and old, they gathered around to watch me breathe life into one superhero after another. And like Danny's mom, most showed their appreciation with a tip.

The buzz of the surrounding crowd swelled drawing after drawing. Their reactions acted like a magnet as the noise and banter gained the attention of other shoppers and passersby. It wasn't until a familiar, stern voice emerged that I realized my success might again be my undoing.

"Let me through, people," said Officer Billings. He parted the sea of onlookers with the authority his uniform bestowed upon him. Fixing his gaze on me, unwavering and cold, "Young lady, you have to move along. You're creating a disturbance and blocking the walk."

From behind, a voice rallied to my defense. "Give the girl a break, officer."

Billings didn't flinch. "I gave her a break when I warned her. There's a city ordinance against this sort of thing. Now, folks, move along, please."

The crowd's mood shifted as they offered their support by turning into a chorus of boos and yells directed at the officer.

The ruckus caught the attention of Mrs. Miller, who emerged from her store. Her face exhibited concern and disbelief at the boisterous scene.

Intervening, her voice carried a weight that only a respected business owner could muster. "Leave her alone, Billings. She's not hurting anyone."

"I warned her. Her crowd is blocking the sidewalk."

"Exactly," Mrs. Miller shot back. "The crowd is blocking, not Emily." But her undeniable logic fell on deaf ears.

"That's not the way I see it." Turning his attention back to me, "Young lady, pick up your things and move along or face the consequences." His ultimatum was as straightforward as it was intimidating.

A voice from the crowd challenged him. "What are you going to do, Billings? Arrest her?"

"That's exactly what I'll do. What will it be, young lady?"

The situation escalated quickly, and the crowd's murmuring grew louder. Amid the chaos, Mrs. Miller stood firm. With a confidence that momentarily halted the growing storm, she directed her next words at Billings. "Don't be an ass, Billings. I told you. Chief Bower and I are friends from way back."

Undeterred, "The chief told me to bring her in," said Billings.

"Oh, he did, did he? We'll see about that. Stay there, Emily."

*I hope you're right about this.* Her assurance provided a glimmer of hope in a standoff growing in intensity.

Billings signaled to me with a sigh that carried the weight of his duty. "Stand up and turn around."

From the crowd, "Cuffs, Billings? Are you crazy?"

"It's procedure."

"This is lunacy," I heard.

Despite my doubts, I placed my trust in Mrs. Miller. Her promise of intervention was the only thing that kept my panic in check as Billings escorted me to his police vehicle. "Watch your head," he said.

The crowd's voices faded into a background hum as I tried to steady my breathing while the reality of my situation sank in.

Despite the support I'd received, the law had spoken. As the car door closed, I pondered the consequences of my rebellion and what was yet to come.



## CHAPTER TWENTY

# *The Changing Tide*

With resolve tempering her irritation, Helen Miller picked up the receiver. Each dialed number represented a step toward righting an injustice. Waiting for the line to connect, she tapped her foot on the polished floor of her store. The ring stopped when Henry's voice, filled with the carefree disposition of a day off, replied. "Chief Bower."

"Henry, Helen Miller." Her voice resonated with the weight of her years and experience in the community.

A sigh on the other end. "I was halfway expecting your call, Helen."

Her response was swift, "I'm so disappointed in you, Henry. What do you have to say for yourself?"

With a subtle sense of irritation, "Upholding the law, Helen. Officer Billings said she was blocking the sidewalk. It's about maintaining order."

"She can't be but one hundred pounds, Henry. She can't possibly block the sidewalk. It's the crowd who's blocking the damn walk."

"Then she's creating a disturbance."

"Oh, please. She was doing nothing of the kind. The only thing Emily was doing was putting smiles on little faces. Besides, would

you rather she be out on the street? She's trying to take care of herself, Henry. She was a few dollars short of having the money necessary to take a room in Sherman's Boarding House, and now you've screwed that up. Do you really plan to lock her up?"

"Just long enough to give her something to think about."

Helen's heart raced. With a simmering anger, she struggled to keep her next words in check. "Henry, you figure out a way to get her back to work, or I swear—" Helen's threat hung in the air.

"This is my day off, you know."

"Henry, as chief, you don't get days off. But you're in for a treat." Trying to appeal to Henry's better nature, Helen's tone softened. "You'll be amazed at what this girl can do."

A resigned sigh crackled through the line. "Fine, Helen. I'll go pick her up and assess the situation myself."



No sooner had we entered the police station than I heard, "For you, Sam. The chief."

"Yeah, chief." A few seconds later, "You're the boss. This way, missy." We walked down a long hallway. "In here." Billings tossed my sketchbook on the table and said, "Turn around."

He removed my cuffs and told me to have a seat. I didn't know what to think. With time and nothing to do, I opened my sketchbook.

Settling into the starkness of the interview room, I pondered what to draw. *Got it.* I started with myself, a side view with my hands behind my back. *Too bad I can't show the cuffs chaffing my skin.* Then I added Officer Billings, freeing me. *My head, turned to the right, taking in the room's details.* It clamored of the early twentieth century with its smells of old wood and stale cigarettes. Its air was dense with the history of countless conversations. The walls, adorned with layers of paint, whispered stories of secrets and betrayal. *And now ... this heavy wooden table with its mismatched chairs.* I leaned forward, and the chair tipped. *One*

*with a slight wobble.* The lone window, its glass grimy, filtered the afternoon light into a dusty haze. The interplay of light and shadow, the texture of the wood, and the sense of time standing still in this forgotten corner of the station completed my drawing.

“Emily ...”

I looked up. There stood a man exuding authority and composure. His slicked-back hair, peppered with tones of gray, suggested maturity and experience.

“Well, Helen was right about one thing. You can’t be but a hundred pounds. How can someone so small cause so much trouble?”

“Are you here to lock me up?”

“No, young lady. Thanks to your friend, I’m here to escort you back. I promised Helen I would take a personal interest in your ... situation.” His focused eyes and intense glare suggested a man with a keen sense of observation and fairness.

“I guess a thank you is in order then.”

“Don’t thank me. Thank your advocate. I’ve known Helen Miller for a long time. She’s not easily impressed. Going to bat for you is out of character. How’d you pull that off?”

“I drew her.”

“Imagine that. Get your things.”

This time, when escorted to the police car, the chief opened the front passenger side door. It didn’t come without a slight sense of embarrassment. One minute, I was off to the slammer. The next, I felt a subtle sense of celebrity.

“So ... you drew Helen?”

“A caricature. She loved it. But not just her. I can put a smile on anyone’s face. I even put a smile on Mr. Blackwood. Do you know him?”

“You made Roger smile?”

“Not a broad one, but it was still a smile.”

“A smile on that old mug? That’s got to be a first.”

The chief pulled up right in front of Woolworths. Everything was just as I’d left it. But before resuming, I marched right inside and gave Mrs. Miller a big bear hug. “Thank you.”

The chief followed me in. “Happy now, Helen?”

“Thank you, Henry. Now, young lady, get back to work. How much are you short?”

“Around four dollars. Not sure.”

“Well, I’m sure Henry won’t mind covering any shortfall, right, Henry?” Mrs. Miller’s glare left the chief little wiggle room.

“How about I help things along with a portrait? How’s a dollar sound, Emily?”

“A portrait or a caricature?”

“A portrait.”

“I’m afraid a portrait will run two dollars. Stumpy paid me five dollars to capture the life of his diner, so two dollars is a bargain.”

“Since I’m here to investigate, why don’t you get started drawing a crowd? Meanwhile, I’ll go across the street to Stumpy’s and see what the hubbub is all about.”

Twenty minutes later, the chief returned to a gaggle surrounding me. Mrs. Miller must have kept her eyes peeled because she stepped outside with his appearance.

“Folks, you need to keep the area passable.”

“Then we can’t watch, chief,” said a voice. “The girl’s incredible.”

From the front row, a young girl about eight said, “And we won’t be able to hear her stories.”

“You tell stories, too?” the chief asked.

“Why do you think she puts so many smiles on little faces?”

“But look around, Helen. We can’t have this.”

“Have you had townspeople complain? I’m sure not. Is anyone here complaining? No. Find a way, Henry. Arrest the crowd if needed, but Emily’s done no wrong.”

The firm set of the chief’s mouth softened with his palms facing up. “I’ll look into it, Helen. Emily, here’s two dollars for my portrait.”

“I can’t disappoint the people in line, chief, but I can bring it to the station on Monday. Your image is imprinted in my mind. No need to sit.” The chief pulled back his head. “I promise.” I tapped my temple. “It’s all up here.”

The chief's two dollars put me over the top. Now, torn between a line of anxious admirers and a room at Sherman's Boarding House, I opted for the responsible course of action. I hated seeing the disappointment on little faces, but my priority was as clear as Woolworth's welcome bell.

"I'm sorry, everyone."

After removing my drawings, I shouldered my backpack. And while the day's commotion replayed in my mind, I set off to secure my future lodging. Along the way, a sense of determination steadied my steps.

When Mrs. Perkins opened the door, her eyebrows subtly arched, and her lips curled in an enigmatic smile. "Is your room still available, Mrs. Perkins? I have the money now."

"Did someone loan it to you?" A hint of skepticism colored her inquiry.

"No, ma'am. I earned it by drawing and telling stories." My voice carried a mix of pride and gratitude. "Mrs. Miller, I owe her so much."

With surprise evident at the mention of Mrs. Miller, she stepped back. "Helen Miller?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Come in."

As I crossed the threshold, I launched into the tale of my ordeal and Helen's unwavering support. "She stood up for me when the police hauled me off. They insisted—"

"You're mixed up with the police?" Concern laced her words as her eyes searched mine for the truth.

"It's not what you think. When I work, I draw a crowd. They say I'm violating some city ordinance, but Mrs. Miller went to bat for me and called the chief of police."

"Helen did that?" Astonishment colored her tone.

"She convinced the chief to find a solution, so he took me back to Woolworths. In an hour, I made up the remainder of what I needed. It helped that the chief gave me two dollars for a portrait. Oh, and the chief agreed I could continue on the sidewalk until—not sure."

Mrs. Perkins produced a sound that blended elements of a scoff and a chuckle. “Henry Bower turned a blind eye? You must be quite the charmer. That man would ticket his own mother.”

“No, ma’am. I’m charmless. I couldn’t charm the sun into rising. It’s the smiles I put on faces. That and the crowd telling the chief to leave me alone.”

“Well ... that’s quite the story.” Mrs. Perkins pondered, then proposed, “Do you have a problem with me giving Helen a call?”

“Why should I?” Confidence buoyed my response. “She’ll just tell you the same thing.”

Five minutes later, she returned, sealing the agreement with an exchange of money for a receipt.

The shadows lengthened as I prepared to return to the shelter, while the day’s end brought a new beginning at Sherman’s Boarding House. Upon my return, I tracked down Mrs. Baker. Holding my receipt out in a display of pride, she moved close. “Congratulations, Emily. I’m proud of you. Nice rebound after giving ten dollars to Maggie.”

“You know about that, huh?”

“Just like I know about your exciting day with the police. You’ve become the talk of the town, young lady.”

*Talk of the town? Right ... not my fault everyone congregates around me.* I left to draw the chief’s portrait. Unlike Billings, it was easy to like the chief. His eyes were kind, and his willingness to listen was a pleasant surprise. Billings ... not so much. It felt like he had it in for me.

As dawn crept into the kitchen the following morning, I found solace in the day’s routine tasks. The aroma of fresh coffee and the murmur of early risers filled the air. In these moments of calm, Mrs. Baker approached with hesitant steps. The tightness in her expression and the slight downturn of her lips hinted at unwelcome news.

*Now what?*

“Emily, Mrs. Perkins just called.”

“Her tenant moved out already?”

Mrs. Baker turned up the corner of her mouth. "To the contrary, her tenant changed her mind. She's not moving out after all. You go on. I'll have one of the others finish up."

*Jail, now this. I can't catch a break.*

She said to start with getting my money back. No one would hold a place without a deposit. "Mrs. Perkins is expecting you."

After grabbing my backpack, I headed on my way. Two steps from the door, I heard a knock. "Cowboy! What a pleasant surprise. Give me a hug. Hey, can I bother you for a ride? I'll update you on the way." I knew he wouldn't take the jail thing very well.

"Come back to the ranch, Emily. You proved your point."

"That I can get hauled off to the slammer? No, Cowboy. Thanks, but I'll manage. Everyone's been super supportive. Even the police chief was sympathetic."

"Blackwood won't be happy when he learns about your police encounter."

"You tell Mr. Blackwood that I appreciate his concern, but I love drawing for people, especially the kids. You should see their little faces light up." I turned, twisting in my seat. "You know, I don't get Mr. Blackwood. First time I met him, he referred to me as a chink. I took him for a bigoted asshole."

"Is that why you won't come back?"

"I've figured out he's more ignorant than he is a racist, so no."

Cowboy glanced my way. "Teasing from the boys?"

"It's not that either, Cowboy. Look, I don't expect anyone to understand. I just know that, for now, this is best for me."

"I hope you're right. Here's a note from Elenore."

"Let everyone know that when I get settled, I'll come back for a visit. Thanks for the ride." Before I got out, I kissed him on his cheek. As I stood holding the door, I couldn't help but notice a rather curious look. "What? It was just a thank-you kiss."

"You're welcome?"

"Bye. Say hi for me." Cowboy acknowledged with a smile.

Mrs. Perkins wished me luck finding a place. She was pretty apologetic about the whole thing. And as much as I appreciated it,

it got me no closer to solving my predicament. But with money burning a hole in my pocket, I stopped at Goodwill to see if they had anything I couldn't live without. Sure enough, they had an easel and a folding camp chair. Well, maybe not a chair, more like a stool. Regardless, it was something to sit on.

When I approached the cash register, the elderly lady behind the counter studied me with keen eyes. "You must be Emily."

I met her gaze, puzzled. "And you would be correct, but how can you know? Have we met? Did I draw for you?"

She shook her head while a warm smile spread across her wrinkled features. "No, hon, but that easel sat untouched for a year with no interest. That's why it's twenty-five cents." She leaned in closer, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "And a budding young artist matching your description is all I've been hearing. You're the talk of the town, young lady."

My brows raised in surprise. "You're the second person now to tell me that." I let out a lighthearted chuckle. "Did you hear about how I got hauled off to jail yesterday?"

Her eyes widened. "Jail? What in the world did you do?"

Waving a dismissive hand, I clarified, "Sorry. Jail is technically inaccurate. I was cuffed and hauled down to the station. My crowd obstructed the sidewalk."

"Tst, tst, shaking her head. Next time I see Chief Bower, I'll give him a piece of my mind. That's ridiculous."

"Don't be too hard on him. He gave me a temporary stay."

The lady's expression softened. "Still ... You know what, hon? You just take these things. They're yours."

I stood there with my mouth open, overwhelmed by her compassion. "Seriously? Thank you. Thank you. That's so generous. And you are ...?"

She smiled. "Mabel, hon. And you're very welcome."

I wasn't any closer to finding a place to call home. Still, I appreciated the support I was getting from the citizens of Boulder. A girl couldn't ask for more. Buoyed by Mabel's unexpected kindness, my spirits ran high. So when I saw the local Boys Club come into view, it was precisely the outlet I needed. Its weathered



brick facade radiated warmth and youthful energy. With my new easel and stool in tow, I decided to stop in and offer a drawing or two. *Perfect. A chance to give back.*

The club was abuzz with activity. The air echoed children's voices and basketballs thumping against a rough wooden floor. After setting up in a quiet corner, my sketchpad ready, a group of curious boys gathered around me.

With eyes wide, one of them asked, "You planning to draw something, miss?"

"Just waiting on one of you boys to show some interest."

"What can you draw?"

"Pretty much anything you can imagine." Smiling, "How about a dragon soaring through the clouds?" They nodded with enthusiasm. With just a few skillful strokes, a mighty dragon appeared on the page. Its scales sparkled like emeralds, and its wings stretched wide against a backdrop of fluffy clouds.

Their eyes sparkled with delight. Soon, I spun a tale of the dragon's adventures of knights, castles, bravery, and friendship. Their laughter and awed gasps painted strokes of joy across the canvas of my day, filling the room with music. About then, Alex, a volunteer about my age, approached. His gaze lingered on the drawing before meeting mine.

"That's incredible," he said, displaying genuine admiration. "You really have a way with them."

"Thanks"—a flush of pride warmed my cheeks—"I love bringing stories to life. It's my kind of thing."

As I turned the page to start a new sketch for another wide-eyed boy, Alex said, "My mom owns a local bookstore and hosts community events all the time. Your art and stories would be perfect for that."

I paused while I considered his words. *A bookstore ... could be an ideal place to share my drawings.* "You've piqued my curiosity. I'd love to learn more."

After my session at the Boys Club, Alex guided me to his mom's bookstore. The bell above the door jingled as a cozy world of books enveloped us. "Mom!"

“Back here.”

Alex led me through aisles of shelves filled with endless pages of adventure and bravery. Toward the back of the store, a woman in her forties looked up from a stoop.

“Look who I ran into.”

With kind and welcoming eyes, “You must be Emily. Hi, I’m Alice Langley.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

# *When Life Comes Knocking*

**M**rs. Langley greeted me with a warm smile. “It’s so nice to meet you.”

“What’s going on? Suddenly, everyone in town knows who I am.”

She tilted her head and let out a soft chuckle. “Well, dear, there are only a handful of Asians in our community, and none are as young and pretty as you are.” Her remark received a good quantity of air blowing through my lips.

“I have to agree with my mom ... on the pretty part.” Alex’s eyes, sincere and kind, met mine.

My skepticism was evident as I crossed my arms and said, “You must be looking for a freebie.”

“I’m not, Emily. It’s just true. She’s everything people have been saying, Mom. Every word is true. This girl is absolutely amazing.” Alex showed his enthusiasm as his hands painted the air as he spoke. “Every boy at the club surrounded her in amazement. It was like she was reading from a book. All off the top of her head—drawing and storytelling. It was incredible to watch.”

Mrs. Langley nodded. Her gaze seemed to appraise me with fresh interest. “An artist and a storyteller? Impressive. Maybe you can put on a storytime here sometime.”

“That’s what I said, Mom.”

“Maybe after I get settled.”

Mrs. Langley furrowed her brow as she scrunched her eyes. “Settled, dear? What do you mean?”

“Uh ... you see, well ... I’m sort of living at the Boulder shelter at the moment. It’s just temporary.” I averted my eyes as embarrassment crept into my voice. “I thought I had a room at the Sherman Boarding House, but that fell through. In fact, I really need to go. Technically, I’m supposed to be out tomorrow. I don’t think Mrs. Baker will kick me out on the street, but I’ll have to listen to a ration for another day.”

“Come with me.” Mrs. Langley’s voice was firm, leaving no room for argument. With my curiosity piqued, I followed her down a dimly lit hall as the sound of our footsteps echoed against the walls. Reaching the top was beyond anything I could have imagined—a complete studio awaiting me. “It’s not much, but it’s better than nothing.”

My eyes widened in disbelief. “How much?”

“Can you manage storytime twice a week for two hours and maybe an occasional special event?”

“Sure. No problem but how much?”

“What I just said. Storytime twice a week for two hours and maybe an occasional special event.” Her generous and unexpected offer hung in the air.

“Shut. Up!” I couldn’t contain my excitement and disbelief as my feet jumped up and down. “You can’t possibly mean that.”

Mrs. Langley smiled with a faint laugh. “I meant every word.”

“I can’t accept. That’s too generous, but thank you. The boarding house was twenty-five dollars with an evening meal. Does twenty dollars sound fair?”

“No, Emily, it doesn’t.” In a confident and resolute manner, Mrs. Langley maintained her stance, exhibiting her business acu-

men. “Can’t you see I’m offering you a job telling stories? The room is your compensation.”

“But I’d tell stories for free. That’s what I did today. Why should you feel obligated to compensate me?”

“It’s not out of obligation, Emily. My offer is out of fairness. I saw your drawing at the diner. Sensational. Your story jumps right off the paper. This is just good business. When the word gets out, the whole town will line up outside my door.”

“I don’t know how to thank you.”

“It’s I who should thank you. Boulder will turn green when they learn I’m the one who snagged you.” Mrs. Langley opened her eyes wide and shook her head. “You don’t realize just how talented you are, do you? Now, Alex will drive you back to the shelter to get your things.”

“All I own I have with me. May I use your phone?” And just like that, euphoria lifted me. “Mrs. Baker? It’s Emily. I found a place to stay.”

Things were finally looking up. I couldn’t stop pinching myself—my own place just by pursuing my passion. Alex was kind enough to play taxi driver, chauffeuring me around to get some groceries and needed supplies. The Goodwill lady, Mabel, gave me boxes of household items and clothes for only five dollars, and that was at my insistence. She wanted to give it all as a housewarming gift.

Inspired by the community’s kindness, I found a moment of peace to express my gratitude through art by capturing a scene of Mrs. Langley’s storytime. In that serene space of creativity and reflection, a gentle knock pulled me back to the present.

“George! Come in. Come in. Give me a hug.”

“It’s good to see you too,” said George.

“Check out my new place. I’m officially off the street.”

George offered a warm smile. “So I was told. Congratulations.”

“And to think that just a few weeks ago, I was unconscious with my face down in the mud.”

George grimaced. “What?”

“Long story. So what brings you by?”

Apparently, George couldn't get me off his mind, believing that untapped talent was still waiting to be unleashed. Wanting to see me reach my full potential, he asked that I meet with his friend. "He is an art teacher by profession, but he also works freelance out of his small home studio. I think he can open a whole new world for you."

"Why are you pushing me, George? I started drawing real life like you suggested. I'm even working on a piece for Mrs. Langley."

"If it feels like pushing, I'm sorry. But I see remarkable things in you. I've never met someone with as much raw, natural talent. I'm only trying to help."

*How can I say no? You'll just pester until I cave anyhow.*

As soon as I agreed, George rushed downstairs to call his friend. A minute later, I heard, "Emily, let's go." Next thing I knew, I stood in Mr. Daniels' studio, surrounded by the scent of pencil wood and fresh paper. George had just introduced me to his teacher-friend before he rushed off to a photo shoot. I felt a nervous excitement bubbling within me as my new mentor gave me a kind yet keen look.

"I've seen some of your work, Emily." His voice was rich with genuine admiration. "It's quite remarkable, likewise your talent. What you can do with such rudimentary materials is nothing short of impressive."

He gestured toward a table covered with various pencils, paints, and papers. Each type and texture promised untold possibilities. With a spark of enthusiasm in his eyes, "I'd like to introduce you to some new tools."

Filled with awe and curiosity, I asked, "Where did you find these?"

"From a catalog," he replied. "I haven't even found a source in Denver for some of this stuff."

Imagining the possibilities, I couldn't help but express my awe. "Wow, what I could do with supplies like these."

Mr. Daniels leaned against the table and crossed his arms. "They would make a difference, for sure. But if you really want

to take your art to another dimension, you'll consider drawing from the inside out."

"Pardon? Inside out?"

Locking his eyes, "You're holding back, Emily." His gaze pierced, yet it was encouraging. "Make your drawings speak from the heart," he said. "I saw your drawing at the diner. Rockwellian is what that is, and that's the problem. No one does Rockwell like Norman Rockwell. You need to find your own niche—the one that lives deep inside you."

"I'm not sure what you mean."

Mr. Daniels stopped all movement to fix his eyes on mine. "Put Emily on paper. Illustrate your life."

"It's not very interesting," I said, feeling a sudden sense of vulnerability.

Mr. Daniels raised his chin and tilted his head to the right. "May I ask? How old are you?"

"Seventeen ... why?"

"The fact that you rolled into town, stayed at the city shelter, and then swept the city by storm tells me a lot about you."

Having piqued my curiosity, "Like what?"

"You have a story to tell. Something drove you into the streets. Share your story. That's all I'm saying." His words painted a picture I hadn't realized was mine.

At a whisper, "Scary." The thought of baring my soul on paper felt more daunting than any sketch I'd ever attempted.

"I understand your hesitation, but sometimes an artist has to make themselves a little vulnerable. Think about it. Now, I've made you an artist care package. It's got everything you need to dazzle the town."

Feeling unworthy of such generosity, "I couldn't possibly—"

"You most certainly can." Mr. Daniels made his insistence known with a stern glare. "You'll hurt my feelings if you don't."

Just then, a knock at the door signaled George's return. "Are you done here?"

Clutching the package with gratitude and determination, "Thanks so much, Mr. Daniels." My mind raced with the possi-

bilities he'd unlocked. Stepping outside, the joy of my newfound good fortune brought a tear to the corner of my eye.

Mr. Daniels called out. "I'll drop by soon to see how you're doing. Bye now."

On the drive back to the bookstore, I found myself wrapped in silence. My thoughts were a whirlwind of emotions and revelations from my meeting with Mr. Daniels. George kept stealing glances my way with concern etched across his face. My eyes stayed fixed ahead, lost in contemplation. I couldn't find the words just yet.

As George pulled up to the bookstore, he finally broke the silence. He sounded curious and concerned. "You're not going to tell me about it?" I remained silent as the gears in my mind still turned. "He gave you something to think about, didn't he?" With a nod, I acknowledged the truth in his words.

"Let me guess. He told you to make yourself vulnerable." His insight surprised me, prompting me to turn my head, poof out my lips, and nod once more. George understood more than I gave him credit for.

"It's the next logical step, Emily. Think of it as therapeutic. You have some demons inside. We all do. My guess is you're running from something. Just try it. Draw from your gut. Draw from your experiences since you left wherever it was you called home. Draw your pain or sadness. Let it out. OK?" His words, so earnest and full of faith, reached deep within me.

I glanced at George, taking a deep breath as I absorbed his advice. Bouncing my head a bit, I felt a mix of gratitude and determination. His encouragement served as a guiding light, pushing me to explore a path that felt intimidating yet necessary.

"Can you give me a ride to Woolworths?"

"Sure. No problem."

After dropping off my new art supplies, George obliged me with a quick jaunt to Woolworths for some motherly advice. "Thanks for being such a good friend, George."

Helen, with her keen perception, wasted no time. "What are you afraid of, Emily?" she asked. Her voice was soft yet piercing.



Just above a whisper, “Life.”

Mrs. Miller smiled, shook her head, and offered a faint chuckle. “My, you could have fooled me. You’re full of life. I’ve seen the smiles you put on faces, young and old. It’s been a pleasure to watch. Someone’s challenged you, huh?”

“Am I that easy to read?” I couldn’t help but smile despite the turmoil inside.

“Do you remember what I told you when you first arrived? Life’s trying to teach you a lesson. I discovered a long time ago it’s best to listen when life comes knocking.” Helen’s wisdom, shared in abundance, felt especially poignant now. “You know, I don’t know why you’re here, but I’m grateful you are. This town is better with you in it. And I guarantee we’ll all be far richer when you let us see the gold hidden inside.”

Her wise words calmed my restless spirit, providing comfort and solace. “That’s kind of you to say.”

“I love all of your art. I especially love what you did for the diner. What a story that drawing tells. It’s time now that you tell us a story about you—something personal. The town’s been asking, ‘Who is this girl?’ ”

My throat tightened as a lump formed. “No one’s ever cared.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

With a trace of bitterness seeping through, “It’s true.”

“Then tell that story. Tell us about the blind people in your life.”

Her encouragement, simple yet profound, nudged me toward a truth I had long avoided. “Thanks, Mrs. Miller.”

“Just a peek inside, Emily.”

“I’ll think about it.” After saying goodbye to Mrs. Miller, her advice kept playing in my mind, urging me to open up and tell my story to the community that had become my sanctuary. As I made my way back home, Helen’s words persisted. ‘When life comes knocking ... Open up. Make yourself vulnerable.’ *Now I know how a trapped mouse feels.* The sense of an ambush overwhelmed me. All three had hammered me with the same message.

Upon my return, I discovered that Mrs. Langley had transformed a corner of the store into a cozy reading nook. She even took the liberty of positioning my easel and art supplies as the focal point.

*Cool. Just what I need right now.*

As soon as I got settled, Alex's steps slowed as he neared me. His shoulders tensed with his eyes averting before offering a tight-lipped smile. "If you don't mind me saying, you don't look your usual self."

Turning up the corner of my mouth, "It shows, huh?"

"I'm a good listener." Alex grabbed a chair, offering an expression that suggested he was all ears.

"Three different people all delivered the same message today. It was ... well, lots of things, actually. Creepy being one. It was like a conspiracy. Has that ever happened to you?"

"Two people. Never three. And the message?"

"Spill my guts."

Alex looked up and inhaled. "I see. You have to admit. You are a bit of an enigma. It's as if one day you simply fell out of the sky. How can a girl with so much talent just appear out of nowhere?" I let his question sit unanswered. "But I'm willing to bet that the mystery surrounding your origins was not what they were talking about." Alex followed up with questioning eyes.

"No. It's not."

"There's no reason to be afraid."

"Mrs. Miller said something similar. That drawing of the diner? That was only my second time capturing something real. Sure, I draw faces, but they're always laced with an artistic slant."

"What was the first?"

"An experience from a ranch I worked at." Alex remained hushed. I'm sure in hopes I'd open up. "Nobody wants to see what's inside, Alex. Nothing but scrambled eggs."

"Excuse me?"

"Alphabet soup. A chaotic mess."

Alex looked at me with curious eyes. “More people than you realize can relate. Let your art speak. Allow yourself to become vulnerable.”

I dropped my pencil and threw up my hands. “That makes four of you now. What sort of witch’s brew is this? Gang up on Emily day?”

A curious smile formed on Alex’s lips. “Maybe life is trying to tell you something.”

“Chimera’s fire! Mrs. Miller said the same thing.”

Alex got up from his chair. Stooping to pick up my pencil, “Then maybe you should listen.”

“Nobody wants to see another Picasso, Alex.”

With a slight shrug of a shoulder and a smile, he left.

In the quiet aftermath of Alex’s departure, I sat alone while his words echoed like a ghost. The room, once vibrant with the energy of creation and possibility, now felt too vast and too empty. Outside, the world moved on, oblivious to the storm brewing within. As I sat in silence, a tiny whisper of bravery nudged me to confront my fear. With a deep breath, I turned my attention back to the canvas. Gripping the pencil in my hand, I realized it had become more than just a tool. It now pointed me toward my personal truth.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

### *The Art of Emotion*

The night stretched on as I tossed and turned beneath the pale moonlight streaming through my window. Each shadow on my walls seemed to echo the chorus of voices urging me to unveil the depths of my soul. But the comfort of my bed offered no solace as I grappled with the turmoil within. With each beat, my heart created a silent rhythm, mirroring the chaos of my uncertainty. The idea of baring my innermost fears and dreams felt like standing on the edge of a precipice. The unknown depths called out to me with dread and longing.

As dawn's first light crept across my room, I sat up, observing the scattered sketches of mythical creatures and distant worlds on my walls. My hands, usually so steady when wielding a pencil, now trembled at the thought of turning them toward the truth of my story. The characters I had created, each a guardian of my imagination, seemed to watch in silent anticipation. *You can do this, Em.*

Opening the floodgates and allowing Emily Reynolds's true essence to spill onto the canvas was a terrifying prospect. With the room now drenched in the soft light of morning, the choice lay startling before me. Drawing fantasy figures, superheroes, and graphic novels had always been my shield between me and the

world. But now, as I stood before the blank canvas, the weight of the decision pressed upon my beleaguered mind.

To express my emotions and experiences without hindrance, I had to explore unfamiliar territories and let go of my imaginary safe spaces. Yet, beneath the fear, an ounce of lion-heartedness roared to life. In the quiet alcove at the front of the bookstore, I sat with my new array of paint and paper, a gift I had only dreamed of until now. The blank page before me was both an invitation and a challenge to draw not just what I saw but what I felt and what I had lived.

Today, I was about to pour my soul onto this blank slate, guided by the vivid memories of my encounter with the Caretaker and the tumultuous journey of my past. My hand hovered over the array of paints, each capable of unlocking a door I had long kept closed.

I started with the hue of blue that reminded me of the Caretaker's realm, a place beyond time that had cradled my most vulnerable confessions. The strokes flowed with ease, forming the backdrop of a world where reality and memory intertwined. As I sketched the figure of the Caretaker, his ethereal presence took shape, a guardian of countless stories, including my own.

As I added layers of color, the walls around my heart crumbled, initiating the exploration of my story. The somber grays and icy blues filled the space around me, colors of the isolation and loneliness that had tinted my days before Boulder. The sharp distinction between the warmth of the community that had embraced me and the cold shadows of my previous life bled onto the page.

My memories were a tumultuous blend of purples and blacks, reflecting my family dynamics: my mother's absence, my father's preoccupation, and Madison's unwitting shadow over my existence. Each line, each color choice, was a step deeper into the labyrinth of my emotions, a journey through the pain, the resentment, and the longing for something more.

Painting became a release, an emotional discharge that allowed me to confront and accept the disparate pieces of myself. The Caretaker's realm, with its timeless wisdom, had offered me a

mirror to reflect upon the complexity of my story. As my painting became more vibrant, its profound significance became clearer. It affirmed my identity, difficulties, and the potential for a complete transformation.

The Caretaker's figure, surrounded by the chaotic swirl of my life's hues, stood as a testament to my journey. His eyes, drawn with the depth of understanding, seemed to offer silent encouragement to embrace the myriad of experiences that had shaped me.

And now, we would embark on a morning characterized by hope and gratitude. I captured the smiles of strangers, the handshakes of friends, and the embrace of a community that had offered me unexpected kindness. The golden yellows of laughter from the Boys Club and the soft oranges of Mabel's generosity bridged the gap between my past and present.

The town's generosity had taken on color and texture as it intertwined with my story. Boulder's colors didn't just surround The Caretaker. They emanated from him as if he were the one ushering me into this new chapter. His guiding light proved that the warmth I had experienced was as genuine as the coldness I'd known. The bookstore corner, where I sat drawing, had become as much a part of my world as the isolated room of my old life.

Boulder wasn't just thawing my frozen world. It had kindled a fire in my heart that I now allowed to spill onto the page. There was no longer an empty space, which would have existed just a few weeks ago.

With my last stroke, I unveiled a revelation. Journeying with the Caretaker showed me that vulnerability is not a flaw but a means to forge connections and discover my true self. The rendering symbolized my newfound courage to face the world, a vivid composite of my past, and the wisdom gleaned from my time beyond time.

I took a step back. My eyes blurred as I took in the entirety of my work. It was the most honest piece I had ever created—a raw and unfiltered glimpse into the essence of Emily Reynolds. As I

wiped a stray tear from my cheek, I knew it was my first step toward accepting and loving the person I was.

As I signed my name, it seemed I was closing one chapter and opening a new one. Lost in this moment of completion, I overlooked Mrs. Langley until she was beside me, her presence quiet but profound. When I looked up, her eyes met mine, glassy with unshed tears. “Oh, Emily, I’m speechless,” she whispered. Her voice carried the weight of emotion that mirrored the depth of the piece before us.

Beyond the surface of colors and shapes, the painting offered a glimpse into my innermost being, portraying a narrative of anguish, personal growth, and hope. Mrs. Langley, moved by the brazen emotion encapsulated within, made an immediate decision. “Emily, this needs to be seen. May I display it in our front window?” Her request was an honor and a validation of the journey I had poured into my art.

The following morning, my painting sat in the bookstore’s front window, visible to everyone passing by. It wasn’t long before a crowd gathered. Curiosity drew people to the emotional gravity emanating from the new display. Whispers of admiration and speculation filled the air, each person drawn to the window by the unabashed passion evident in my painting.

Amidst the quiet hum of appreciation, the sharp edge of Officer Billings’ approach cut through the atmosphere. His presence was like a dark cloud over a sunlit day, his uniform crisp in a way that seemed almost too rigid, too ready for confrontation.

As he walked towards me, he scrutinized me with a pained expression and an uneasy demeanor that I couldn’t fully identify. It was a look I’d seen before that hinted at something personal beyond mere duty.

As Officer Billings attempted to disperse the crowd, his authoritative voice seemed to lose its edge against the collaborative vigilance on the artwork. As the onlookers shuffled on, Billings’ stride slowed. His glance skimmed past the painting, then snapped back, ensnared. His step hesitated, a brief stutter in his motion as if the image had hooked into him, tugging at the seams of his

composure. Around him, the crowds lingered with their gazes glued to the painting, weaving a silent barrier of shared intrigue.

Standing amidst the unmoving onlookers, Billings glanced back at the painting, then to the crowd, and finally to me. In that brief exchange of looks, a subtle shift occurred. Without a word spoken against him, the atmosphere seemed to hold him in place, an invisible restraint he couldn't breach.

He stepped back with the lines of his posture softening, if only slightly. The painting continued to draw gazes, including his own, tethering him to the moment longer than he intended. In the end, Billings turned away while the crowd's attention reverted to the window, leaving the quiet victory of the day to the art and its audience.

Later, I couldn't help but feel a twinge of satisfaction knowing that, for once, Billings had found himself on the back foot. His calls to the chief and the veiled reports of obstruction seemed to stem from a place of personal vendetta. Yet, at that moment outside the bookstore, none of it mattered. The painting had spoken louder than any accusation he could levy against me, leaving him to retreat, if only for now.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

### *A Call to Action*

In his office, Chief Bower sat with the weight of Officer Billings' recent complaint heavy on his mind. The door had barely swung shut when a sense of frustration settled in. As he reached for the phone, Henry grimaced, hesitated, and returned it to its cradle. The cycle repeated once more before determination set in, and he dialed the familiar number to Langley Books.

"Alice, Henry Bower," his voice carrying the burden of his office.

With a tone firm yet not without warmth, "Save it, Henry."

Henry pressed on. "These crowds can't persist, Alice. Must you display the painting in your front window?"

"Yes, Henry, I must. It's more than a work of art. Have you been by to see it?" Alice's defense was swift and her question rhetorical. "Besides, I thought you and Helen Miller reached an understanding. That's right. We shopkeepers talk, so I'll tell you the same thing she told you. You and the city council need to deal with this."

Staunch resistance greeted Henry's attempt to differentiate the situation at Woolworths from that at Langley Books. Alice's rebuttal was clear. "Not my problem. Talk to the mayor if you're losing sleep."

The mention of their friendship did little to sway Alice. “We are, Henry—long time, but your city ordinance is your problem, not mine.”

Alice’s stark reality check countered Henry’s plea for dependability. “You can, Henry. I’m saving you from yourself.”

“That’s a matter of opinion,” he said.

Alice’s warning against citing her carried a threat of its own. “Oh, bring it on. That’s a battle you can’t win, Henry. That young lady has stolen the hearts of this town. Maybe you should ask the mayor if he plans to run for re-election.”

As the conversation spiraled, the chief’s attempt to appeal to law and order fell on deaf ears as well. “No ‘but Alice.’ Either loosen up your sphincter muscle or take it to the city council. And dammit, Henry, don’t you ever threaten me again ... or any of the other shopkeepers in this town. Do your job.”

“I’m trying, Alice. Would you prefer anarchy?”

“Oh, please. Stop with the melodrama. Glad we had this little chat. Have a great day, Henry.”

The phone call ended with Henry hearing a click and the silence of his office. He sighed as the reality of his isolation in this battle settled in. The painting at Langley Books had indeed stirred the hearts of Boulder. Its vibrant colors and intricate details had captivated the entire community.



As I set my sketchbook aside, the stain of the conversation I’d just overheard settled like a dark curse on my heart. I couldn’t shake the feeling of being a burden despite Mrs. Langley’s unwavering support. Rising from my corner, I approached her, finding her amidst a cascade of books.

“Mrs. Langley,” my words stumbling a bit, “I couldn’t help but overhear your conversation with Chief Bower.”

Surrounded by books, Mrs. Langley paused, her hands motionless, and her gaze softened as she turned to face me. “Emily, your

art has brought a new energy and vibrancy to this place that we didn't realize was missing. It's stirred something wonderful in the hearts of our community."

"But at what cost?" My voice was a mere whisper. "If my presence here is causing this much trouble, maybe I should just stop displaying my work."

She placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder. "Emily, the joy and thoughtfulness of your work outweigh any temporary ruffles it may cause. This town needs more of what you offer, not less."

But her consoling remarks risked raising tensions instead of soothing them. "Thank you, Mrs. Langley, but I can't stand by and watch this friction grow. There's got to be a solution to this mess."

I watched as Mrs. Langley pondered for a moment before finally offering a nod. "Good luck finding it. Just know you have my and the town's support behind you."

Feeling gratitude and determination, I thanked her and made my way out of the store. As I stepped onto the street, the cool breeze of Boulder brushed against my skin, heightening my senses and fueling my racing thoughts. It was clear what I had to do next. Taking a deep breath, I ventured toward the Boys Club, determined to bring harmony back to the community I had come to cherish.

Finding Alex amid basketballs and wrestling garb, I didn't waste a moment before pouring out my worries. "He even threatened to cite her. The town has spiraled into chaos, and it's all my fault. We need to do something, Alex, but I'm no activist."

Alex's reaction was immediate. "You might not see yourself as an activist, Emily, but you're definitely a peacekeeper. You wouldn't be this worried if you weren't." *Peacekeeper. Activist. What's the difference? Sounds like dragons and griffins.*

"But what can we do? I feel so ... helpless."

"But not alone. I'm with you," he said with a determined glint in his eye. "Let's gauge the town's opinion. See what they think. And I've got the perfect plan. They say a picture is worth a thousand words, right? So, let's show them."

His idea intrigued me. “Draw a picture? I could sketch the crowd, maybe even with Billings in the mix, trying to break it up.”

“Exactly,” Alex said as his enthusiasm grew infectious. “Plus, it’ll give people a chance to meet you firsthand. Grab your easel. It’s practically your signature now. We’ll hit up Stumpy’s Diner first. He adores your work, especially that drawing of the regulars. We’ll draw a crowd in no time.”

Empowered by Alex’s support and our budding plan, I felt a shift within me. *Maybe we can smooth over this rift. My art can serve as a bridge.* With a nod, we set off to fetch my easel, ready to face whatever came our way.

Outside Stumpy’s Diner, the air buzzed with anticipation as I set up my easel, ready to capture the essence of my experiences outside Woolworths. The scene took shape as I added the crowd’s joyful faces gathered around my art, with Officer Billings observing off to the side. As he settled by the crowd, his expression stood out, poles apart from the obvious warmth surrounding him.

As I sketched, I narrated the story behind the drawing, my voice weaving through the tranquil attentiveness of the onlookers. While applying the finishing touches, an annoyed voice from the crowd cut through. “That’s silly. What’s his beef?”

“Yes, it is silly,” said another, chiming in firm and sure. “I was there when Officer Billings came to break it up. Said she was breaking some city ordinance.”

“Boulder has become my home.” My voice rose above the hush, and my hand steadied as I marked the canvas with purpose. Pausing, I locked eyes with those surrounding me. “But this conflict, this battle between those who are supposed to protect us and the heart of our town, is tearing me apart.” In my new-found sanctuary, my plea lingered. Its strong yet gentle tone reverberated amid the chaos. As the conversation surrounding me grew, I said, “They’re making a temporary exception while they find a solution. But really, they aren’t. Meanwhile, the pressure continues as they try to put the onus on the storekeepers.”

“Chief Bower threatened to cite my mom this morning, probably veiled, but still,” said Alex. “He did the same to Helen Miller. Who knows how many more?”

“You know the chief. He’s a stickler,” said Stumpy.

Then, an irritated citizen added, “We should storm City Hall.”

As the murmurs of agreement and concern swirled through the air, an elderly gentleman made his way forward.

“Emily, it’s so nice to finally meet you. I’m Jack Crawford,” he said, extending a hand. “I have a suggestion for you. On Tuesday evening, the city council holds its monthly meeting. Come state your case or plea for a solution. Meanwhile, do what you can to rustle up interest among the townspeople. And don’t forget the *Daily Camera*. Surely, they’ll want to cover the story.”

Grateful, I nodded as the idea took root. “Thank you, Mr. Crawford. I’ll do just that. It’s time our voices were heard, not just through art, but in the council chambers too.” Looking at the crowd surrounding me, I saw a mix of strangers and familiar faces united in their enthusiasm and support. “And thanks to all of you.”

The morning air was crisp as Alex and I headed to the *Boulder Daily Camera*, my heart a combination of nerves and resolve. As we entered the newsroom, typewriters buzzed, and urgent conversations filled the air, creating a scene that exuded anticipation and importance.

At the reception, I requested to see Mr. Paddock, the editor. Moments later, a man with observant eyes and a welcoming smile approached. I took a deep breath before addressing him. “I’m Emily.” My voice betrayed me with a hint of nervousness. “And this is my friend Alex. I believe we have a story that merits your attention.”

Mr. Paddock’s curiosity turned into genuine interest as I outlined our situation and plan. “Your art has sparked quite the discussion, Emily.” With his gaze reflecting thoughtfulness, “It’s a conversation this town should have.”

To our surprise, he beckoned one of his reporters. “Write down everything. This is tomorrow’s front-page story. Boulder

needs to hear about this,” he said, catapulting our cause into the community’s consciousness.

As the reporter scribbled notes, I recounted my journey, the crowds my art drew, and the complications that ensued. With each word, my confidence grew, painting a vivid picture of our current predicament.

Before we left, Mr. Paddock, with a gleam in his eye, said, “There’s a price for your story, though. I’d like an illustration for my office.”

“Certainly,” I said, honored by the request and grateful for the support.

True to their word, the *Daily Camera* showcased our story on the front page, motivating the community to participate. The support was overwhelming. Boulder’s response validated my work and highlighted the significance of our struggle for balance.

Over the next few days, Alex and I canvassed Boulder. Woolworths, Langley Books, Stumpy’s Diner, Jenkins Hardware, Goodwill, the Boulder Shelter, and even City Hall drew the attention of many. At each stop, I captured the essence of the Big Bad Wolf, drawing crowds and igniting discussions.

As Alex and I navigated the town, our movement became a powerful demonstration of community solidarity. Each drawing, conversation, and new ally added to the collective voice calling for understanding and resolution. Come Tuesday evening, the council meeting room witnessed a historic event. It burgeoned with townspeople in unprecedented numbers.

As the mayor called the meeting to order, his eyes swept over the crowd, confirming the urgency and weight of the moment. “Given the turnout,” he said, adjusting his glasses, “I propose we change the normal proceedings to address the concerns that have brought us all here today.” The attendees immediately approved his suggestion and made and seconded a motion in quick succession.

“The floor is open for comments. Please state your name and voice your position on the matter. Considering the numbers present, limit yourself to two minutes. Who would like to go

first?” Helen Miller led, with many of her fellow shopkeepers standing by her side. The air was thick with anticipation.

“Mr. Mayor, this crowd should speak for itself. However, it’s both fortunate and regrettable that we are here today. Regrettable, that it’s come to this. Fortunate, that Boulder has embraced this young woman as one of their own. Of course, our community wants law and order, but who’s complaining? Where is the harm? This girl is only bringing smiles to little faces and infusing this town with sorely needed life and energy. She’s a breath of fresh air, Mr. Mayor. Our request is simple. Leave the girl and us shopkeepers alone.”

After Helen’s impassioned plea, others followed without a single dissenting voice. It felt as though the entire city of Boulder rallied around me. Sensing the overwhelming support from the entire town, I found myself in a place I’d never imagined. The sheer enormity of the situation left me torn. I felt embarrassed, yet I experienced a profound emotional response as tears welled in my eyes.

Then, the room’s focus unmistakably shifted. With a mixture of curiosity and challenge, the mayor turned his stern gaze to me. “It’s my understanding that this is all your doing, Emily. Is that true?”

I stepped forward, feeling the weight of every eye upon me. “I asked the community to come together to stop the nonsense. Yes, Mr. Mayor.”

His eyebrow arched in reaction to my response. “Nonsense? Is that what you think about the law?”

“No, sir. I’m just tired of seeing my friends and neighbors harassed over someone’s silly interpretation of a city ordinance.”

“So now it’s silly?” His tone took on a hint of defensiveness.

With a steadying breath, I pressed on. “Respectfully, Mr. Mayor, have you read the ordinance?”

Admitting he hadn’t, the room tensed. A collective intake of breath marked the moment. I seized it, revealing the truth I had unearthed through diligent research. “Well, I did some digging, Mr. Mayor, and discovered there is no ordinance re-

garding crowds impeding the sidewalks. There is, however, a city ordinance that prohibits storekeepers from displaying their goods on city sidewalks. A practice, I must say, that is utilized by many stores throughout the city. Yet, no one seems to care about that. Despite the absence of an ordinance, one police officer unjustly burdened citizens with preventing or dispersing the crowds. Many of them have been threatened with citations. I was hauled off to the police station ... in cuffs, I will add.”

I paused, letting the absurdity of the situation sink in before continuing. “The other ordinance I found was one about creating a public disturbance. If putting smiles on little girls’ and boys’ faces makes a public disturbance, then maybe Boulder isn’t for me. The thing is, I love this town and the people in it, most anyway. I don’t want to leave, but this ridiculous treatment of Boulder’s citizens needs to stop.

“I suggest that you and your council pass a resolution stating that drawing a crowd doesn’t violate any ordinance. You might also want to have the chief of police speak to a certain one of his officers.”

The mayor’s response, “Yes, well, we’ll take that suggestion under advisement,” was almost inaudible over the rising tide of support from the crowd. Then, out of nowhere, a voice cried, Emily! Emily! Emily. Another joined, Emily! Emily! And then a third and another and another until the entire room erupted into a chant. Meanwhile, the mayor and council members consorted. It only took a minute for the mayor to pound his gavel for order in the room.

When finally restored, the mayor, perhaps moved by the undeniable solidarity, called for a vote. I held my breath and waited. One by one, the council members raised their hands, supporting my proposal. I couldn’t believe it. They all voted yes. A wave of relief and joy crashed over me. Smiling, I nodded at the faces beaming back at me, some with tears in their eyes. The crowd erupted in cheers and applause, joining us in our victory. “Thank you,” I whispered, their enthusiasm echoing in my chest.



Amid the pandemonium, Alex raced to my side. After a brief embrace, he took my head with both hands and gently pressed his lips to mine. His presence was an anchor in a storm of emotions—his gentle kiss a comfort in the tumultuous journey that led to this moment. As we walked out of the council chamber, hand in hand, the smiles on our faces mirrored the hope and joy we felt within. Our community had spoken, and for once, it felt like someone had truly listened.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

### *Decisions, Decisions*

Chief Bower walked into the briefing room with a demeanor that demanded attention. The morning light shined across the space filled with his awaiting officers. As he cleared his throat, every pair of eyes locked onto him, sensing the moment's gravity.

With a steady and commanding voice, "Gentlemen, the city council has passed a resolution that directly impacts how we manage gatherings in public spaces. Effective immediately, drawing a crowd is not a violation of any city ordinance." He paused, letting the words sink in, aware of the ripple of reactions across the room. "This decision is a direct result of a major oversight and misinterpretation of one of our laws."

After the briefing, Chief Bower motioned to Officer Billings, a man he had known for years. "Billings, my office, now."

Once the door was closed, the chief turned to face Billings with the air between them charged with tension. "You've embarrassed me and the department," Chief Bower said. "I'm taking responsibility for this fiasco because that's my job. Ultimately, I'm responsible for what happens, but you led me down the garden path. I wrongly assumed you knew what ordinance you were trying to uphold." He leaned back against his desk, crossing his arms as he regarded Billings with frustration and concern. "No, I

had to have some little girl, Emily Reynolds, take us to school in front of the entire city of Boulder. You know what else? It took her to point out that you're the only one who's had an issue with her and the crowds she draws. Why is that?"

Chief Bower's gaze didn't waver, drilling into Billings with an intensity that demanded introspection. "I've known you a long time, so I've heard some comments you've made over the years. I wasn't chief then, but I am now. If you have issues, you'd better keep them off the job. I won't have that crap in my department."

The room felt smaller and the silence heavy. "Consider this a warning. I'll be watching. We're here to protect and serve the entire community, and that includes Emily Reynolds."



In the nook's calm near the front of the bookstore, I sat with a brush in hand, applying the final strokes to Mrs. Langley's cherished scene. The smell of fresh paint and the comforting scent of old books enveloped me, creating a sanctuary away from the bustling world outside. The painting captured one of many moments of pure magic—storytime. With my back turned to a circle of children, the kids watch as I draw and weave tales that make their eyes sparkle with wonder.

Mrs. Langley's presence remained unnoticed until her shadow appeared on the canvas. With her voice laced with genuine admiration, "Oh, Emily, it's beautiful." And the warmth in her eyes reflected the joy we both saw in those children's faces.

"I'm so proud of you, and you should be proud too—standing up to the city like you did."

"It was the town, Mrs. Langley—"

"Alice. Please."

"Your support. All the kind words. Boulder moved me to tears. And my insides ... total chaos. I hardly remember what I said."

"Well, you did good. Enough to get rewarded. I saw that kiss."

My cheeks flushed with pride and sudden shyness. “No need to be embarrassed.” Her soft chuckle and understanding gaze told me she saw more than a fleeting moment between two people. “I know you guys have become close.”

As we shared a laugh, the bell above the bookstore door jingled, announcing Chief Bower’s unexpected entrance. A mix of apprehension and curiosity bloomed as he approached. He stood out in the bookstore like a thunderstorm on a sunny day, but his demeanor was gentle, unlike his uniform.

“Alice, can you excuse us?”

“No problem. I’ll leave you two be.”

The chief waited until Alice was out of earshot before uttering, “You’re quite the young lady,” he said in a resigned tone. As he took a nearby chair, his eyes spoke with sincerity. “I’m here to apologize, Emily—to say how sorry I am about ... everything, I guess. I hope you can find room in your heart to forgive me and my department’s actions.”

“Thank you, chief. I accept. Just happy to have the issue resolved.”

“I also want to thank you,” he said. “Seeing this town so unified was something to behold.”

I gave the chief a slight shrug.

“What was that for?”

“Credit the great people of Bolder. I’m not responsible for their kindness and generosity. They did that. I didn’t pay or bribe them to attend the council meeting. They did that all on their own.”

The chief slapped his upper thighs and stood. “Oh, as requested, I had a little talk with Billings. He won’t bother you anymore—at least, he’d better not.” With his hand on the doorknob, he stopped. “If you ever need anything, my door is always open.”

“You’re kind. Thank you.”

The chief’s visit, unexpected as it was, left me with a sense of validation and a deeper connection to Boulder than I’d ever felt. Sitting back in my chair, I let the moment soak in. The sounds of the bookstore, the scent of paint and paper, and the warmth

of the sun all blended into a memory I knew I'd cherish forever. *The Daily Camera! I need to thank Paddock.*

Snapping out of my reverie, I dashed to the back of the store. "Alex, the *Daily Camera*. We need to thank Paddock. Are you coming?"

"You bet."

Stepping out of the bookstore, Alex reached for the car door, holding it open for me. His chivalry, unexpected, stirred a blush that warmed my cheeks. Slipping into the seat, I whispered my thanks, savoring the pleasant coolness of the leather against my legs.

As we pulled away, the engine's whirr filled the space between us until I broke the silence. "Alex, I need to tell you something about ... that kiss." As he glanced my way, I saw a question in his eyes. "It was my first." The words hung in the car like my breath on a winter's day.

He blinked, surprise etched on his face. "First? But you're ..." As he searched for words, I felt the weight of his gaze. "You're beautiful, Emily. The way your eyes light up when you laugh, it's like ... I don't know. Sorry, I'm not the poetic type."

I looked away, focusing on the soft thrum of the car and the world passing by in a blur. With my voice just above the sound of the rushing wind, "You're the only one who seems to see it," I said.

When we arrived at the *Daily Camera*, I smoothed down my skirt before we walked in to meet Mr. Paddock. His office was a clamor of ringing phones and clicking typewriters with the scent of fresh ink in the air.

Paddock welcomed us with a firm handshake, saying, "Good to see you both. I have news. Your story—it's gone national with the AP." His words left me dizzy and the room spinning as I took in the magnitude of his news. "And the response—it's incredible." Paddock continued with excitement in his voice. "It's been non-stop calls all morning. Everything from appreciation to bless her heart. This town loves a fighter, and you, young Emily, just knocked down Goliath."

I stood there processing his words as the sounds of the office faded into the background. Then, as unexpected as a gust of wind blowing open a door, “We’d like you to consider joining us as our illustrator, Emily. Your perspective has captivated Boulder . . . and now, the country.” The offer hung in the air, heavy with potential and promise. Taking a deep breath, I tasted the opportunity, yet felt tethered to the life I knew.

“Mr. Paddock, I’m honored, truly,” my words slow and deliberate. “Could I have some time to think it over?”

“Certainly,” he said with a nod.

Sitting in the car, I absorbed the reality of the situation as Alex’s proud voice filled the cabin. “Emily, you’ve done something amazing here.”

As we pulled up to the bookstore, the familiar sight of the storefront calmed my racing thoughts. While the idea took root, “I need to draw,” I said. “It helps me think.”

I set up my easel outside the bookstore, feeling the crisp Boulder air against my skin. After the tumultuous council meeting and the unexpected job offer, I craved the solace that my world of shapes and lines provided.

I began sketching the council chamber with broad, sweeping lines. The strokes brought back memories of the voices that had supported me and the many faces that had become a united wave of encouragement. More and more people stopped to watch as my drawing took shape.

A young couple paused nearby, whispering. “Isn’t that Emily? The artist everyone’s talking about? She’s terrific.”

Their words made me smile, shy and unassuming. “Thank you,” I said, barely louder than the rustling leaves. Today felt different. Today, I sensed an undeniable connection with these streets and its people.

I sketched in the stern benches of the council chamber and the podium where I’d stood, even as my voice steadied and my hands shook. I added the mayor next. His face, exhibiting both irritation and interest, brought my drawing to life. And with their vivid emotions, the expressions of the townspeople filled my page.

Mrs. Henderson from the diner approached with her kind eyes. “My dear, we’re all so proud of you. You’re quite the young lady standing up to the council like that.”

I paused and glanced upwards as tears welled up in my eyes. “I just wanted to give something back to the town. You’ve all been so kind to me.”

“You’ve brought more life to this place than you know, Emily. That drawing you’re doing is special, just like you.”

Encouraged and with a new sense of purpose, I added the intensity in the community members’ eyes as they stood behind me.

Curiosity lit up the faces of a group of children as they gathered close. “Are you the lady who draws stories?”

I nodded as my heart warmed. “Yes, I am. Would you like to hear about this one?” They nodded with their eyes wide as I began. “Unlike so many stories that begin with ... in a land far, far away, this story is about a town standing together, about a girl finding her voice, and of a community becoming a family.”

As I spoke, my words painted pictures in the air while the children hung on every sentence. They laughed, gasped, and cheered, and I felt a surge of pride—not for myself, but for the story we all had created.

I stepped back to let the crowd see the finished drawing—a tribute to the spirit and people of Boulder. As I looked around, I saw a blend of old friends who had journeyed with me and fresh faces eager and ready for the adventure ahead. “Thank you, Boulder,” overwhelmed with gratitude, “for everything.”

As the crowd dispersed, the job offer still lingered in my mind. But for now, I reveled in the moment with my heart rooted in the streets of Boulder.

The sun was dipping lower in the sky, casting shadows across the sidewalk as Alex and I packed my painting supplies. His hands, steady and sure, folded my easel with an ease that spoke of the many times he’d watched me do it.

“It’s amazing how you do that,” he said. His voice carried a mix of admiration and perhaps a touch of wonder.

“Do what?” I asked, tucking a stray hair behind my ear.

“Make so many people happy,” he replied. As our eyes met, his sincerity was unmistakable.

I laughed, puffing a breath of air into the cool afternoon, “Until I came to Boulder, I’d never drawn for anyone. Stories either.”

“You act like you’ve been doing it all your life.”

As we entered, Alice’s voice carried from the back of the store. “Emily, you have a phone call.”

I exchanged a puzzled glance with Alex before wiping my hands on a rag. The phone felt cool and foreign against my ear as I answered. “This is Emily.”

“Hello, Emily. This is Anne Palmer from *The Saturday Evening Post*. We were wondering if you might be interested in doing an interview.” Her voice was bright and expectant.

“Holy Spock! Word travels fast.”

“Pardon?”

“I take it you saw the AP story. Crazy, huh?”

“Actually, Emily, we’ve seen some of your work—”

“How’s that even possible? So, this isn’t about the—what kind of interview?”

“For a job, of course.”

I felt my pulse quicken as the reality of her words sank in. *National attention. The Saturday Evening Post?* My thoughts tumbled like stars cascading from a night sky. “A job? Me?”

“Yes. Can you meet me tomorrow morning?”

“For a job interview? Are you sure about this?”

“Quite sure. Will Stumpy’s Diner at 9:00 work for you?”

“For a job interview?”

“Yes, Emily, for a job interview.”

“I guess ...” My voice sounded far away, even to my own ears.

I hung up and dialed Paddock’s number with shaky fingers. “Mr. Paddock, it’s Emily. I just got a call from *The Saturday Evening Post*. They want an interview.” I paused, struggling to find my next words. “Can I have a bit more time to decide on the job offer?”



“Emily, take all the time you need.” Paddock’s voice was a calming force. “This is your moment.”

I let out a shrill scream. “Alex! Alex!”

Alex raced toward me. “Emily, are you alright?”

“You won’t believe. You won’t believe it. *The Saturday Evening Post* wants to interview me ... for a job.”

“Congratulations. Mom!”

Stepping back outside, the phone call replayed in my mind. The streets that had witnessed my arrival, struggles, and triumphs stretched before me. Standing at a fork in the road, I found myself caught amidst the embrace of my local community and the siren call of national fame.

I turned toward the picture window fronting Langley’s Books. Still on display was my encounter with the Caretaker. *Who is that scared little girl?* It seemed like years, but it had only been weeks since that encounter. Next to it, Alice had just finished placing my drawing of City Hall. *What a difference.*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

### *A Familiar Figure*

With the morning air crisp against my skin, I pushed open the heavy door to City Hall. The last thing I expected was to nearly collide with the mayor, just steps into the foyer.

“Miss Emily. How’s my rabble-rouser doing this morning?” His tone carried a lightness with a smile playing at the edges of his words.

“I’m so sorry, Mayor.” My cheeks warmed as I stumbled out an apology, mixed with embarrassment and surprise. He waved off my concern and ushered me into his office. Sitting across from him, the reality of why I was there nudged at me. “I’m really sorry, Mr. Mayor—”

“It’s I who should say sorry, Emily. What you did ... it took courage. And for that, you have my respect.” His acknowledgment felt like a balm, soothing the flurry of nerves within me.

I reached into my bag and pulled out the drawing I’d crafted as a token of gratitude. “I want you to have this,” I said, sliding the paper across the desk. “And to thank you for adopting the resolution.”

His eyes scanned the artwork before locking with mine. “I hear the *Daily Camera* offered you a job.”

Surprise flickered through me. “Fairy wings! News travels fast. Yes, they did, so I guess you’ve heard about my interview with the *Post*?”

“*The Saturday Evening Post*?” His eyebrows lifted, displaying surprise and pride in his gaze.

“That’s the one.”

He leaned back, considering. “Well, that’s a big deal. Next thing, you’ll be rubbing elbows with Norman Rockwell.”

I let out a small laugh. “I doubt that.”

“Don’t be too sure. You’re a talented young lady. For the town’s sake, I hope you opt with the *Daily Camera*.”

“Thank you, Mayor. That means a lot. But Boulder ... it’s become home. And no matter where my art goes, part of me will always remain here.”

Standing, I needed to leave. “I appreciate everything, Mayor, but my interview awaits.”

As I turned to leave, “Uh, young Emily, my door ... it’s always open to you.”

I nodded and stepped back into the morning light. The door to City Hall closed softly behind me as the mayor’s words lingered. Boulder had indeed become more than just a place. It had become my home and a part of me. Yet, as I walked toward an uncertain future, the choices before me felt as vast as the sky above.

Walking from City Hall to Stumpy’s Diner wrapped me in a blanket of morning air. But the fifteen-minute journey did little to ease the tightening knot of anticipation in the pit of my stomach. With its familiar warmth and chatter, the diner felt like stepping into a hug. Stumpy’s greeting and nods and smiles from a few patrons offered a slice of comfort. Anne Palmer’s wave from her subdued corner broke through the bustling atmosphere, anchoring me.

Despite Anne’s professional and warm presence, my nerves remained jittery as I took a seat across from her. We exchanged pleasantries, but my mind raced ahead, full of questions and half-formed hopes. Unable to contain the squall inside, I started,

“When you said interview, I assumed it had something to do with me taking on city hall.”

“City hall?”

“Yeah ... since the AP picked up the *Camera’s* story, I sort of figured that was the reason.”

Anne’s slight nod acknowledged my confusion. “You might have mentioned something about that on the phone.”

Curiosity overwhelmed me. “You said you’ve seen some of my art. How? Where? You’re in Pennsylvania, for the love of trolls and orbs.”

Anne leaned back as a smile played at the corners of her mouth. “For the love of trolls and orbs? That’s one I haven’t heard.”

I scrunched my nose and pursed my lips, cringing. “Those sorts of things have a tendency to pop out, kind of like my stories. Can’t help it.”

“Yes ... well, Emily, we’ve been watching you for a while now. George Russell, your photographer friend, told us about your amazing talent. And not just for your artistic talents, he also mentioned your endless stories. We’ve worked with George over the years, so we pay attention when he sees something special. And that, young lady, would be you. We want you to participate in a pilot project to nurture young, emerging artists. It would be like an apprenticeship, exposing you to all the talent that has made the *Post* what it is.”

Her words fell like puzzle pieces dumped from a box. “But you have Norman Rockwell. Why on the moons of Pluto would you want me?”

“Mr. Rockwell is special. There is no doubt about that. But, Emily, George sent us a picture of one of your paintings. It looked like Father Time with a girl about your age. That, young lady, is extraordinary.”

Her praise seized me, leaving a blend of pride and disbelief. “That’s—I’m nowhere near Rockwell’s level. Lightyears away.”

“George was right.”

“Excuse me?”

Anne continued with a soft yet firm voice. “You don’t see your own talent.”

I scrunched my face and pulled back my head. “Then why the apprenticeship?”

“Emily, the apprenticeship isn’t for developing you as an artist, *per se*. Although we expect to feature some of your artwork on the cover, we have additional places where we believe you can help the magazine. Many of those require that you work in a team environment with much older adults. That often proves challenging for someone so young.”

“But I can stay in Boulder, right?”

Anne stretched her lips wide and shook her head. “No, dear, that just wouldn’t be possible for what we have in mind. The *Post* would pay for your relocation, so you wouldn’t have to worry about that.”

“Oh ...” I replied.

“Is that a problem?”

I nodded without a word. The weight of her statement crushed the flutter of hope I’d harbored. Speaking hardly above a whisper, “If you only knew how impossible this feels.”

Anne’s hand reached across the table. “Do you have anyone to help you with your decision? If not, I’m available to answer any questions.”

“That’s the problem. I have more than I can count. So many have embraced me like their own. I’ve got mentors, aunts, uncles, parents, and grandparents out the wazoo. You’re asking me to leave the only real family I’ve ever known. I spoke with the mayor”—my voice quivered—“the mayor, mind you, just before I came here. He hoped I’d be staying and told me his door is always open. The chief of police told me, don’t fail to ask if I ever need anything. Last night, the entire city of Boulder stood by my side, chanting my name. It was surreal.”

“My! It sounds like maybe we should do an article about you.”

“When do you need an answer, Anne?”

Her deadline loomed like a storm cloud—three days. Anne slipped out of the booth and then handed me her card. I man-

aged a thank you before she turned away, leaving me with an impossible decision.

Alex walked into the diner. His arrival almost went unnoticed in the bustle of the morning rush. I sat alone with a cup of coffee in front of me, lost in a sea of thoughts that must have been clear on my face. He caught Stumpy's attention with a nod before he made his way to join me. The world around us faded as our conversation took center stage.

"Emily." His tone of concern interrupted my reverie. "I've never seen you so ... sad-looking. What's wrong?"

Hesitant at first, my words eventually spilled out. "Alex, the *Saturday Evening Post* offered me a job. It's an incredible opportunity."

His face lit up with pride. "Congratulations. I'm so proud of you. But why the long face?"

"There's a catch." The moment I mentioned moving to Pennsylvania, his expression morphed as a medley of surprise and worry took hold.

"Are you actually considering it?" He leaned back in his seat with his mouth hanging open.

"No. Yes. Argh, I don't know. *The Post*. That's what careers are made of." The words felt as tangled as the emotions swirling within me.

"I know ... but Pennsylvania? What about Boulder? What about everything here? What about us?"

Laden with implications, I left his question dangling before I responded. "Us? Alex, we're friends. Good friends. And yes, there was that kiss, but it doesn't mean—"

"Don't do that, Emily. Don't downplay what happened between us. That kiss wasn't just a casual thing, at least not for me. You felt it, too, didn't you?"

"Alex, I ... Yes, there was something, but I can't base my entire future on a single moment. This job ... it's a chance to make an actual mark with my art." My gaze averted. The clash between his truth and my career hopes created turmoil in my heart.

His hand reached across the table, touching mine. “I get it, Emily. Your art is your world. But sometimes, life is about more than just opportunities. It’s about where you’re happy and where you belong. You’ve made a life here in Boulder. People love you. I ... I care about you, more than you know.”

With a subtle movement, I pulled my hand away. I felt torn as his words echoed in the space between us. “Alex, I care about you too. But what you’re suggesting—I’m not sure if I’m ready to say that. Everything has happened so fast, and now this ... I need to think about what’s right for me.”

Silence enveloped us, dense and unyielding. The disappointment etched on Alex’s face overshadowed his usual radiant demeanor. “I’ve never met anyone like you. I can’t imagine you not being in my life.”

His heartfelt words tugged at something deep within. A storm of reflection wailed in doubt about leaving Boulder and everything it had come to mean. “Alex, I need some time ... alone. Ordinarily, I love your company and your insight. But right now, I need a time of, of, call it introspection.”

Feeling his pain, I left to navigate the tumultuous sea of my thoughts with no clear path forward. After walking several blocks, my eyes caught a familiar figure seeking solace on a park bench. Curiosity drew me closer until my heart skipped. The Caretaker, wearing ancient robes and appearing as if plucked from a fairy tale, leaned on a staff that whispered stories of yesteryears.

“Caretaker? What, what are you doing here?”

“Come, child.” His voice echoed with the weight of the ages. “Have a seat, Emily. I have news about your family—your other one.”

While anxiety bubbled inside, I uttered, “What kind of news?” in a subdued voice.

“I sense a moment fast approaching when your kin will need you.”

“My family? They’ve never needed me before.” My eyes widened as I took in the unexpected news. “Who?”

“The future, cloaked in its mysteries, eludes even me.” His gaze remained steady and stoic.

With my eyebrows drawn together and lips pursed, “Why now?”

“The tapestry of time is complex and intertwined in ways beyond our understanding.”

I crossed my arms while trying to make sense of it all. “Care-taker ... why are you telling me this? You know I can’t just walk back through that portal.”

He shifted his eyes to mine. “Only you know your heart, Emily.” He glanced at me with a glint of amusement in his ancient gaze.

“Aren’t you forgetting the Heartseer Codex?”

“Not at all.”

I sighed, feeling a bit exasperated. “Look, maybe you don’t see the future clearly, but you precisely know the past. You’ve seen me here in Boulder. Why would I want to leave? And you know as well as I, obligation isn’t the same as desire.”

His penetrating gaze seemed to read my soul. “My aim isn’t to burden you with guilt. In its ebb and flow, life presents lessons when we least expect.”

Here we go again. “Mrs. Miller told me something like that too.”

A knowing smile lightened his face. “Ah, Mrs. Miller. A wise soul indeed.”

I couldn’t help but notice his expression. “Why do you look like that? What’s with the smile?”

He leaned on his staff as his eyes reflected a deep understanding. “Tell me about your conversation with Mrs. Miller.”

I leaned back against a nearby tree. Memories flooded in. “It was after I first drew in front of her shop. She said I had this special talent and that it was like magic. Then she hit me with the ‘life’s lesson’ talk.” Weeks had since passed, yet it seemed like months. “My life had been a major mess since arriving in Boulder.”

“And your current predicaments?”



“The *Post*, Alex, the *Camera* ... I’m torn. What should I do, Caretaker?” I asked in hopes of some guidance.

“The *Saturday Evening Post* offers extraordinary prestige.”

“And my dilemma. This town loves me. My art. My stories. And Alex. For the love of Tinker Bell and Peter Pan, he kissed me. My first ever. He all but said I love you. After all these people have done for me, I can’t just leave them.”

The Caretaker nodded. “So you’ve decided against Philadelphia ...”

In less than a heartbeat, “I didn’t say that.”

A soft chuckle escaped him. “My hearing remains sharp, Emily.”

“It doesn’t matter. You told me the only way to return is to desire it with the same intensity I had when I left. Did you lie to me? Has something changed?”

“Not at all.”

“Then why come and throw this guilt trip on me? I can’t change how I feel. I left that life for a reason. This experience has turned out better than I could have imagined. And since you’re here, I want to take this opportunity to thank you for this amazing gift. Mrs. Miller was right. Life in the now is pretty cool. I’ve met so many wonderful people.”

He posed a final question, pushing me to the edge of decision. “Emily, if you could return, would you?”

I returned to the bench and drew in a big gulp of air. “Somehow, I knew you would ask that.” My head shook, and I shrugged. “I don’t know. With my luck, the mystery family member would turn out to be Madison.”

“You wish ill to befall your sister?”

“Of course not. It’s just that we’re as different as snakes and bunny rabbits.”

The Caretaker looked up at the clear Boulder sky. “Young Emily, have you learned anything from your time in 1948?”

“Where do I start?”

“You asked what you should do. The decision is one that only you can make.” His gaze shifted to me, his ancient eyes

conveying wisdom beyond years. “Reflect upon your experiences here. Understand why Boulder has captivated your heart. Your answers lie within.”

As he faded away, his words lingered in the air. Left alone, my thoughts swirled as I faced the most significant moment of my life.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

### *Reflections*

Sleepless, I faced the dawn with a burdened heart. Two job offers and the Caretaker's news still echoed in my mind. The walls of my room felt too close and the air too still. Outside, the day beckoned—brilliant and clear, quite the contrast to the storm brewing in my heart. I needed to think.

Alex, ever the friend, agreed to take me to Settler's Park, understanding my need for solitude without the words to explain it. The ride over was quiet, a silent accord between us. He knew my mind was miles away, wrestling with decisions that felt too big for my shoulders. His presence was a comfort, the kind that didn't require words. When we arrived, Alex's actions spoke volumes as he helped me with my things. Then, with a promise to check in later, he left me to the solitude I desperately needed.

Settler's Park sprawled before me, a haven of green and gold under the expansive Colorado sky. Too gorgeous a day to waste wallowing in indecision, I settled under the shade of an old oak. Perhaps in its rustling leaves, I hoped it might whisper a few words of wisdom.

*OK, Em, what are we doing? The Caretaker said to reflect upon my experiences here. Understand why Boulder has captivated my heart. My*

*answers lie within. Easy. All the great people. All the support. Now ... where to start? Duh. At the beginning.*

While I sharpened my pencil, I pondered the bridges built and those yet to be crossed with a heart filled with gratitude. The soft scratching sound was a comforting prelude to diving into memories. *Forget about the old coot at the bridge. Disgusting. The root cellar? Nah, dark and scary. Nana and Grandpa rescuing me? That one. Face up or face down? Down. Why not? With such an inauspicious beginning, I guided my pencil. Capturing splashing puddles and my muddy hair, each stroke was a word in the story of my journey.*

*What shall it be next? Cops? My near-fatal screw-up or my sketchbook? A brief pause, then a visitor. "Hi there."*

"Emily, right?" I nodded. "May we watch?"

"Certainly, but quietly, please." My attention returned to the paper. *Cops. I got lucky with that one. God, the interrogation, the scrutiny, the questions. It was all so much, exposed like a specimen under a microscope. That memory is sure vivid, almost too sharp.*

*Now Blackwood. Half chink, huh? I don't think so. He did warm up, Em. Still ... didn't make his words sting any less. I'm not made of money. I don't run no charity for strays. Three days probation. No pay. I catch you lazing or causing trouble, you'll be outta here so fast ... You weren't so scary after all.*

*My hovel. Nana, you're everything I hoped for—not so much with Grandpa. Thanks for watching after me. Your familial warmth will fill a corner of my canvas, a soft glow amid the harsher lines of my earlier experiences. Sorry I couldn't stick around. I hope you weren't too disappointed in me.*

I looked around. *When did all these people get here?* A murmur of interest and whispers surrounded me.

*George ... what would I have done without you? You're one of my favorites, I hope you know. You told me I had a gift, and you stood up for me. Wrongly, I must add because it was all my fault. Still, you were quite chivalrous despite nearly killing you. Thank you for believing in me. Yes, your likeness is taking form now.*

*Who's next? Woolworths. Mrs. Miller. You probably saved my life. Your hug. You wouldn't let me go. It meant so much to me. You were there. You went to bat for me. I must say that trusting you was—but I'm happy I did. A sanctuary in my storm, I added your compassionate eyes and open arms. Thank you, Mrs. Miller. A little detail. There.*

“Dear, your drawing ... it's beautiful. So much passion. So much precision. Do you know Norman Rockwell?”

“Just of him, ma'am.”

I paused for contemplation, and then my pencil returned to the paper. *Mrs. Miller again. I need my chair back, Emily. Our first mother-daughter talk. Life is trying to teach you a lesson. I suggest you consider listening. The mom I never had. Keep it together, girl. No blubbing.*

“Dear, are you OK?”

“Fine, ma'am. Must be the spring pollen.”

*You gotta be tough to make it. Ah ... Marlene. What happened? I guess the streets caught up with you, but your words painted a picture far different from my romantic notions. And finding you dead ... that could have been me. Maybe it should have been me. I have to capture you the way I found you. What a wake-up call. Marlene's story added a somber note to my canvas as a reminder of the fragility of life.*

*Let's see ... Sarah. You opened my eyes to a world where, no matter how small my actions, they can ripple through the lives of others and create waves of change. I'm capturing your infectious smile. There you go.*

*Cowboy. I almost forgot about you. My bad. I know I must have disappointed you, and I'm sorry. My head was in the clouds again. No excuse, I know. That's why I had to leave. Plus, the total embarrassment of it all.*

“Emily, whatever are you drawing?”

“My life here in Boulder. My experiences. All the people who supported me. Selflessly gave to me. Stood up for me. Like George here. And Mrs. Miller, here,” I said, pointing. “I owe them all so much.”

*I appreciated your open invite to return, Mr. Blackwood. And honestly, it wasn't because of your 'chink' remark. I know the difference*

*between malice and ignorance. It's not where I belonged. Too far from the people who taught me so much. Loved me so much. The kids I drew for. The stories I told. The smiles I put on little faces. Your offer was a pivotal moment, offering clarity about my path.*

*Now, what happened after turning down Blackwood? Woolworths, I think. I haven't drawn Woolworths yet? Shoot. I should have put that in the center. Oh well. And we're back to good ol' George. After watching me draw for the kids, you challenged me. Draw real life. That changed everything. You need a halo. I'll draw anything for two bucks. Remember that? Compared me to Rockwell? My pencil moved with renewed vigor as I captured George's influence radiating outwards.*

*Then came the diner. The Regulars. Stumpy, you were so happy. I got a lot of mileage out of that drawing. It really struck a chord. The diner, a scene of joyful faces, wove its way into my drawing.*

I scratched my head and then looked up. *Whoa.* "Hi, everyone. I was so engrossed in my drawing that I didn't realize ..."

"Do you plan to paint this one?" a voice asked.

"I'm not sure. Time will tell. The jury's still out."

"It will be great either way." The onlookers' support and encouragement warmed me like the eyes of a phoenix.

*Maggie ... I was happy to help. Mrs. Baker. Always a lecture. Oh well, things worked out. Of course, it took getting hauled off to the hoosegow. Billings. What was your problem? Got it. I'll draw the big bad wolf in a police uniform. Got to, if I'm being honest. I know it's a stain on the drawing, but that's on you. Mrs. Miller warned you. You made a fool of yourself, you know. Somehow ... I doubt you even realize it.*

*Chief Bower. You're next. Yet another character in this rich collage. You're a complex blend of duty and humanity. Wish I could have been there when Mrs. Miller called you. I can hear her now. I'm so disappointed in you, Henry. What were you thinking? I bet she had you stumblin' and bumbling' all over yourself. The lady doesn't pull punches. But I appreciate that you took a personal interest in little old me. You even held the car door for me. Hardly a date, you know.*

*It's boarding house time. Mrs. Perkins. You wanna know why you're an important cog in this wheel? If not for your insistence on first and last, the whole jail thing would never have happened. And yes, that was a good thing. It rallied the town. But more importantly, I've never felt so supported and loved.*

When the boarding house fell through, I got my money back, then onto Goodwill. *Mabel, your kindness rippled its way through my turbulent waters. Your name belongs in a heart for your compassion.* As I etched her name, a wave of appreciation swept over me. Pausing while the pencil hovered above the paper, I reached into my pocket. There lay the familiar tokens I'd collected along my journey: the small, heart-shaped pendant, a memento of a child's lost moment, and the charm from Sarah, a reminder of the spirit of community I never knew I could inspire. *There. This heart, simple yet profound, is a promise to pay forward the kindness that carried me through darker times. Thank you.*

*Onto the Boys Club. Billy, I'll use you. So enthralled with my stories. Wide-open eyes. A big smile. You even get a speech bubble. One more, Emily. Please ...* Billy's eager request brought life to my drawing with his anticipation, mirroring my own as I considered my decision.

*Alex, my faithful companion. It won't be easy leaving you. You should know that. And maybe one day, who knows? Of course, leaving any of you, including your mom, won't be easy. Mrs. Langley, another mom watching out for me. Storytime twice a week for two hours. A bargain at twice the price. I'll have your caring gaze and maternal presence watching over this scene in no time.*

"Emily?"

"Mrs. Miller ..."

"Look around." Her warm and encouraging voice prompted me to take in the faces of the lives I'd touched. "You've had quite the impact."

"Not compared to the impact you've all had on me. See?" As I extended my hand, my drawing revealed a vast array of figures, each telling a story of lessons learned, kindness received, and bonds formed.

“You’ve decided to leave, haven’t you?” Mrs. Miller’s question, though expected, sent a ripple through the air, acknowledging the crossroads before me.

“Nothing’s been decided yet, Mrs. Miller.”

“The *Post* is a tremendous opportunity. I can’t blame you.” Her understanding seemed to acknowledge the weight of the decision resting on my shoulders.

“Like I said ...”

I returned to my drawing. *It’s time for Mr. Daniels.* His quiet encouragement and belief in my talent offered a guiding light. *Sometimes, an artist has to make themselves a little vulnerable. And your sage advice, no one does Rockwell like Norman Rockwell. You need to find your own niche—the one that lives deep inside you. Your advice stirred my spirit and urged me toward self-discovery. You turned my world upside down, Mr. Daniels. Thank you.*

*And let’s not forget about your chorus: George, Mrs. Miller, and Alex. That makes you the gang of four. It was a conspiracy, I swear. Dig down inside, Emily. Make yourself vulnerable, Emily. You were all to blame for the Caretaker painting. What a firestorm. The crowd gathered. Billings told the chief. The chief called Alice, and the genie was out of the bottle.*

*Oh, bring it on. That’s a battle you can’t win, Henry. That young lady has stolen the hearts of this town. Maybe you should ask the mayor if he plans to run for re-election. I’ll draw Alice on the phone. You get a speech bubble too.*

*And you, Mr. Jack Crawford, might have been the difference.*

“Who is that in the fedora, Emily?” asked Mrs. Miller.

“Mr. Crawford. He advised us of the City Council meeting and suggested we take it to the *Camera*. He was instrumental.”

“Funny, I don’t know him,” she said, a reminder of the many unseen hands guiding our paths.

“Which brings me to Mr. Paddock. He had one of his best reporters interview us, and we were on the front page the next morning. It’s funny how everything lined up and fell into place like a bunch of dominos.”



*I never asked if you were instrumental in the story getting picked up by the AP. I bet so. And then a job offer. You blew me away. I should call you. After all you did, leaving you in the lurch wouldn't be very respectful.*

Looking up from my easel, “Mrs. Miller, what shall I use for the council meeting?”

“How about the scales of justice?” Her suggestion, apt and inspired, became the next element in my evolving story.

“Fantastic idea. Bravo.”

As I poised my pencil above the paper, the suggestion of scales of justice lingered in my mind. More than a symbol, they stood as a reminder of the balance in every decision. How the constant juggle between right and wrong and the responsibility of fairness rests on each of us. With each line I drew, I pondered the weights I'd placed on my own life's scales, my choices good or bad.

Each brushstroke brought me a profound sense of clarity, etching their importance deeper into my heart. It solidified my resolve to navigate life with wisdom and an unyielding commitment to justice.

The crowd's cheers echoed in celebration of the emerging image and recognition of its profound truth. Their enthusiastic support reminded me we shared a love of discernment, the essence of the scales, which was a cornerstone of our community.

The phone call from the *Post* ... me screaming out loud. And finally, my interview with Anne Palmer, learning I'd have to move to Pennsylvania.

“Emily, you drew yourself looking like your best friend just died. What's that about?”

My reply was a whisper of loss and change. “In a sense, my best friend did die.”

Right on time, Alex's figure appeared in the distance. I expected he'd press me for my decision, but no.

“Let's get your stuff to the car.”

*What should I tell him? The truth? I can't do that—Crazyville.*

Like our drive to the park, we were mostly quiet until, “Tell me, Em. Please.”

“I haven’t decided yet.”

Alex glanced over. “I don’t believe you. Your drawing screams it. I see it now in your ... your everything about you.”

“Alex, you don’t understand.”

“Well enough to know that you’re leaving.”

“I am, but it’s not what you think. Coming to Boulder was a gift. Truly, a gift of life. Then, that gift multiplied. I learned more things and received more things than I can count. And the people of Boulder did it willingly, out of charity, never asking for a thing in return. I learned the meaning of love, Alex.”

“Then why are you leaving?”

“I need”—my voice quivered—“no, I want to give that same gift. It’s meant to be shared. That’s the beauty of it. I never understood before. The people here didn’t take me in, accept me, or love me out of obligation. It’s who you people are. I aspire to be like that person—like the people of Boulder.”

“You’re right. I don’t understand. Can’t you be that person here?”

Alex pulled into the alley behind Langley Books and parked. *Just end it here, Em.* Leaning over, I kissed Alex on his cheek and whispered, “No.” After grabbing my backpack, “My drawing is for the town. Perhaps you can find a place to display it. And my stuff ... just return it to Mabel.” I closed my car door and headed inside.

Standing at my window, I looked out over the streets of Boulder while reflecting on my day. *You were right, Caretaker. My answer did lie within. It’s time, Em.*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

### *Sisters*

The Heartseer Codex rested on my lap, adorned with symbols that had come to mean so much more than just etchings on leather. I flipped through, page after page, until I found the hourglass. With hope and hesitation, I traced its border with my finger, submitting to its judgment.

A rush of air and a gentle blur of colors marked my departure from the safety of my room to the vast, echoing expanse of the Caretaker's realm. A place of otherworld beauty and grandiose columns rose to meet the soft glow from the skylight above. The Caretaker sat before me, an ageless sentinel in this sanctuary of time.

He gestured to the chair opposite him with a serene smile. "I've been expecting you, Emily. Come, child. Before you return, spend a few moments."

I sat with the room's immense presence dwarfing my own and the stone beneath my feet cool and firm. "I'm so relieved." In the chamber's vastness, my voice bounced with a faint echo. "I didn't know how the Heartseer would interpret my desire to return."

"You did well, Emily. You should be proud of your achievements," he said with a kind and reassuring voice.

"I've done nothing yet, Caretaker. That's why I had to return."

He offered a thoughtful nod. “Ah, but you must remember, young one, there are many ways to walk through a forest. Sometimes, it’s helpful to stand back and look up. And sometimes, to turn around to see where you’ve been.”

Deep and multifaceted, I let the meaning of his words seep in. “More riddles, always more riddles. Have you any clearer picture of the future, Caretaker?”

“It’s your sister. Will this be a problem?” His eyes possessed a depth like the night sky, dark and endless.

“I’m glad it’s my sister. Not that I want something bad to happen to her.”

With a gaze that never wavered, “May I inquire why?”

I swallowed hard, steeling myself for what was yet to come. “I think I know the likely reason she needs me. It’s the perfect opportunity to put the essence of Boulder into action.”

After a pause that felt like an eternity, the Caretaker asked, “Are you ready to return?”

“Anxious.”

“Cherish the hourglass and the Heartseer Codex. Consider them a well-earned reward. You are now free to return to my realm whenever you wish. I live a lonely existence, Emily. Your company is always welcome.”

With my heart full of gratitude, “Thank you. But you’ve already given me so much.”

“Infrequent is my opportunity to ... rub elbows with the outside,” he said with a hint of melancholy.

“I’m ready,” I said. In an instant, my world transformed, sending me back to my room just as I’d left it—bizarre, like a dream. Exhausted from the emotional turmoil of the previous couple of days, I crawled into bed and slept until morning.

Stepping out of my room, the house lay quiet with an eerie silence filling the air. As I crept into the living room, the dim glow of the television cast shadows across Madison’s figure, huddled on the couch.

My voice was tentative but laced with genuine concern. “Hey, you OK?” I asked. Madison looked frail, far from her usual vibrant

self, with a blanket pulled tight around her. She murmured about complaints of dizziness and a throbbing headache.

"I need to take a shower," said Madison. Grappling to sit up, she returned her head to the couch. Just then, Mom entered, and her eyes widened as she took in the scene. With a trace of defeat in her eyes, "I think I have to skip school today."

Witnessing her struggle to sit up, a profound sense of protectiveness welled up inside me. "She's not doing well, Mom. Maybe I should stay home with her."

Madison, in a weakened voice, "I'll be fine. I don't need a babysitter."

Mom shrugged. "You heard your sister."

Madison threw off her blanket. This time, she managed to sit up. Hesitating to steady herself, she pushed up on her hands but failed to stand. "Want help?" I asked.

"I told you I'm fine, Em." With another push, Madison found success, but she staggered after a couple of steps. Close by, I steadied her before she collapsed.

Mom, watching Madison cling to my arm, "OK, Em, I guess you'd better stay home."

"Maybe you just need to eat something. Can I make you some toast?"

Returning to the safety and comfort of the couch, "Not hungry."

I hesitated before suggesting, "Maybe some hot tea then?"

Madison gave her head a slight tilt with her brow furrowed and her gaze lingering. "What's with the sudden nurse act, Emily? Trying to score points with Mom and Dad?"

The question stung, but my reply came from a place of new-found clarity. "No, Madison, I'm just worried about you."

Her lips tightened into a narrow line, and her voice wavered with a hint of bitterness and fragility. "Cut the crap, Emily. You've never cared before. What's really going on?"

Suppressing a sigh, I headed to the kitchen to put the kettle on. The soft click of the burner igniting was the only sound as

I mulled over her skepticism. *Why can't she see my intentions are sincere?*

"This isn't you, Emily. You hiding something? Planning something?"

With my back to her as I measured the tea leaves, "I'm just trying to be there for you like a sister should."

"Well, I don't need your pity or whatever this is." Madison cleared her throat and continued. "Remember when I needed you last year for the school project? Where was this caring sister then?"

As I set the tea strainer in the pot, the sharp clink of metal against porcelain pierced through the quiet. "I know I wasn't there for you before, Madison, and I regret that. Just trying to make things right. Yeah, I've been distant and absorbed in my own little world. But now, my perspective on life has changed."

"Spare me the epiphany."

I turned to face her, leaning against the counter. "It wasn't an epiphany, sister. I had a dream—a very real dream. Do you remember that *Star Trek* episode where Picard lives a lifetime in some distant place all within a matter of minutes?"

Madison raised an eyebrow. "Yeah ... 'The Inner Light.' I remember. What about it?"

"It was like that for me. In my dream, I lived a different life, a whole other existence. It felt as real as this moment we're sharing now. It changed me, Madison, just like it did Picard."

With a brief snort and a dismissive twist of her lips, "You're saying you went on some sci-fi adventure in your sleep?" The sound of her scoff faded, and her expression shifted from disdain to reluctant empathy.

"More or less. I know it sounds crazy, but I experienced things and learned lessons I couldn't have here. It's hard to explain, but it's changed how I see everything ... including our relationship."

Madison looked lost in thought. Then, with a hint of sarcasm, said, "So, my sister, the artist, suddenly turns into a *Star Trek* character?"

"Did I say I turned into Picard? Another life like him. Except, unlike Picard, I wasn't another person. I was me. And just like

Picard's flute playing stayed with him, my dream experience has stayed with me." With the steaming pot in hand, her eyes followed me as I walked back to the couch. "I think I may even write a book about it."

"A comic book about a dream?"

"Not a comic book or a graphic novel. I think I'm done with those. I mean a novel. Maybe a memoir."

"That must have been one hell of a dream."

"It was so real, sister."

"That's twice you've called me sister. You've never called me sister. OK. I'll bite. Tell me about this dream."

I launched into the tale of my Boulder days, my voice rising and falling with the cadences of my otherworld journey. My hands gestured, painting pictures in the air of the people and places that had embraced me in that distant realm. By the time I finished, Madison's expression was a fusion of disbelief and wonder.

"I can read that expression. Fine. I get it."

"Yeah, right. People don't change overnight. You've been in your own world for far too long."

I nodded as a small smile formed on my lips. "Yeah, I know, but this dream showed me that the real world isn't so bad. Actually, if you give it a chance, pretty interesting."

Light streamed through the curtains the following morning, casting a warm glow on the two of us getting ready for school. Madison insisted she was fine, but I caught a slight hesitation in her steps and how her hand lingered on the banister a moment too long.

"Are you sure you're up for this?" I asked, stepping out into the crisp morning air. The day promised clarity, but my heart was clouded with concern.

The school route, typically filled with our constant bickering, seemed oddly tranquil today with only the sound of the engine's hum. After parking, I couldn't help but notice Madison's slumped shoulders as if her backpack dragged her down. "I can carry that for you," but she shook her head with a determined yet fragile smile. "I'm good, Em," though her pace was slower than usual.

In class, Madison's focus wavered like pixie dust on a blustery day. Her pallid skin stood out against her usually vibrant complexion. I watched her with an intentional eye as her every grimace tightened a knot in my chest.

During our group work, her hand quivered. Upon catching my gaze, she withdrew it, but not before I'd noticed. My worry for her grew with each passing minute.

While we transitioned from one class to another, Madison's hand reached for my arm to regain her balance after a minor stumble. "Let's go to the nurse," I said.

But she dismissed it with a quick, "Just tripped, that's all."

Lunch brought a crescendo. Madison's hand betrayed her, sending the tray clattering. I caught her mid-fall with her full weight landing in my arms. "Help!" I yelled, my voice rising above the sudden hush falling over the room. While I held her, a chilling dread engulfed me as if my worst fears had materialized.

The nurse's professional calm contrasted with the storm of emotions within me. As Madison's eyelids fluttered open, she revealed a vulnerability I'd seldom seen in her. "Perhaps Madison should rest the remainder of the day," said the nurse.

Mom couldn't come, so I took on the burden of taking her home. Leaning with her full weight against me, we left the school. Arriving home, Madison's every step seemed tentative. The usual spark in her eyes had dimmed, replaced by a weariness that tugged at my heart. As I watched her sink into the couch, she reached for the blanket I'd set out.

"Here, let me," I said, adjusting the blanket over Madison's legs. A silent exchange transpired as our gazes met with Madison expressing appreciation and a slight sense of astonishment. "I'll make tea."

I retreated to the kitchen. The click of the kettle and the clink of teacups provided a comforting ritual amid my worry. I took a deep breath, savoring the calming aroma of Madison's cherished scent, peppermint, as it enveloped the air. Carrying the steaming mug back to the living room, I offered it to Madison with a small but hopeful smile.



She mumbled, “Thanks,” wrapping her fingers around the mug. I joined her on the couch and saw faint bruises blooming on Madison’s arm. They looked like delicate ink stains, out of place on my sister’s usually unblemished exterior. My brow creased as I reached out, my fingertips barely grazing the discolored skin.

“Does it hurt?” I asked.

Madison shook her head while her gaze fixed on the mug in her hands. “No, it’s just ... weird. I don’t even remember bumping into anything.”

My heart thumped in my chest, a rhythm of growing concern. I observed Madison, the way her eyelids fluttered with fatigue and the slight grimace when she shifted to get comfortable. The pieces didn’t add up to a simple flu or a passing bug.

“Madison, maybe we should—”

“I’m fine, Em,” she said, setting the mug on the coffee table with a soft clink. “Just tired, that’s all.”

The click of the front door and the rhythmic tapping of Mom’s heels announced her arrival. I watched her silhouette against the hallway light as she navigated towards us. Calling out, “I’m here, girls.” Her eyes, sharp and discerning, scanned Madison’s pallid form slouched on the couch. “You look terrible, Madison. How do you feel?”

Madison tried to muster a smile, weak and unconvincing, but before she could downplay her condition, “Worse than she looks, Mom.”

“Stop fussing. I think it’s just girl stuff.”

“That’s nothing but dragon’s breath, Mad. She’s sick, Mom.” My words were firm, and my gaze locked with Madison’s, daring her to challenge me. For my trouble, she shot me a look that could freeze lava, a silent accusation of betrayal. But my concern outweighed her irritation. I didn’t care. She could give me a death-stare all she wanted.

“I agree. I’m calling the doctor.” Her tone left no room for argument.

“That’s all you have, huh? First thing ... Well, alright. Put us down.” Mom concluded her phone call, looking at me in a silent

plea. “I hate to do this to you, Em, but you’ll need to take her. I have a meeting I can’t get out of.”

“No problem, but you should call Mr. Jamison. Wouldn’t want him to get his panties in a knot.” My attempt at lightening the mood fell flat as my try at humor failed to slice through the tension.

The following day couldn’t come soon enough. Madison, stirring beside me, looked like death warmed over as I feared that my sense of *déjà vu* might be all too real. The car ride was quiet, but my mind was busy with thoughts of Boulder.

*But I see remarkable things in you. I’ve never met someone with as much raw, natural talent. I’m only trying to help. You believed in me when I couldn’t believe in myself. Thank you, George.*

I glanced over at Madison. Her eyes ... nothing but blank stares. Reaching over, I touched her hand before my mind again wandered.

*You’ve decided to leave, haven’t you? I’m sorry I lied, Mrs. Miller.* I knew, but I could hardly admit it to myself, much less to my champion. *I’ll forever be grateful to you.*

As I thought about Boulder standing behind me with their cheers and chants of Emily, Emily, I couldn’t prevent an escaping tear. Observing it fall from the corner of my eye, “I’ll be fine, Em. No need to cry.”

“I know you’ll be fine, sis.” Wiping it from my cheek, “Sorry, it’s not about worry over you.”

“Then what?” Her inquiry, though simple, felt laden with more profound questions.

*Should I?* “My dream, Mad.” My response drew raised eyebrows and a slow shake of her head.

The doctor’s office was a sterile sanctuary of hope and fear. As Madison’s shadow, I felt every word the doctor didn’t say and every possibility he hinted at. “It could be any number of things.” His voice was clinical, detached, yet not uncaring. “Let’s see what the lab tests tell us. Meanwhile, rest and fluids. I’ll rush the lab work.”

The ride home was little different from our trip to the doctor. My thoughts drifted back to Boulder, only this time to Alex. The sweetness of our first kiss at City Hall and the bittersweet taste of our farewell consumed my attention until Madison pulled me from my musing.

“What was the tear about, Em?”

“You wouldn’t believe me.”

“Humor me.”

“I was the recipient of overwhelming love and support. That experience will be with me until the day I die.” At that moment, I received a long and discerning glare. *Told you.*

After pulling into the driveway, “Stay put,” I said. “I don’t need you falling on your face.”

“Stop hovering, Em. I’m fine.”

Madison’s assurance did little to quell the unease that had taken root within me, and her insistence failed to mask the truth that lay bare before us. Her strength was a facade. Beneath it, I saw cracks forming amid silent cries for help. Inside, I helped her to the couch, where she uttered, “Let me sleep.”

There was a fragility to her I hadn’t noticed before and a vulnerability that scared me. She was trying to be strong, but the shadows under her eyes and the bruises on her skin told a different story. I watched her for a moment, torn between voicing my growing fears and respecting her wish to be left alone.

When Madison drifted off to sleep, I went to the kitchen to make a sandwich. Upon opening the refrigerator door, I couldn’t help but notice the package of half-used bologna. It brought a smile to my face. It seemed so long ago. Despite the fond memory, I reached for the strawberry preserves. They were just what I needed to go with some peanut butter and a glass of milk.

My sandwich and sketchbook provided some sorely needed comfort. Sketching me surrounded with eager ears at the Boys Club offered a distraction from the reality that was certain to make its way into the light.

The afternoon flew by. It took Mom's familiar ringtone of "Yeah" to bring me back to the moment. My door was open, and Mom was within earshot.

"Oncologist! Are you sure that's necessary?" Silence. "I see." More silence. "This week? OK. I appreciate that."

My gut wrenched as my eyes darted to the Codex perched on my bookshelf. With my eyes fixed, *you did well, Emily. You should be proud of your achievements. Thanks for the reminder, Caretaker.*

As the light outside faded, casting a soft glow across the room, a resolve settled within. I didn't know what the next step was or what I could do, but as I sat there, I knew one thing for sure. I couldn't let her go through this alone. Whatever it took, I would be there for her.

Walking from my room to the top of the stairs, I looked down at Mom. She had extended her arm, bracing herself against the banister post. "I overheard. What can I do?"

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

### *The Verdict*

The hygienic scent of the hospital consultation room was far too sharp with its sober reminder of why we were there. The chairs felt harder and the silence louder. After untold minutes of waiting with bated breath, a woman in her late 40s entered the conference room.

“I’m Dr. Greenly, an attending here at Denver Children’s. I wish I had better news.” She didn’t waste words. Her voice was even and practiced, but not uncaring. “Madison has ALL, Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia. However, unlike Emily, hers is complicated by the presence of what’s called the Philadelphia Chromosome. It’s a more challenging form.”

I watched as my parents’ faces crumpled, and their world tilted on an axis they had hoped to never experience again. My own heart, already bruised from battles past, sank for Madison. In an instant, disbelief masked her face, and her eyes darted from Mom and Dad to me. “No . . . no, this can’t be.”

“I understand this is a lot to take in,” said Dr. Greenly. “We’ll start with chemotherapy, but we need to be aggressive.”

I remembered my own fight with the disease, albeit at a much younger age. I’d hoped no one else in my family would ever have

to learn about the despair and isolation firsthand. Yet here we were, Madison's hand in mine, cold and trembling.

"Emily," Dr. Greenly turned to me, "given your history, we'll exclude you from HLA testing. I know both the department head and the Ethics Board quite well. It's a non-starter."

"What, what's HLA testing?"

Turning to Madison, "That's how we find you a bone marrow donor."

"Will I need one?"

"It depends, Madison, but the likelihood is there. We can always hope that you respond to treatment like your sister. I looked over your case file, Emily. You were one lucky little girl."

While looking down at Madison's hand in mine, "It didn't seem that way."

In a small voice, Madison said something about not wanting to be sick and not wanting to disrupt life. "You're not disrupting anything," I told her. "We're here for you, every step."

*I might be barred from donating marrow, but I can give you something else—my presence, my learned hope, and my promise to walk with you through every harsh step of this journey.*

"Questions?" asked the doctor.

"I only have to come here for treatments, right?"

Dr. Greenly pursed her lips and took a deep breath. "Madison, because we need to be aggressive, it's best to admit you for at least the first week."

Mom looked at Madison's poofed-out lips. "Is that really necessary, doctor?"

"We need to keep a close eye on her."

They shot down my attempt at volunteering to stay with Mad as fast as a bullet off Superman's chest. "You're already struggling in school, Emily."

"But, Dad ... I can do it. Just let me prove it to you."

About the time Dad curled up the corner of his mouth and gave his head a slight tilt, Madison said something that dropped my jaw. "You should let her. Can't you see we've got a Stepford Wives or body snatcher thing going on?"

Dad shrugged and furrowed his brow. “Let’s not waste the doctor’s time on this.”

“It’s quite alright, Mr. Reynolds. These are important things to consider. Let me just say that it would benefit Madison if you can make it work.”

Madison’s hand was still in mine when I whispered, “We’ve got this.” And though the words were for her, they were also my vow—to be the sister she needed, the support she deserved, and to honor the lessons Boulder had imprinted upon me.

As we navigated the corridors of the hospital, we noticed a pronounced contrast between the lively chatter of the medical staff and the silent burden we carried. The sterile smell of antiseptics filled the air, serving as a constant reminder of the battle we were about to face.

Over Madison’s objections, Dr. Greenly had her admitted immediately following our consultation. None of us dared ask about a prognosis. That Madison was high-risk and rushed to begin treatment told me everything I needed to know.

Encased in the grim and impersonal setting of the hospital, Madison bravely faced her first chemotherapy session. The soft beeps of the monitors, each a harsh reminder of our reality, punctuated the heavy silence.

Squeezing Madison’s hand, “I’ll be right here, OK?”

Madison gave me a weak nod while her eyes betrayed the fear she fought to hide. “I know.”

Our parents stood by with faces that telegraphed their fear and concern. The burden of our shared memories from my leukemia struggle weighed us down. It was a scene of hope, dread, and a family united in the fight against an unseen enemy. As Madison’s treatment began, her initial resolve faltered under the tax of the medication coursing through her veins. Nausea and fatigue set in as her body rebelled against the chemicals meant to heal her.

As the drip fed its poison into Madison’s veins, her stoicism wavered. The swift disguising of a grimace conveyed a lot. I reached for a cool cloth, dabbing at her forehead, but it was an act of care that felt woefully inadequate.

More of a plea than a promise, “It’s going to be OK,” I said. “We’ve got this.” Madison’s lips quivered as she forced a smile. It was a raw, heart-wrenching sight that tore at my very soul. Madison’s resolve crumbled as the session dragged on, and tears broke through. I held her closer. “You’re not alone in this.”

“We’re here, sweetheart,” said Mom. Dad gave her a gentle squeeze on her shoulder.

I stepped into a role I never expected—Madison’s protector, comforter, and caregiver. Holding her hand, I whispered words of encouragement and offered her solace in small gestures of love. It was a role reversal neither of us could have anticipated, yet it felt as natural as breathing.

When the session ended, Mom and Dad left—work obligations, leaving the hush to envelop us. With a quiet resolve, I gazed out the window while the setting sun spread shadows across the room. At that moment, I knew that no matter what came our way, we would face it together, as sisters should.

“Thanks, Em.”

“Shhh. You rest.”

“That must have been some dream.”

I looked up from my sketchbook and saw an inviting curiosity in Mad’s eyes. Setting my drawing aside, I got up to sit beside her. “The year was 1948, and I was in Boulder. I was just plopped there with no money, my sketchbook, and only a few clothes. I met Nana and Grandpa. They were ranch hands. But I did my usual thing and ran away. I hit a low point when I found a lady I’d just come to know dead in an alley. Afterward, through the actions and voices of countless selfless people, I learned the power of community,” my voice wavered, “and in giving.”

Madison took a deep breath and repeated, “That must have been some dream.”

“More than you’ll ever know, sis.”

In the days that followed, I shared more of my experiences from Boulder, both verbally and in my art. And while Madison slept, I roamed the hospital corridors for inspiration. Amidst the routine bustle, I found fleeting moments of humanity—smiles



shared between exhausted nurses, the concentrated brows on doctors' faces, and the silent resilience of patients tethered to their IV stands. I etched every image in my mind as a means to process and comprehend the intricate emotions I navigated.

Madison's treatments pulled at my heartstrings, spilling empathy into each recorded memory. As my sketches took shape, scenes of busy hospital corridors and silent stories of patients and healthcare workers eased the tension. Each drawing, a moment captured, helped me negotiate the storm of emotions churning inside.

Perched by Madison's side, pencil in hand, I sought solace in the familiar dance of lead on paper. Draped in the tranquility of her sleep, the rhythm of her breathing guided my hand. Sketching her, I could almost forget the beeping monitors and the hospital smell that hung in the air. And counter to the chaos of hospital life outside our door, I found a sliver of escape and comfort in the bound pages of my sketchbook.

In one scene, I recalled a nurse clutching a young patient's hand. With concern in her eyes and empathy in her touch, she reminded me of my past and the unexpected acts of kindness that had pierced my darkest moments.

"Hello, Emily," said a voice.

I looked up just long enough to identify who had interrupted my reverie. "Tina ..."

"What has you in such deep concentration today? May I see?" Pausing beside me, "Your work is really something."

Her simple yet sincere words squelched the voice of my worries. "Thank you." A shy smile crept onto my face. "Keeps the mind busy."

She nodded. "How do you do it? You capture so much feeling."

Her words brought me back to a realization I discovered in Boulder. Art has the power to connect people and build community, even within the confines of a hospital. With her gaze lingering on the peaceful scene I'd captured, "You've got a genuine gift," she said. Her words bolstered me, bridging the gap between my inner turmoil and the calm I sought to portray.

“Your work reminds me of Norman Rockwell in the way you’re able to tell a story with your drawings.”

“That’s kind of you to say.”

“The emotion you convey jumps right off the page. I’ve never seen anything like it. May I see some others?”

“Help yourself. Madison’s waking up. Hey sis, how’s the stomach?” Madison scrunched her nose and pulled her lips to one side. “Tina, can you give her something for the nausea?”

“I’ll see what the doctor ordered. Emily, you are one talented young lady. You should put some up and brighten these walls. And if you allow me to, I’d like to display some around the floor. Let others enjoy your work.”

My response should have been quick and confident, but now my experience in Boulder seemed like make-believe. *It was real—I know it was real.* But given the contrast with our current reality, it felt more like a dream.

Reaching out with her hand, “Let me see what you’ve been up to, Em.”

“You haven’t shared these with your sister, Emily?”

“She’s not a fancier of art, Tina.”

Tina moved to the side of Madison’s bed with my sketchbook. “You’re missing out.”

Madison’s eyes opened wide, along with her mouth. “Sister! What? When? These ...” Madison shifted her surprise my way, then back and forth to me and my sketches. “Your dream?”

“See what I mean?” said Tina. “Think about it, Emily. I’ll check the doctor’s orders.”

Madison turned one page after another in total astonishment. She stopped when she found the one of me in the mud at Nana’s and Grandpa’s. She turned her head until her eyes met mine. “This is you. You told me about this. Picard’s dream. It’s just like you said. Please, Em. Put some up, then select some for Tina to display on the floor.”

In sharing my art, I watched faces light up and saw the momentary escape it provided from the harsh realities we all faced within these walls. My sketches had found a purpose beyond my

own healing. They brought solace to others, tiling them into a mosaic of shared human experience.

Returning from the cafeteria, I paused at the threshold of a room. A young boy, Lucas, sat alone with his eyes fixed on the world beyond the window. His bald head, a silent witness to his battle with leukemia, spoke volumes. It mirrored my own journey through the shadows of this disease. Standing guard, a superhero-action figure lay alone by his bedside.

Compelled by a shared past and a love for the heroes that kept us company, I ventured into his world with a gentle, “Spider-Man’s pretty cool, huh?”

Lucas’s eyes lit up at the mention of his hero and sparked a conversation between us about the greatest of them all. His enthusiasm reminded me of the stories I told on the streets of Boulder and the smiles they brought.

“I’ll be right back, Lucas.”

Returning with my sketchbook, I flipped it open and began, “Imagine, Lucas, a city much like ours, but under the cover of night. Shadows dance along the walls as Spider-Man stands guard against the tide of darkness. But this time, a new hero stands beside him. One with courage that rivals even the bravest of hearts—Lucas, the Lightning Knight.”

As I wove the tale, Lucas’ mother and Mrs. Gibson, a child life specialist, joined us. Their presence and their silent thanks underscored the impact of my impromptu visit. Continuing, my pencil brought to life the silhouettes of our heroes atop a towering skyscraper overlooking the city. “Tonight, they face their greatest challenge yet. The Vulture, with wings as sharp as knives and eyes glowing with malice, has taken the city’s heart, the Crystal of Unity, threatening to plunge the metropolis into eternal discord.”

Lucas’s eyes widened with every stroke of my pencil. “But fear not. Spider-Man and the Lightning Knight are on the case. Using his incredible agility and webs, Spider-Man swings between buildings, a dance of heroism in the moonlit sky. And Lucas, with his armor shining under the moon and lightning crackling from his fingertips, rides the storm clouds, a beacon of hope.

“The battle is fierce, with the Vulture’s cunning matched only by our heroes’ determination. Yet, with his heart as his guide, the Lightning Knight lands the final blow. His lightning bolt strikes true, shattering the Vulture’s armor and freeing the Crystal.

“As Spider-Man and the Lightning Knight stand victorious, the city below erupts in cheers. The Crystal’s light bathes the buildings in a warm glow, symbolizing unity restored.

“Lucas, the Lightning Knight, with Spider-Man by his side, looks out over the city, knowing they saved the day once more together. And as dawn breaks, the city owes its peace to the bravest hero it has ever known—you, Lucas.”

Closing my sketchbook, I smiled at Lucas. The tale ignited his imagination, providing a brief escape from the confines of his hospital room. “See, Lucas, heroes are all around us, sometimes in the mirror.”

Leaving the pediatric ward, the weight of the hospital’s walls seemed lighter. The power of art and storytelling, once a refuge for my own pain, had evolved into a bridge connecting me to others. The experience with Lucas reminded me of the reach and impact of my sketches and tales, rekindling a sense of purpose and hope within me.

After returning to Madison’s room, Mrs. Gibson caught me just as I was about to dive back into my sketchbook. “Emily, is it? May I have a word with you?” She wasted no time as we stepped into a quiet corner of the corridor. “What I just witnessed was beyond impressive. That little guy has had a challenging time. I haven’t seen a smile on his little face since he’s been here.”

“I was happy to do it.”

“Your ability to connect and bring comfort through your art is extraordinary, Emily. We could use more of that around here. I wonder if you might consider a part-time position?”

I felt a swell of emotions at her offer. Part of me soared at the thought of helping others, offering a bit of escape from the gloom of sterile hospital rooms. But then my mind returned to Madison. The promises I made to support her and the struggle of balancing school and hospital visits jolted me back to reality.

After a long moment, I found my voice. “I’m incredibly honored, Mrs. Gibson, and part of me wants nothing more than to say yes. But right now, my place is beside Madison. I can’t spread myself too thin, not when she needs me the most.”

Mrs. Gibson nodded, her expression softening. “I understand, Emily. It’s an enormous responsibility, and your dedication to your sister is admirable. If the situation changes or you find a way to balance both, the offer stands.”

Returning to Madison’s side, I carried a mix of emotions. Disappointment lingered, but a profound conviction validated my decision. Madison needed me, and that was my priority. Looking at her, I felt a sense of peace, reassured by the knowledge that family always comes first.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

### *The Battle Begins*

I sat next to Madison with her hand in mine, listening to the monotonous beep of the heart monitor. It was a sound I had grown too familiar with and a constant reminder of where we were. With a subdued calm, the chemotherapy session progressed in a quiet slumber.

Fighting the fatigue that the medicine brought, Madison's eyes opened inchmeal. She looked at me with a frail smile on her lips. "You don't have to glue yourself here, Em. Go out, do something ... less hospital-ish."

With a gentle squeeze of her hand, "And miss our lovely date with IV drips? No way." I tried to keep my tone light, but my heart wasn't in it.

Just then, Molly walked in, striding with but a whisper against the sterile floor. She checked Madison's IV with her clipboard tucked under her arm. "How are we feeling today, Madison?" carrying a tune of optimism.

"The usual, just dandy."

As the nurse made some notes, she glanced up at me. "You're quite the fixture here, Emily. Always by her side. That's commendable."

"She had a dream," said Madison.

“Pardon me?”

“Sorry. Inside joke.”

I chuckled under my breath at Madison’s persistent mention of my dream. *I haven’t changed that much, sister.* “Hey, Molly, have you heard if there’s any news on the donor front?”

“No, hon, I haven’t. But I’m sure they haven’t stopped looking.”

“Is it . . . is it always this hard to find a match?”

Molly looked up with sympathetic eyes. “It can be. Unfortunately, it’s not as simple as a blood-type match. I’ve heard that the possibilities are in the thousands. They’re doing everything they can. What about you? They often look at siblings.”

“The doctors say it’s a bad idea because I had leukemia as a kid. So? That’s what I say. I’ve been in remission for years.” Staring at the IV drip, I watched the medicine trickle down into Madison’s vein. “Dr. Greenly says it would never fly with the Ethics Review Board. Apparently, just the mention of me with a history of leukemia would have their sphincters so tight they wouldn’t be able to fart.”

“Thank you, Emily, for that colorful assessment.” Molly’s attention was diverted as she wrote something in Mad’s chart. “But I’ve heard that they’ll listen . . . sometimes.”

“Listen?”

She looked up from Madison’s chart and smiled. “Sometimes enough to pass gas.”

I looked at Madison, sleeping now, her breathing even and slow. *Enough to pass gas, huh?* Mom and Dad stayed pretty tight-lipped with Madison’s progress. But considering that we were weeks into her treatment and still in the hospital spoke volumes. There were also concerned looks and eyes of red that conveyed things weren’t going well.

The room felt suddenly smaller as the walls seemed to inch closer. I needed air and space to think. Without a sound, I slipped out of the room, leaving the beeps and hums behind. The corridor was empty and the lights dimmed. Leaning against the cool wall, my mind raced. Standing while lost in thought, the reality of our

situation settled heavily on my shoulders. The possibility of being a donor, once a distant thought, was now at the forefront of my mind.

If I learned anything in Boulder, adults can be wrong. Or, at the very least, don't know what they're talking about. *The ordinance that wasn't. Maybe these guys are just protecting their assets. I took on city hall. Why not these bozos? Time for some research.*

*Why didn't I do this sooner?* My gut twisted in knots when I discovered the aggressiveness of Madison's cancer. I also learned that she should have been showing progress by now. All of which made perfect sense when her doctor kept her hospitalized after the first week. As I read my risks as a donor, my lips tightened, and I could almost feel my blood pressure rising. *That's my choice, not theirs. Even still . . . I licked it once. Mad's fighting for her life.*

Amidst my research, a young man about my age approached. "Excuse me. Aren't you the artist who tells stories? I'm David, by the way."

"Emily."

"I'm aware. My mother is the child life specialist who tried cajoling you into a job. Not to make you feel bad, but she was quite disappointed."

"I was flattered, to say the least, but my sister comes first."

"I get it."

"So you have a sick friend or relative, too?"

"No, I'm observing my mom, trying to decide if I might want to follow in her footsteps. You'd sure be good at it."

"Thanks, but art is my world."

"On that subject, my mom wondered if you could make yourself available for storytime. Our regular called in."

"When?"

"Half an hour."

"Well, I am done here but need to check on my sister."

As we walked to Mad's room, David went on about my drawings that had made their way onto the hospital's walls. All the while, I couldn't stop thinking about how similar David's



appearance was to Alex's—similar age, similar eye color, and the same wavy brown hair.

“Hey, sis. How you doing?” Madison rocked her palm-down hand back and forth. “Oh, this is David Gibson, son to none other.”

“Hi ...”

“Mrs. Gibson has asked me to fill in for storytime. Will you be OK?”

“Just fine. You kids have fun now.” Madison offered a smile that only she could deliver. I moved to her side and kissed her forehead on my way out. As I pulled away, she grabbed my arm and mouthed. He's so hot.

Lipping a reply, stop it.

David had this natural way of corralling the kids into a semi-circle, his voice both commanding and kind. It was storytime, a highlight for these brave little warriors battling cancer. He introduced me as a friend who'd share a special story, and I could feel the weight of expectation in their eyes.

I had my sketchbook, but I spotted an easel with large pieces of paper, ideal for the setting. As I moved the easel to the center of our gathering, I asked what they'd like to hear about. A small boy, no older than six, wearing a cowboy hat that barely clung to his head, piped up, “Horses!”

I smiled, warmed by his enthusiasm. “I like horses too. Let me tell you about the greatest horse race in the magical lands of Everwind.”

My pencil touched the paper. As I sketched, I told them of Everwind. “It was where the sky kissed the earth. Horses with manes of fire and hooves of thunder raced across the heavens. In Everwind, horses weren't just animals. They were heroes, friends, and legends,” I said as my pencil brought the story to life.

The children were silent, hanging on every word. “One horse, Blaze,” I continued, sketching a majestic steed with eyes like the dawn. “Blaze wasn't the biggest or the fastest in Everwind, but he had something no other horse did—a heart that knew no limits.”

The story unfolded, a tale of courage and friendship, as Blaze entered the grand race to save his home from darkness. The kids were spellbound as I drew Blaze conquering obstacles like storms and dark forests, always staying determined.

“With every stride, Blaze proved that it’s not the size of your body but the strength of your heart that truly matters.” As I narrated, my pencil danced across the page, capturing Blaze’s triumphant leap across the finish line, a ray of hope for all of Everwind.

As the story came to an end and Blaze returned a hero, the children erupted in applause with their faces alight with joy and wonder. It was a moment of escape and a brief respite from the battles they faced every day.

Handing the final sketch to the boy who loved horses, I saw a spark in his eyes and a reflection of the magic we’d shared. Whispering, “Thank you,” he clutched the drawing.

As I packed up, Mrs. Gibson approached with misty eyes. “That was beautiful, Emily. How in the world—that’s twice now I’ve seen you do that. Not a moment to think about it. It just spills out. Amazing.”

“Yeah ... kind of a curse, actually.”

“How can you say a curse? Didn’t you see the smiles you put on those faces?”

“Until recently, I didn’t know how to control it. Still can’t, sometimes. Head’s always in the clouds. Just ask Madison.”

“What I just saw is not a curse, young lady. That’s a gift. Thanks so much for stepping in today. If there’s ever anything I can do for you, just name it.”

I nodded, feeling an unexpected surge of emotion. Amid the hospital’s sterile halls, we’d found a pocket of magic and a reminder that even in our darkest moments, stories have the power to heal, inspire, and connect us all.

As I returned to Madison’s room, Mom and Dad had concern all over their faces as they spoke with Dr. Greenly. They stopped talking as I neared, but not before I overheard, “Madison isn’t responding.”

They say ignorance is bliss. In a sense, I wished that were true because I knew what her news meant. Madison was in the relative minority of those who do not respond to chemotherapy. As I hung by the door just within earshot, “She really needs a transplant. We aren’t out of options yet, but I’d feel much better about her prognosis if we could find a donor.”

When the doctor left, I meandered through the corridors while my footsteps echoed off the hospital walls. I ended up in the hospital garden, a small oasis amidst the clinical surroundings. The scent of fresh flowers and the antiseptic air created a bittersweet aroma.

I sat on a bench, staring at a small fountain. The water’s gentle trickle offered a bleak contrast to the turmoil inside me. I’d just clasped my hands together and felt the cold bite of my fingers when my phone vibrated. Come to the cafeteria, said a text. With a deep sigh, I stood up. I could see the silhouettes of patients and nurses moving through the glass. With each step back to the ward, my head moved up and down to the slightest degree. Upon reaching Madison’s door, I paused as she slept. Her peaceful face contradicted the battle raging within her body.

I found my parents huddled over cups of coffee. Their weary eyes lifted as I approached. “Have a seat, Em.” Unaware that I’d overheard them talking to Madison’s doctor, there was little doubt why I was summoned.

Before Dad said another word, “Mom, Dad, I, I’ve made a decision.” With my words aflutter, “I’ve been thinking a lot about Madison’s situation.” I took a deep breath, steadying my nerves. “I want to get tested to be a donor.”

Their reactions were immediate. Dad’s cup clattered on the table. “Emily, that’s ... Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure,” I said, my voice firmer than before. “I know the risks, but I also know what Madison is going through. I can’t just sit back.”

“But your health, Emily.” Mom’s eyes brimmed with concern. “You’ve been through so much already.”

“I have, and that’s exactly why I need to do this.” Meeting their worried gazes, “I know what it’s like to be in that bed. If there’s a chance I can help her, I need to take it.”

Dad ran his hand through his hair. “It’s not a simple decision, Em. There’s a lot to consider.”

I pressed on. “I have considered, and I’d never forgive myself if I didn’t at least try.”

There was a long pause as the weight of my words hung between us. “OK,” Dad finally said, his voice low. “We’ll talk to the doctors and see what they say.”

With her hand covering mine, Mom reached across the table. “We’re proud of you, Emily. Scared, but proud.”

Back in Madison’s room, I pulled a chair up next to her bed. The soft, rhythmic beeping of the heart monitor filled the space between us. She was asleep, her chest rising and falling gently under the hospital blanket.

Whispering, leaning close to her ear. “Hey, girl, I know you can’t hear me, but I’ll do everything possible, OK? Just hang in there.”

Her hand lay on the blanket, frail yet unbowed in its fight. I wrapped my fingers around hers, a gentle anchor in the uncertain sea we were navigating. And as I sat there, I observed the play of light on her face, each shadow reflecting her hardships.

Madison’s brow furrowed slightly in her sleep. Watching her, a firmness settled in my jaw, a hardening of resolve that needed no words. My gaze drifted from her face to the surrounding room—the machines, the IV stand, and the cards like colorful sentinels on the windowsill. The room was lit only by a slender beam of light from the hallway. With my chair creaking softly under my weight, I leaned back and rested my eyes.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

# *Big Bad Wolf*

“**W**hy are we here? They said no, didn’t they?”

I saw it on their faces, and their invitation to join them in the family sitting area sealed the deal. Sitting across from me, their expressions of concern and exhaustion told the story. Perhaps with its soft beige walls and the row of potted plants along the windowsill, they thought that might soften the blow. Well, it didn’t. Not even the quiet or sunlight filtering through the blinds could cast a positive spin on their words.

With Dad’s hands clasped, “Emily, the doctor says it’s too risky,” he said, turning his knuckles white.

I shook my head while the frustration boiled inside me. “Too risky? It’s not her call. It’s mine.” My words came out sharp, echoing within the empty room.

“But it is, Em.”

“Did you even fight on her behalf?”

“Well,” said Dad, “we deferred to her doctor’s best judgment.”

“Sometimes, adults aren’t always right, including doctors.”

“Calm down, Em.”

“No, Dad. I won’t calm down. Don’t you remember what she said that first day? It’s the department head and that gaggle of

ethics clowns. She doesn't want to bother because she thinks she knows the answer. I heard the doctor say she needs a transplant. The chemo isn't working. I looked it up. It's what they call refractory ALL. Her long-term prognosis isn't nearly as rosy. Did she tell you that? Of course, she didn't."

Trembling, Mom reached out. "Honey, she's just concerned about your health. Your history ..."

"I'm fine, Mom, better than fine." I stood, scraping the chair against the floor. The scent of antiseptic and the faint smell of coffee did little to calm my nerves.

Dad looked at me with searching eyes. "What's happened to you, Em? Ever since Madison got sick, you've been ... different."

I lifted my head. "Have I?"

He gestured toward me with a softness in his eyes. "Look at you. Your art, it's full of life now. And the way you interact with the kids here, you're the talk of the floor. Now you want to take on Mad's doctor."

Mom nodded, adding, "And your relationship with Madison. You two have never gotten along, not like this."

I gave them both a shoulder shrug. "She's still my sister, and I know what she's going through, more than anyone."

Dad sighed and shared his gaze. "And you think we don't?"

"No, because you can't. You have no idea what it's like wishing you'd just die to end everyone's misery." Their silence was answer enough. With their usually open faces hidden behind a shroud of pain and uncertainty, I turned toward the door.

"Where are you going?" Mom's voice was laced with worry.

"To change that doctor's mind." My voice was resolute, and my steps determined as I stormed out of the room. *I need to draw.* When I returned to get my sketchbook, I found Madison sleeping. Each breath taken was in step with her monitor. *I've got you, Madison.*

I found a quiet spot to cool down. Approaching Dr. Greenly in my current state would have further complicated matters. Still fuming, my mind drifted back to memories of Boulder.

Specifically, the City Council meeting came to mind. *That's it. Thank you again, Boulder.*

"Excuse me. Are you Emily?"

"I am."

"I'm Jenna, and I'm with the Denver Post. May I have a few minutes?"

"Very few."

"We received a tip about the remarkable talent you are. We'd like to write a story about you."

"Jenna, I'm sorry. I came here to draw. Cool down. Come up with a plan. This really isn't a good time."

"May I watch you?" I exhaled loud enough for all to hear. "I see. Well, I'm a good listener. What has you so distracted and fired up?"

"This damn hospital. They seem to care more about their asses than their patients."

"This sounds interesting. Tell me more."

After telling her all about it, she said, "May I ask why this is so important to you?" *Do I dare go there with her? She's wasting my time. Not so fast, Em. Community. City Council meeting ...*

As I rambled on about my history, Madison's cancer, and the stuffed suits of the hospital, I sketched myself sketching the two of us in conversation. As I vented, she jotted down a few things while maintaining a close eye on my sketchbook.

"You're remarkable, and I hear you tell stories as well—all off the top of your head."

"Jenna, why do I have the feeling you don't plan to leave me alone?"

She smiled. "Maybe because you're a smart girl. Would you mind telling me one of your stories? You know ... the kind you might tell one of the kids."

I obliged, hoping it might be enough for her to get what she came for and leave. No such luck. "You know, Emily, you're exactly the type of person my readers want to know about. Allow me to follow you. I'll stay out of your way. I promise."

Jenna added as I finished my drawing, “I assure you that I will handle the story with care and sensitivity. And you never know, this story could bring much-needed attention to Madison’s situation.”

*Community, Em. Community. Think Boulder.*

“Let’s hope so.” Turning my sketchbook around, “What do you think?”

“I think my tip was spot on. So ... what’s next?”

“Follow me.”

As the morning sun shone through the hospital corridors, I navigated the maze of hallways with Jenna in tow. Our destination ... Mrs. Gibson. “If anyone can help, she can.” I wasted no time explaining the critical need for a meeting with Madison’s doctor. Mrs. Gibson, a lantern in the darkness, listened before nodding her agreement to intervene, promising to arrange a meeting for later that day.

As we entered Dr. Greenly’s office, I started with, “Thanks for agreeing to see me, doctor,” trying to mask the nervous tremor in my voice.

Dr. Greenly, eyeing Jenna with caution and curiosity, “Certainly. But, Emily, your friend needs to step outside for privacy reasons.”

“She’s not a friend yet, Dr. Greenly. She’s a reporter from the Denver Post, here to do a story on me.”

Uncompromising, “She still needs to step outside.”

“But doctor,” my frustration mounting, “it’s my privacy at stake, not Madison’s. Getting tested has nothing to do with Madison.”

Dr. Greenly sighed a sound that carried a weight of resignation and procedure. “Yes, well ... Mrs. Gibson says you want to discuss my decision about declining you as a donor.”

I steadied my voice, instilling it with every ounce of conviction I could muster. “I do because you’re not looking out for the best interest of my sister, your patient.”



The doctor's response was measured and a careful blend of professionalism and concern. "Well, Emily, in this case, I have to look out for your interests as well."

I almost laughed. The absurdity of being protected from a choice I was so eager to make was maddening. "No, you don't. You're not my doctor. I've done my research. Your obligation stops at informing me of the risks."

We had a conversation where she pointed out the challenges in finding a suitable match because of my mixed heritage and the complexities of donor matches. But I wouldn't be swayed.

"If you do test me, what's the risk to me?" seeking a foothold and a crack in her resolve.

"Uh ... none, but that's not the point."

"It's exactly the point. There is no risk. So what's the problem?" My argument was simple, and its simplicity was its strength.

Dr. Greenly faltered, and her professional facade cracked under the weight of logic and raw need. She mentioned potential opposition from the Ethics Review Board, but I was relentless.

"Do you have a crystal ball, doctor?" Somber humor laced my voice.

"Of course not," she said as a reluctant smile tugged at the corner of her mouth.

"Then why act like you do? Now, for the good of the one who is your patient, stay out of my way." My words were bold and a dare for her to defy the logic we both knew held true.

After a tense moment where time seemed to slow, Dr. Greenly succumbed, perhaps seeing the unyielding determination in my eyes or maybe realizing the futility of arguing further. "Fine. I'll set up the testing."

As Jenna and I exited the office, the air felt lighter, victory mingling with the cool breath of the hospital's air conditioning. Jenna, animated and impressed, turned to me with her curiosity peaking. "That was as impressive as your art. Where in the world did a young woman such as yourself learn to be so assertive?"

Though meant as a compliment, her question led my thoughts down a path lined with memories and dreams. With a wistful

smile and my gaze fixed on a brighter future, I replied, “In a dream.”

The contrasting brightness of the hospital corridor seemed to mirror the flicker of hope that had ignited within me. We walked back to Madison’s room in silence, lost in thought over the recent confrontation until we nearly collided with Mrs. Gibson.

“Emily, just the person I wanted to see.” Her voice was a blend of warmth and urgency. “I just got a call from Dr. Greenly. Impressive, young lady. She ordered your test as soon as you left her office. You’re set to go.”

Jenna chimed in with a smirky grin. “You should have been there to witness it.”

The pride I felt was colored with a somber undertone. “I’ve learned that when people have their stupidity pointed out in a public forum, they’re not hard to bring around,” I said, half-joking, half-serious.

Mrs. Gibson extended a slip of paper. “Room 202A at 1:30. A nurse will meet with you and help you through the process. Hey, would you mind if David observes for educational purposes?”

“Nope.” Despite the whirlwind of emotions, the presence of an observer seemed inconsequential.

“He’ll meet you there,” she said, leaving us to resume our way.

In the sparse tranquility of a consultation room, David and Jenna looked on as a nurse laid out the procedure. The health questionnaire felt like an autopsy of my past as each question probed deep wounds that had barely healed. David’s quiet support and Jenna’s respectful distance provided a semblance of comfort as I navigated the labyrinth of my medical history. But for all of the resistance and hubbub, the test was nothing but a swab of my cheek. *What a bunch of bozos.*

In the aftermath, as the weight of the day bore down on me, Jenna seized the opportunity to delve into my artistic journey. Though unrelated to the immediate ordeal, her questions offered a distraction and a momentary respite from the heavy cloak of uncertainty. David, ever the silent pillar, remained by my side with the comfort of his presence.

No sooner had I returned to Madison's room than her doctor summoned my parents and me for a meeting. "Have a seat, please." The tension in her voice was undeniable. "The Ethics Board caught wind of your case. Because of Emily's past with leukemia, they have preemptively decided not to approve Emily as a donor, irrespective of the test results. This decision is based on their assessment of the risks and potential ethical implications."

My muscles tensed, and my heart pounded. Seething, "If you think I'll just take this sitting down," my voice a mix of defiance and resolve, "then you don't know Emily Reynolds."

Slamming the doctor's office door behind me, I couldn't shake off the anger and helplessness swirling within. *The Caretaker*. My drive home was a blur, thoughts racing faster than the car. I sprinted to the front door, my hands shaking as I fumbled with the key. *Come on*.

Rushing to my room, I grabbed the Codex from its hiding place. Its raised symbols reminded me of a world that had seemed so real. Opening it to the page of the hourglass, I traced its outline with anxious hesitation. The familiar sensation of being pulled through time engulfed me, depositing me in the Caretaker's realm.

Always the enigmatic presence, he looked up with wonder crossing his features. "I'm surprised to see you, Emily."

"You said I could pop in anytime," I replied, trying to mask the turmoil inside with a semblance of normalcy.

"Indeed. And I do appreciate the company. Tell me. What brings you to my realm?" he asked, his voice a calm in the storm of my emotions.

"I'm mad, sad, frustrated, and need to vent."

"Why sad, child? You're thriving in 2005." He tilted his head slightly, a gesture I'd come to associate with his deep, thoughtful moods.

"My predicament made me think about some of my closest allies. You know ... like Mrs. Miller. After all they did for me, I just up and disappeared. I don't regret leaving. My sister needed me."

“Emily, the truth is ... you left no one behind,” he said with a gentle but firm voice.

“What do you mean? Of course, I did. The friends I made, the lives we shared ...” Confusion and a growing sense of dread took hold.

“Emily, the time you spent in 1948 was not the literal past. To use a term I know you’re familiar with, the portal is something like a holodeck, a simulation,” he said as his words echoed in the vastness of his realm.

“No! No ... it was all an elaborate lie?” My face betrayed me, revealing my shock and disbelief. “How could you do this? Send me home. Send me back now!” My voice cracked under the strain of betrayal.

“All in good time, child.”

“I’m not your child. Now send me back.”

“It’s the Heartseer that must send you back.”

“Fine. Whatever. Heartseer, send me back.”

“It senses your anger. It’s finicky like that. So while we wait, let’s examine your life in Boulder, beginning with when I informed you about the future.” The Caretaker waved his hands about, conjuring up our discussion on the park bench.

“Then why come and throw this guilt trip on me? I can’t change how I feel. I left that life for a reason. This experience has turned out better than I could have imagined. And since you’re here, I want to take this opportunity to thank you for this amazing gift. Mrs. Miller was right. Life in the now is pretty cool. I’ve met so many wonderful people.”

“I take it back.”

“You can’t undo the past, young Emily. Each second that passes is like a drop in a river, forever carried away. But let me ask. If I could roll back time, would you still take that opportunity to step into 1948 Boulder?” My gaze dropped to my hands. “I’ve watched you in 2005, so I know you took my gift with you. It’s who you are now.”

“It was still a lie.”

“Only if you choose to view it like that. Every person you encountered was real. Some are still alive today. Were your actions real? Of course. What you experienced was their reactions to you. Your choices were real. Your desire to depart 1948 for an unknown 2005 was real. When we met by the park bench, you told me quite emphatically that you had no desire to return, yet you’re here.” His words painted a complex picture of reality and perception.

Whispering, “But I loved those people.”

“Do you wish to return?” The Caretaker’s question hung in the air between us like a challenge.

“What would be the point? It’s all fake. I can’t very well make a difference in the lives of fake people. Can I? At least here, the smiles are genuine. The pain is real. And my actions actually mean something.”

“Consider your words, Emily. Before your time in Boulder, were any of them a concern to you?”

“I guess I see your point.”

“Your disdain for my news is understandable. But the lessons we need to learn about ourselves and the world around us can be taught in ways not constrained by a template. Your journey was real in every way that matters—in the growth you achieved, the compassion you learned, and the love you felt. ‘What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.’ ” His words echoed with wisdom and a gentle urging toward acceptance.

“You’ll need to explain that one,” I said, my heart beginning to understand even as my mind fought against the revelation.

“The essence of your experiences and the growth you’ve achieved is no less real than the stage it played upon.”

“You and your riddles,” I muttered. Despite the swirl of emotions, a smile tugged at the corners of my lips.

“Life’s lessons come in many forms—film, art, literature, superhero stories, probes from distant galaxies, and even simulations. Does the source of the lesson diminish the value of the gift?” he

asked, his question rhetorical yet profound. “The book you hold and the symbols upon it, have you discovered their secrets?”

“I’m not sure. The lion was the first that seemed to hold some meaning.”

“Yes.” The Caretaker swiped at the air, bringing up the night before I departed the ranch. “That took courage, young Emily. You left the security of the ranch for whatever the streets held for you.” Waving his hands, “Here, you stepped into the portal when others before you would not.” Swiping again, “Do you recognize this one? You trusted Mrs. Miller when Officer Billings hauled you off, and you stood up to city hall when your friends were threatened. I could go on with others.”

The truth of his words settled around me like a warm embrace. “The hearts you found and the one you drew for Mabel followed acts of kindness and compassion. You learned that lesson well. You’ve been demonstrating it every day with your sister.

“The open hand of gratitude. Being grateful for both the ability to give and graciously receive.” Swiping the air, “I’m sure that you remember Maggie. You touched her life with your gift, just as Mabel’s generosity touched you.

“The anchor represents responsibility. You recognized this trait when you told your story of Titan and the Mighty Hooves. He was their anchor. And you put responsibility on display when you recognized you didn’t belong there.

“The scale of justice represents discernment as it relates to judgment, balance, and fairness. You saw an injustice and acted upon it. And lastly, the mirror. You had many reflective moments, Emily, none greater than reflecting on the town of Boulder. With gratitude in your heart, you wished to reciprocate, and here you are.”

After a moment of absorbing his words, I rose from my chair. Approaching the Caretaker, I opened my arms and squeezed him with a tight embrace. “I’m sorry I doubted you.”

“Now, I believe you have some unfinished business to take care of.”

“And I know exactly what I’m going to do. Thanks, Caretaker,” I said with a newfound determination coursing through me.

With that, the Heartseer sent me back to Denver and back to the reality of 2005. But this time, I resolved to face my real-world challenges head-on, starting with the Ethics Board’s decision.

Back in my room, the Heartseer Codex closed with a soft thud, imprinting its lessons on my heart. I reached for my phone and dialed Jenna, the reporter, asking her to do a follow-up story. My resolve was unmistakable. I decided the time had come to use my voice, art, and experiences to make a real difference.

Upon returning to the hospital, I found Madison awake for a change. “Where you been, sis?”

“Arranging for the cavalry.”

“Say what?”

“In my dream ...”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

### *Community*

**M**y ringing phone jolted me from a trance of worry. Its bright chirp cleaved through the heavy hospital silence. “Hello?”

“Hi, Emily, it’s Jenna. I thought I’d let you know I got you on the front page of the local news section.”

The words hardly had time to register before a brief scream escaped me. “You’re the best, Jenna. Thanks so much.”

“What’s going on, Em?”

“Be right back,” I said, barely containing the swirl of emotions.

“Sis...” Madison’s voice faded as I bolted from the room.

My heart pounded against my chest, racing with every step toward the hospital gift shop. Anticipation shook my hands as I reached for a copy of the paper. My breaths were quick and shallow. *Breathe, Em, breathe.* The urge to devour the article right there battled my desire to share this moment with Madison. By the time I returned to our room, I was gasping for air.

Mad’s voice, laced with confusion and concern, “Emily, what’s going on?”

Panting, I blurted out, “We made ... the front, page. Local section.”



Madison's eyes widened as she took the newspaper, tearing through the pages to the local section. There it was, our story laid bare for the world to see—a photo of us, Madison frail and clinging to life, and me, her determined sister by her side. The headline screamed of our plight and the injustice we faced.

#### Local Teen's Donor Bid Rejected Without Test Results

**Denver** – The local community is rallying around seventeen-year-old Emily Reynolds, whose offer to be a bone marrow donor for her sister, Madison, was pre-emptively declined by the hospital's ethics board before the test results were even considered.

Madison Reynolds, also seventeen, is battling a severe form of leukemia and urgently needs a bone marrow transplant. Emily, despite her own history of leukemia, stepped up to be tested as a potential donor. However, the ethics board at Denver Children's Hospital declined her offer, citing her medical history without waiting for the compatibility test results.

"This isn't just about medical guidelines; it's about common sense," said a hospital nurse who preferred to remain anonymous. "Emily's willingness to help her sister deserves at least the consideration of her test results."

The board's decision, made before ascertaining whether Emily was a match, has sparked a heated debate about the balance between medical ethics and the urgency of life-saving measures.

The Reynolds family, known in the community for Emily's contributions as an artist and storyteller, expressed disappointment and frustration. "We just want a fair chance to fight this together," said the girls' mother.

As word of the situation spreads, support for the Reynolds sisters is growing, with many calling for re-evaluating the decision. This case highlights the complex and often painful intersection of medical ethics and human emotion in life-and-death situations.

"What now, sis?" Madison's voice broke through my thoughts.

"Nothing, Mad. Not a thing." My voice was steadier than I felt.

Madison fixed on me with a look that said she knew me better than that. "This new Emily doesn't give up that easily."

I couldn't help but smile with pride and resolve swelling within me. "Did I say I was giving up? People do not like stupidity or injustice. In my dream, the town supported me when I took on city hall."

"You?" Disbelief colored her voice.

"Yep! Believe it or not. This is a double whammy, sis. It's stupid, and it's an injustice. Someone will help us out. We've got them right where we want them."

As David approached, he interrupted our moment of reflection. Having caught wind of the article, he offered his congratulations, a beam of support in our moment of vulnerability.

My phone rang again. *Who now?* "Emily, it's Jenna. Great news. The Associated Press has picked up your story."

With shock turning into empowerment, the stakes grew higher, and the spotlight expanded. I realized our story's profound potential to transform our lives and the discourse on medical ethics and compassion.

A few days later, in the muted morning light of Madison's hospital room, I sat by her bed, coffee in one hand and sketchpad in the other. The rhythmic beep of monitors played a soft background tune. At the same time, Madison pecked at her breakfast, seeming more animated than she had been in days.

A nurse breezed into the room with a warm smile, bringing a burst of energy under the bright, fluorescent lights. "Good morning, girls. Have you heard the news?"

"The board changed their mind?" I asked, half-hoping the impossible had happened overnight.

"Not quite. It seems, Emily, that you have friends in high places. Dr. Jonas, a highly respected and well-known pediatric oncologist at St. Jude's Research Hospital, wrote an opinion piece about Madison's case. Would you like me to read it to you?"

"Absolutely," I said as anticipation prickled my skin.

Clearing her throat, the nurse began.

"In the case of Emily Reynolds, a seventeen-year-old willing to donate bone marrow to her sister, Madison, facing a severe form of leukemia, we encounter a profound ethical dilemma. The

decision by the Ethics Board at Denver Children's Hospital to preemptively decline Emily's offer, citing her medical history, raises significant concerns about the balance between medical guidelines and the autonomy of individuals willing to take risks for loved ones.

As a pediatric oncologist at St. Jude's Research Hospital, I've witnessed countless families navigate these heart-wrenching decisions. Emily's case underscores the necessity for medical ethics to evolve in response to the complexities of individual circumstances. Despite her history of leukemia, her willingness to donate exemplifies a level of selflessness and familial commitment that deserves more than automatic disqualification.

The Ethics Board's decision, made without even considering compatibility test results, fails to account for the potential life-saving impact of Emily's offer. It's imperative that we prioritize patient and family autonomy while ensuring that individuals like Emily are allowed to make informed decisions about their own bodies and the chance to save a loved one's life."

"Told ya, Mad," unable to keep the triumph from my voice.

"Quite the dream, Em," a teasing light in her eyes.

The nurse looked puzzled. "You had a dream about this?"

"No. An inside joke. That's all."

"It's all the hospital is talking about." Dropping her voice to a whisper and holding the side of her hand against the corner of her mouth, she said, "By the way, you didn't hear it from me, but your test results came back as a match."

"I knew it would. They have to authorize the transplant now, sis." The words were out before I could temper my excitement with caution.

"Don't count on it, Emily," dousing our glimmer of hope. "Dr. Edwards, the Director of Oncology, would need to intervene, and he doesn't do that. It's never happened as long as I've been here—ten years."

"He will in this case. Like I told my sister, people don't like stupidity or injustice. The world is full of injustices. There's no need to add a stupid one to the list."

“You’re a smart girl,” she said, admiration tinting her voice.

Feeling a surge of confidence, “I just know people,” I replied.

Mrs. Gibson chose that moment to appear, bringing a gust of optimism. “I heard Dr. Edwards called an emergency meeting with the Ethics Review Board. It seems that your story stirred up quite the hornet’s nest.”

“I knew they’d come around.”

“Not yet, anyway.” Mrs. Gibson couldn’t hide the half-smile stretching across her lips. “The director wants to speak with you.”

“If that ain’t leprechaun’s gold. Now?”

“Yes, but . . .” Mrs. Gibson held her hand like a stop sign. “Try not to get your hopes up, Emily. Dr. Edwards is not one to flip once he’s made a decision.”

“He is on this.”

In the austere office of Dr. Edwards, I found myself perched on the edge of a too-large chair. Feeling every bit the ‘small young woman’ he accused me of being, I was happy to learn I was also a ‘big pain in his ass.’ His opening remark was almost a compliment in its own grudging way.

“Sorry,” I offered, though the apology felt hollow even to my ears.

“I highly doubt that,” he said, a wry smile touching his lips. “You know . . . I’ve heard nothing but ‘Emily this’ and ‘Emily that’ for weeks. Your name keeps popping up even in my isolated corner of the hospital. And now, you’ve managed to get a renowned pediatric oncologist on your side. How did you do that?”

“Luck?” unsure of how much to reveal.

He chuckled, not buying it for a second. “Is it true Mrs. Gibson offered you a job the second day you were here?”

Feeling the *déjà vu* of being scrutinized once again, “Yes, sir.”

“I’ve known Donna a long time. She’s a compassionate woman. Good at her job, but she’s not easily impressed.” He paused, eyeing me with curiosity and respect I hadn’t expected to find here. Prodding further, “She got you in to see Dr. Greenly?”

“I see you’ve done your homework,” I said, meeting his gaze.

“Like I said, ‘Emily this’ and ‘Emily that.’ If I allow you to state your case with the review board, will that get you out of my hair?” he asked, half-joking but also half-serious.

“Dr. Edwards, I feel like a broken record saying this, but people do not like injustice or stupidity. And they certainly don’t like it when the injustice is served up by some stupid bureaucratic decision. So, no,” I replied, my voice firm with conviction.

He sighed, leaning back in his chair as if weighing his options. “I guess I’d have been disappointed if you’d said otherwise. Still, the best I can do is an audience with the review board.”

“I learned a valuable lesson, Dr. Edwards. I learned about the power of community. They’re on my side. An audience with the review board is all I need,” I said, standing to leave. At that moment, I felt taller, bolstered by the knowledge that I wasn’t alone in this fight. The community’s support was a force to be reckoned with, and I was ready to face the review board, confident in the strength of our collective voice.

Navigating the hospital corridors on my return to Madison’s room felt surreal, almost like walking through a live celebration of my small but significant victory. The faces I passed—nurses, patients, even the janitor—greeted me with warmth and recognition. “Hey, Emily,” echoed with each step I took, accompanied by high fives that felt like the clapping of a supportive crowd after a triumphant performance.

One of the younger patients, a girl for whom I’d sketched a princess just days before, tugged at my sleeve. “Can you draw me a dragon this time? A friendly one?” Her eyes sparkled with hope, mirroring the support and belief everyone seemed to have in me.

“You go, girl,” a nurse called out as she passed, smiling wide and encouraging.

By the time I reached Madison’s room, the accumulation of these interactions had me beaming with pride and gratitude. Madison looked up from her book as I entered, her face lighting up at the sight of my smile.

“Mad, guess what?” barely containing my excitement. “Dr. Edwards is giving us a chance to present our case to the review board.”

Madison’s smile widened, and for a moment, the hospital room felt less like a place of sickness and more like a home filled with hope. “Really? That’s amazing, Em!”

“Yeah,” I said, sitting beside her, “it feels like we’re on a victory lap. Everyone’s been so supportive.”

Madison reached for my hand and squeezed it. “You’re incredible, you know that? Not just for fighting for me but for being this ... light for everyone around you.”

“We’re not there just yet, sis.” Pulling out my phone, I dialed Jenna’s number.

“Who you calling?”

I held up my hand. “Jenna, it’s Emily. Hi. Can I ask for one more favor ...?”

The small auditorium, typically reserved for dry administrative meetings, was all abuzz, bringing back a not-so-distant memory. Reporters lined the walls, their cameras trained on us as we entered, and community members filled every seat. The atmosphere hummed with a blend of anticipation and solidarity.

Madison, in her wheelchair, looked smaller than usual, yet her eyes sparkled with nervousness and hope. Our parents flanked her with their usual stoic demeanor, softened by the community’s overwhelming support.

The chairman, visibly ill at ease in the crowded room, stood to address the assembly. “Everyone. I’m sorry, but this is not a public forum. There are privacy concerns. Please—”

“Mr. Chairman, it’s fine with us if they stay.” I steadied my voice despite the fluttering in my stomach. “They’ll either write about the facts that come out here or make up their own. Wouldn’t you prefer to be transparent? This involves the entire community of Boulder, whether they might want to bring their loved ones here.”

“Certainly, Miss Reynolds. Transparency. We’ve set up a podium for you. Would you like to come forward?”

“I know you’re busy, so I promise to be brief. But before I start, thank you for hearing me out.”

“As if we had much choice.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way, Mr. Chairman. You know, I had something prepared to read but not after that comment.” Setting aside my prepared material, “I understand why doctors, such as yourselves, might have a god-complex. After all, you make life-and-death decisions almost every day. But whether you realize it or not, this is one that you don’t have to make. You’re playing Russian roulette with my sister. Needlessly, I might add. Madison isn’t responding to chemo, and targeted therapies are still in their infancy. At this point, her prognosis is not good—at all. Yet, for some reason, you want to prioritize my life over hers. Yes, I may get sick. Meanwhile, she is sick.

“I don’t know when and where a donor’s age is or should become an issue. Ten? Twelve? But I’m months away from being a legal adult, yet you treat me like I’m not capable of making an informed decision. When the lines are gray, perhaps you should consider teaming up with the family instead of dismissing them.

“This is simple. I know the risks. Perhaps you’ve forgotten, but I beat this once. But Madison, she’s losing the battle. From where I stand, this is a no-brainer. You see these people surrounding me? They’re my support community, and there’s more where they came from. Stick by your stuffy principles if you want. That’s your prerogative. But my sister is getting the transplant she needs. All I need to do is pick up the phone. I happen to know a renowned pediatric oncologist. But that will take time. Madison is running out of time. Thank you for your consideration.”

As I finished, turning to push Madison’s wheelchair, the chairman’s voice halted us. “Miss Reynolds,” the chairman looked about the other members as if to seek objection, “you can have your transplant.”

The auditorium erupted in applause, with the sound echoing off the walls, a chorus of relief and victory. Madison and I exchanged high-fives as the unanimous support lifted our spirits.

Our parents wrapped us in a tight embrace, a moment of familial unity amidst the struggle.

Madison's win was a triumph for the entire community and for every voice that rallied behind us, proving that together we could make a difference. As we exited the auditorium, the cheers of our supporters rang in our ears.

In the days before the procedure, Madison was isolated for her conditioning regimen. Thankfully, her room had a window that peered into the hall. It was great for keeping up Madison's spirits as she seemed to have a revolving door of well-wishers, each visitor bringing a fresh wave of encouragement. Her spirits soared with every smile and every kind word, amplifying the community's resounding rallying cry.

With my nose pressed against the glass, I waved to Mad, pointing to indicate I was planning on coming in. I got a thumbs up and a smile that was all Madison. Meanwhile, Jenna, the reporter whose story had catapulted our private struggle into the national spotlight, lingered with my parents. I caught snippets of their conversation, her questions peeling back the layers of our family's story.

"What do you think about your daughter's performance, Mr. Reynolds?"

"Coming from a girl who once sought refuge in the four corners of her room, this accomplishment is nothing short of miraculous."

When the big day came, I was wheeled into the procedure room with Madison waiting.

"Your sister is here, Madison."

"Can you bring her beside me?"

Madison and I locked eyes as our hands intertwined, a powerful symbol of our unwavering resilience.

"Thanks, sis."

I smiled, squeezing her hand. "Don't thank me. Thank my dream."

The End