
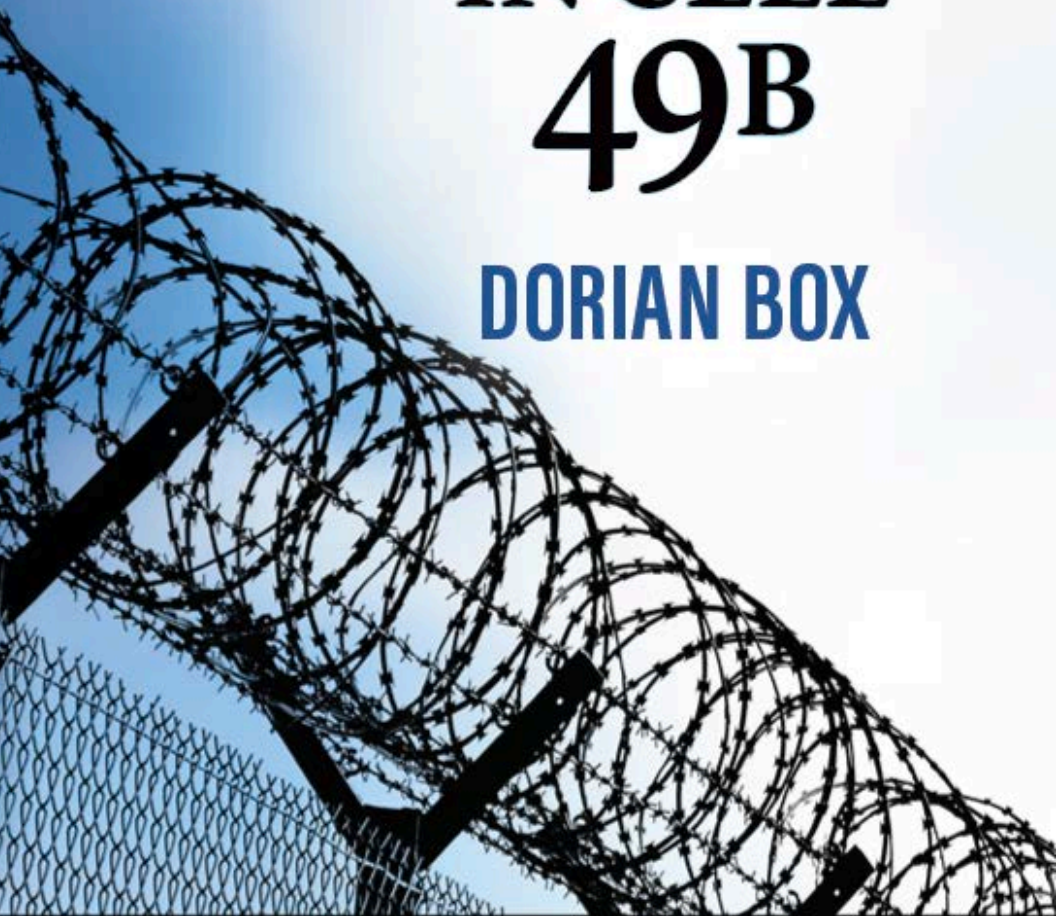


EMILY CALBY BOOK 2



THE GIRL IN CELL 49B

DORIAN BOX



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GIRL
IN CELL
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THE GIRL IN CELL 49B

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Also by Dorian Box

Psycho-Tropics

The Hiding Girl

For Mary Pat Treuthart

Prologue

IT BEGINS at the end. I'm running through the backyard, past the clothesline and swing-set. The stocky man is shouting from behind me, out the bathroom window, "I'm coming to cut you into pieces."

I'm not even into the woods before I'm swallowed by guilt. Mom. The gunshot. *And Becky.* Where's my baby sister? *Take care of your Mom and Becky.* I promised Dad.

Have to go back ... but I barely made it out the window, stocky man grabbing at my legs, trying to see through the bleach I sprayed in his eyes.

You have to go back ... but I can't. My legs won't turn. He's coming after me. I hear his footsteps pounding through the leaves. I run faster. *Coward.*

I dive into the shallow ravine I know so well and bury myself in the leaves just before he arrives. He stops, feet shuffling in the underbrush. The crunchy leaves tickle my face and I have to hold my breath to keep them from rattling.

He's muttering curse words. In the distance, the tall man is yelling. "Boss man. Place about to blow to Kingdom Come. Got to go."

In a regular voice, like he knows I'm there, "Little girl, if I ever get my hands on you, you're gonna wish you died with your mama and sister."

I already wish it. A whimper as soft as a cricket chirp. If Mom and Becky are already dead, *this will be my grave.*

All I have to do is move. He'll see me and it will be all over. I let my breath out and will my trembling arm upward through the leaves. I keep my hand poised, flat and straight, like I'm raising it in Mrs. Bianchi's math class.

A spooky silence makes me grab onto the fantasy that he's gone. Then I hear snarky laughter. "Thank you for your cooperation, blondie. Your mama was right. You are a good girl."

One click and the gun starts firing. Everything slows down. The first two bullets miss. They zip through the top layers of leaves and halt with a thud when they hit the damp decaying mat that gathered last winter. Two more shots miss. Maybe he'll run out of bullets.

But the fifth shot is a direct hit, right through the center of my chest, straight into my broken heart. Bullseye.

It hurts and I know I'm dying, but I'm not afraid. I was raised to believe. I wait for the bright light, to be lifted up and join the angels. I can already picture sweet little Becky, an angel even on earth.

... but something's not working right. The blood pumping out of the hole in my heart is being replaced just as fast with an inky black liquid, thick and gooey, like oil. It's heavy and weighs me down, pulling me farther into the ground, filling my heart and veins before overflowing from my mouth and nose and finally eyes ...

Choking, gasping ... My eyes snap open. *Just a dream. Not real, not real.*

I lie under the covers shivering as my heart rate slows and breathing returns to normal, but there's no sense of relief. Because real is worse than the dream. In the actual record of events, I didn't raise my hand through the leaves that day and die with my mother and sister. I stayed frozen as a log until the stocky man left, committing a sin I can never forgive.

I lived.

For an extra eleven hundred and forty-six days I've been able to laugh and cry and read books and see sunrises ... and

breathe. Eleven hundred and forty-seven if I count today. My sixteenth birthday.

1

“HAPPY BIRTHDAY,” Lucas says. “Hope you like it.”

“I’m so excited,” I say lethargically, the nightmare still weighing on me. I tear off the Sweet Sixteen wrapping paper, bursting with luminous gold stars and pink balloons. In my hands is a compact Sig Sauer nine-millimeter semiautomatic pistol, no box.

Lucas says. “Sweet? I wish.”

I force a laugh.

We’re in the front lounge of the bus we’ve been living in and out of for three years, parked at Zinnie’s Paradise Campground in the Ozark Mountains in northwest Arkansas. The air conditioner is going full blast.

“What’s wrong? That’s what you wanted, ain’t it?”

“Uh-huh. Exactly.” Right down to the black anodized finish. “You shouldn’t have done it though. These things cost a thousand bucks.”

“Not the way I get ’em. That gun was stolen six hundred miles from here. Got an obliterated serial number. Untraceable.”

“Oh.”

Birthdays have definitely changed since my twelfth, the last one I spent with my family. That day I wore a glittering tiara over my sheeny blonde hair. I got a softball glove and a pair of rubber cleats from Mom and a picture Becky colored that said *I LOVE U, LUV*. She was dancing around the living room in the cleats, way too big for her, slipping and sliding on the wood floor. We were all laughing.

For my thirteenth birthday, I got a thirty-eight caliber pocket-rocket from Lucas in a brown paper sack. No tiara. I'd already torn my golden locks to shreds.

I don't know why I'm not happier. Maybe it was the gun in my dream. Maybe because birthdays always remind me of my family.

"Thank you, Lucas." I lean to give him a hug. I'm five-seven now, same height as Mom, but the top of my head barely grazes the chin of his massive body.

"No problem," he says. "Remind me. This your real birthday or fake birthday?"

I'm counterfeit in just about every way imaginable. I live under a false identity: *Alice Black*, Joseph Black's fake adopted daughter. Joseph Black—real name Lucas Ellington Jackson—is an expert document forger. That's how we met in South Memphis, when I was on the run and looking for a driver's license. He's also a former gang member and drug dealer smart enough to have invested his profits in mutual funds.

I frown. Another punctured moment. "*Mi-ine*. Emily's. You don't even know that?"

"Hard to keep track of dates when you forge documents for a livin'." He hands me another wrapped package. "These from Kiona."

Kiona is his wife, a boxing trainer who found her dream job in Las Vegas as a result of my effed-up life. Haha, at least it's good for something!

We'd been on the run for a long time, living out of the bus. *The Calby Murders* were still in the news and Lucas had faked his death in Memphis. We took a break and rented a house in Vegas so I could go back to school. With Alice Black's identity and forged academic records, I attended ninth grade, having missed seventh and eighth.

Things were going fine until a social worker showed up at our house with a cop saying they received a welfare complaint *about a white girl living here*. They asked to look around. After all his

lectures about not antagonizing the authorities, Lucas told them to shove it and get a warrant. Worried they might, we left town the same night. Kiona refused to get back on the bus. I don't get it, but living apart seems to work for them.

Inside her package are a box of nine-millimeter cartridges and a black belly-band holster.

"Kiona got me these?" Kiona hates guns and can't understand why we don't, especially us. I still remember her walking out in disgust when Lucas gave me the pocket-rocket, number 13 candles melting all over the cake.

"Don't say nothin'. She insisted on sending money to buy a present. Just thank her for the Amazon card."

I nod. "I'll say I spent it on creatine and protein powder." I still make her custom shakes. It's harder on a bus, but I've never stopped training.

We arrived at Zinnie's last night after spending a week in Little Rock with Darla and Peggy, my other two saviors. I met them at a campground in Louisiana three years ago. They've retired from RV life, even sold the cute pink trailer. Seems impossible it's been so long since Darla, a psychologist, worked to keep me from having to be recommitted to a mental hospital.

Lucas and I drove all the way from Wyoming to see them. He said it was just to visit but I knew he was lying. He thinks I'm losing it again and wanted Darla's professional opinion. I spilled everything to her, about all the bad stuff returning. The impulsive anger, seeing threats everywhere ... the nightmares. PTSD, Darla said, same as always.

The latest episode happened on our way here, at an RV park in Kansas. Someone pulled on the bus door in the middle of the night. I kicked it open, neck knife in hand. If Lucas hadn't held me back, a drunk guy who wandered home to the wrong bus might be dead.

Darla and I worked on *taking a break from anger* and reversing my *act first, think later* pattern. She was encouraging, gave me a pep-talk about *the bright side*, that at least I'm not dissociating

again, but when we hugged good-bye, her eyes said she was just as worried as Lucas.

"Turn around so I can try on the holster," I say.

I tighten it under my jeans and pull my shirts down. I always wear double shirts and long pants, even in summer.

"Alright, you can look. Not bad. Only a little bump."

"Be better if you wasn't so skinny."

I'm Mom's twin, including the same long straight body—except mine is solid muscle from three years of brutal training under Lucas and Kiona.

I pull out the Sig and aim it out the dark-tinted windows at a bald guy reading a book on a lawn chair at the next campsite. The tritium sights glow like cat eyes.

Lucas wags a finger. "Don't go taking that gun nowhere without my permission. It's illegal. Got to be twenty-one to get a carry permit."

"Just forge one for me."

"Pfft, you ain't passing for twenty-one. You just a kid."

"I am not," I protest like a whiny kid. "I passed for sixteen when I was twelve, and I'm already taller than most women. I can do the rest with makeup and attitude."

"We ain't ever gonna find out."

"Why not?"

"Cause I ain't doing it. You already grew up too fast. Time to be your own age."

"I'll never be my age again. You know that. You helped make me that way."

It comes out like an accusation, and for some reason I'm not understanding, I intend it to. Lucas did help make me this way—but only because I badgered him into it.

I was twelve when I persuaded him to teach me *self-defense*. He still insists on calling it that, doesn't like to admit he trained a killer. I was a highly motivated student. Even Kiona couldn't break me, and she tried. Whenever she brought me to my knees during a workout, dizzy and throwing up, I'd think about the

red-tailed hawk circling our front yard the day the two men came. *Predator, not prey. Never again.*

Lucas is rubbing his eyes with his fists. "Look, I didn't even wanna give you the damn gun. Way you been acting, might shoot me in one of your little fits."

"Well, I guess you'd better be nice to me then." I mean it as a joke, but his nostrils flare.

This is a big reason we came to see Darla: I've been acting like a total bitch lately, which is not me. Annoying, yes. Bitch, no.

"Gimme," he says, grabbing for the gun.

I pull it away. "No. You gave it to me."

Simmering, "I've been trying to be patient 'cause I know you're struggling, but you know patience ain't my strength. It's time for you to get it together and fly right."

"Fly right? Are you going to send me to my room?"

He locks his thick fingers together, possibly to resist strangling me, which I probably deserve. "I'm trying to help, Emily. That's all."

"Then quit trying to be my dad. We're just a bunch of forged documents. Nothing about us is real. You didn't even know it was my real birthday."

I push open the bus door and jump out, the stippled gun grip abrading my skin when I hit the concrete RV pad.

"Get back here," Lucas says.

I put my hands over my ears and start walking to the campground exit, trying not to fall over from the knife in my heart. Not my neck knife, which is tucked safely behind my bra. This is the stab that comes from knowing you're worthless, worse than worthless. *Horrible*, someone who hurts the person she loves most.

At the guard station I fake a smile and wave, tugging down my shirts.

Two miles to the nearest town. The road is empty, everyone chased inside by the heat.

* * *

I buy a bottle of Gatorade at a convenience store, dawdling inside to enjoy the chilled air before heading back into the steam bath. Walking always clears my head. I even had an epiphany on the way.

Maybe I've been treating Lucas bad because I'm afraid of losing him. It doesn't make sense, but in a weird way it does. Everyone else is gone. It's only a matter of time before I lose Lucas. That feeling is always there. So I push and push, expecting the point to come where he gets fed up and says, *That's it, you're out of here*, and I can think, *I knew it!*

I said nothing about us is real. A big fat lie, and a cruel one. *Love, loyalty, trust*. Nothing is more real about me and Lucas. I get a lump in my throat.

My regret is interrupted by the distinctive syncopated popping of a Harley Davidson. Dad had one. I helped him work on it every week.

Two Harleys roar up to the gas pumps. Both drivers are men, but there's a woman passenger on the back of one. She hardly fits because the driver is a tub, wearing an open vest with an ink-stained belly hanging out. Front and center is a tattoo of a revolver-shaped American flag. The other guy has the cadaverous face of someone who's lived a hard life. A fringe of black hair hangs below a red bandanna wrapped tightly around his head.

I avoid direct eye contact. I've learned a lot about men since the day everything ended. One day I was innocent, the good daughter of a good family in rural Georgia. The next day I wasn't.

The men lean the bikes on the side stands—the big guy's is made in the shape of a serpent—and start filling the tanks. The woman stands off by herself next to the pumps. She's thin, almost malnourished, dressed in torn blue jeans and a sleeveless top, arms and neck badly sunburned. A pile of bleached blonde

hair falls out when she removes her helmet, the only one of them with the good sense to wear one.

Gas nozzle rattling around in his tank, the tatt-man turns to her. "Get me the tire gauge." An order, not a request.

"Um, where is it?" she says.

"Where do you think it is? In the saddle-bag, dumbass."

She unbuckles a black bag and rummages through it. "I don't see it."

"Jesus Christ. Can't you do anything? It's on the other side."

My dad didn't have a lot in common with Lucas Jackson, but one thing they both taught me is that any man who abuses a woman deserves a good beating.

I add the biker to my *deserves-to-die* list. It's long, already has like a hundred people on it. I learned the code from Lucas. Zen-like in its simplicity, a person either deserves to die or doesn't. The surprising part is how easy it is to tell the difference. That doesn't mean I go around killing everyone. I just like to keep notes.

He's still berating her when the gasoline overflows all over his glossy airbrushed tank, a skull with flames coming out the back. I barely stifle my laugh.

"Fuck!" he says. The woman shrinks. "Now look what you did. Grab some paper towels and clean this tank—and hurry. I'll find the damn tire gauge myself."

I wish Lucas were here ... to put a piece of tape over my mouth. I know I should keep it shut, but of course I can't.

"It wasn't her fault," I say.

Both men wheel at the same time. Tatt-man takes a step toward me. "What did you say?"

"You heard me. You blamed her, but you're the dumbass who overfilled the tank."

Face blotching with rage, hands tightening into fists.

"Ooh, big tough man. What now? Are you going to beat up a teenage girl? Impressive."

He looks *very* tempted, but do-rag man quickly sidles up and

grabs his arm, saying, "What's your problem, Goldilocks? Ain't no one ever teach you to be polite?"

I almost laugh. I spent my entire life being polite. *Goldilocks*. Growing my hair back was probably was a mistake. *That blonde hair shines like a fuckin' beacon*, Lucas complained the day I met him. I cut it short and dyed it black, but let it grow out again, worried I was losing Emily Calby completely.

"Why don't you ask your rude friend that question?"

The tatt-man is barely under control, breathing heavily between clenched teeth. *Think, then act*. Darla was right. Need to let these things go.

I toss the Gatorade bottle in a recycling bin, wave good-bye and circle around them. I make it three steps before a hand lands on my shoulder, causing all the triggers to fire at once.

I turn and deliver a short quick punch to the throat. Dad always said go for the balls, but Lucas taught me that crushing a man's trachea is more reliable. Tatt-man drops to his knees clutching his neck. The American flag on his stomach flutters as he sucks for air, sputtering curse words and staring at me in disbelief.

Element of surprise. That was the foundation of my entire training. *Bein' young and a girl, you gonna have the element of surprise every time unless you fuck up. If Lucas walks up to a man, that man's gonna be grabbin' for a bazooka, but no one's gonna expect you to fight*.

I lift my knee to sweep it into his head before he can react. Kiona trained me to box with fists, but Lucas prefers knees and elbows. Standing on one leg like the Karate Kid, I hear Darla's scolding: *Take a break from anger*.

I replant my foot and step back, holding my palms up as a peace offering, but do-rag makes the same stupid miscalculation and lurches toward me. I pull my birthday present from the holster and aim it at his pockmarked, wide-eyed face. He stops and raises his hands like he's being robbed as I instantly regret my latest huge blunder.

It's not that the gun is unloaded. I wasn't planning to shoot him. *Fear is a powerful weapon. Stronger than bullets. Can get people to do anything if they afraid enough—and they a lot more afraid before they dead, than after.* Another of my first lessons.

The problem is I'm standing in a public place in broad daylight threatening to shoot a man with an illegal handgun. To my right, the woman is tending to tatt-man, trying to, but he pushes her away. I re-holster the gun and backpedal. When it's clear they're not coming after me, I turn and run like fire down the road that brought me here.

Halfway back to the campground, cresting an asphalt hill with an incline that seemed a mile long, a wave of dizziness hits me. Could be the heat, but I think it's more than that. In Nevada, Kiona made me train in the desert. I veer off the road, under the shade of a row of mossy trees, and slow my pace.

A little girl with pigtails is playing in her front yard. She smiles with missing front teeth and points a plastic assault rifle at me. I give her a thumbs-up.

My skull is burning ... it's my hair, stretched tight around my finger. I unwind it and shake the loose pale strands onto the ground. Not a good sign. My *trichotillomania*—obsessive hair-pulling—has been under control.

I messed up so frigging bad and the worst part is I *knew* it the whole time, with every word, every action. I told Darla the night we left Little Rock that sometimes I feel like a runaway train steaming down a dark tunnel that never ends.

"Sometimes you have to hit bottom before you can look up and see sky," she said.

I hit it. I risked everything, even Lucas. *Of course* it's time for me to get it together and fly right. When I get home, he's getting the biggest hug and apology in the world.

A mockingbird whistles excitedly in the trees. I look up. Patches of blue play hide and seek in the branches. *I can see sky, Darla.*

I lower my head. *Thank you, Lord, for giving me this chance to save me from myself before it was too late.*

I say *Amen* as a police car revs over the hill, blue lights flashing.

2

STAY OR RUN? It's a question I face more often than the average teen. The cops could be rushing to an accident scene but I can't take a chance.

I dash through a yard and hop the back fence, only to see more bursts of blue light reflecting off the houses from the next street over. I stop to consider my limited options and decide on old reliable: *fake it*. I climb back over the fence and stash the gun and neck knife in a garbage can.

The police car is parked on the side of the road. The officers are already out, a tall male driver and a short woman passenger with dark curls flaring from under her cap. They both have their guns drawn. I run to them waving my arms.

"*Omigod*, I'm so glad you're here!"

The woman says something into a microphone clipped to her shirt. The man is yelling at me.

"On the ground! Face down, arms and legs apart. Now!"

I could probably get a patent on manufactured looks of bewildered innocence. "Huh? What are you talking about?"

"You heard him. On the ground. Now." The woman.

I kneel and start crying. For the longest time I couldn't cry even when I desperately needed to. Now I just let one of the images of that day slip from the black boxes in my brain. There's Becky's stuffed dog, Pooky, on fire in our backyard, plastic eyes melting onto the grass.

"I don't understand. I thought you were here to help me. I just got attacked by two men at a gas station."

The woman holsters her gun and motions for the man to lower his. I sniffle as she helps me to my feet. Another cop car pulls up, maybe the one from the other street. Two more men get out.

"Settle down," the woman says more gently. I see her nametag. Russo. "I want to hear your story, but I need to search you first."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously. We had a report of a girl who looks like you threatening someone with a gun. Arms up."

The man-cop pulls handcuffs from his belt when I hesitate.

"Okay, fine," I say.

She pats me down. "No gun," she reports. "Empty your pockets."

"Is this legal? Don't I have rights?"

"Empty your pockets or I'll do it for you." All I have is my fake driver's license and a few dollars. I stormed out of the bus so fast I didn't even grab my phone.

"Alice Black," she reads off the license, checking my face against the picture. "Fresno, California. You're a long way from home, Alice. What are you doing out here?"

"Just, you know, passing through." I can't lead them back to Lucas. He's got weed, illegal guns and a busload of document-forging equipment.

"In the middle of the Ozarks? On foot?"

"I had a car, but my boyfriend took it. We got in a fight and he drove off and left me. He'll probably come back. He's done it before."

"Sounds like you need a new boyfriend. What happened at the gas station?"

"I was standing out front minding my own business when two men on motorcycles pulled up and started saying nasty things to me. Then one of them grabbed me. They're the ones you should be looking for."

"We will." She opens her phone and starts typing. "Give me a description."

I hesitate. I might be able to justify the punch as self-defense,

but not pulling out a gun and definitely not having one. Accurate descriptions would just lead to eyewitnesses.

"I was so scared, the whole thing is kind of a blur." Qualifying everything with *I'm not completely sure*, I spin vague details, keeping an eye on the three man-cops clustered together talking.

"Why did you run when you saw us?"

They break huddle and spread out into the yard. "Um, I wasn't running from you." On-demand blushing. "I drank a whole quart of Gatorade at the gas station and had to pee super-bad. Couldn't hold it."

"What about the gun? They say you pulled a gun."

"A gun? Me?" I laugh. "I've never even seen a real gun." Something's not computing. "Who is *they*? I thought you said you hadn't found the bikers."

"The store clerks. They saw everything and called it in. They said it's all on security video."

While I grasp for a response to that, her partner moots the point, strutting from the backyard holding up the holster and neck knife like trophies.

Russo nods. "You wanted rights? Congratulations. You got 'em, kid. You're under arrest." She pulls a card from her shirt pocket. "*You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you . . .*"

I never should have opened my mouth. Lucas told me that a dozen times.

They roll my fingertips on a scanner, cuff my hands and lower me into the backseat, Russo apologizing for the handcuffs. Department policy, she says. Probably a mom.

Russo and the man-cop talk back and forth in low voices. His name is Bates. His overpowering cologne smells like licorice. He guns the motor and we squeal back onto the road. Russo is talking into her radio, requesting someone go interview the gas station clerks and put out a BOLO for the bikers. It's a comment on my life that I know what a BOLO is. *Be On the Lookout*.

We're coming up to Zinnie's. If I hadn't self-destructed, Lucas and I would be outside getting ready to fire up the grill for dinner. He's going to be worried sick when I don't come back. My heart hurts as I watch the campground disappear behind us. I paw at my eyes, handcuffs clinking.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Police station," Russo says.

My mind races to reprogram my story as the car whooshes up and around the winding mountain roads like we're on a rollercoaster. Russo is typing on a tablet.

The driver's license should stand up. Lucas only uses real driver's licenses to make fake ones. There really is a sixteen-year-old girl named Alice Black in Fresno, California.

Sell it. You're *Alice Black*. The gun belonged to my boyfriend. Plausible. Lucas said lots of gang members get their girlfriends to carry their guns because they're convicted felons and felon-in-possession is a five-year gun crime. The video will show the belly-hanger grabbing my shoulder from behind. I've talked my way out of worse. *Buck up.*

Russo interrupts my self-therapy session by suddenly jerking her head around and saying, "No way. Cannot be."

Gawking, holding up her tablet, eyes flitting back and forth between me and the screen.

I force a smile, cuffed hands folded on my lap.

"What's wrong?" Bates says.

"You remember that home invasion case in Georgia a few years ago?" she says.

And I know I'm dead.

"Which one?"

"The *Calby Murders*. Two men killed the family and blew up the house. One girl escaped."

"How could I forget? It was in the news for months. Everyone thought the girl burned up in the fire, but the forensics showed no trace. I wonder whatever happened to her."

"She's sitting in the backseat."

He cranes his neck. "You are kidding me."

"I'm not. The fingerprints came up a match. And that's not all. Hold onto the steering wheel because you're not going to believe this one. There's an outstanding arrest warrant for her in another state."

"Arrest warrant? I thought she was the victim. For what?"

"Murder."

3

“HEY-UH, JULIO,” I say.

Officer Russo is standing a few feet away, leaned against the pea-green wall, picking at her red nail polish and pretending not to listen.

When we got to the station she said juveniles have a right to call their parents, but must have remembered Emily Calby’s story because she looked embarrassed and said I could call anyone I want. I said I needed to talk to my boyfriend. She frowned, but let me. I called Lucas on his burner. He makes me memorize the number each time he gets a new one.

“Julio? What the fuck? You still playin’ games? Where you been, Em—”

“That’s right. It’s me. *Alice*. Your abandoned girlfriend. Bet you didn’t expect to be hearing from me so soon.” I smile at Russo as Lucas rants about whether I’ve lost my mind.

I turn my back to her and whisper. “Don’t say anything. I’m in a jail standing next to a sign that says *All Calls May Be Monitored and Recorded*.”

A groan. “Go on,” he says in a voice so heavy it could sink a ship.

“I’m in a lot of trouble. I don’t understand it all, but wanted you to know I’m alive and okay. Don’t try to come visit me. It’s too dangerous. There’s nothing you can do right now.”

A murder warrant from another state can mean only one thing. Either the FBI or the Florida state police found evidence

linking me to the deaths of tall man and stocky man, my family's killers, in Pensacola. Some of them always suspected I was involved. That means Lucas could be in trouble too. He left a pint of blood behind at the scene.

"You should ditch this burner after we hang up. They might be tracking my calls. They figured out ... um"—I don't know how to explain it in code—"that my name hasn't always been Alice. We'll figure out a way to hook up later."

Lucas curses while Russo points at the clock.

"I have to go. I'm sorry for saying that stupid stuff ... and for ruining everything. I love you."

* * *

Russo put me in a small, locked room. I know because I tried the door, ignoring the video cameras mounted in the corners.

I pace in circles around a metal table bolted to the floor before taking a seat in a white plastic bucket chair, the kind you buy at Walmart in the garden department. My only company is a moth battering itself silly inside one of the light fixtures. I stand on the table and set it free.

Russo finally returns. Tagging behind her is a trim, balding man in a blue suit carrying a yellow pad. He introduces himself as a detective and starts reading me my rights. I cut him off.

"I know my rights. I don't want to talk."

"Do I understand you to say you are invoking your right to remain silent?"

"Was I unclear? I can rephrase it if you need help. I invoke my right to remain noiseless, soundless, wordless, mute *and* silent. Don't try to play me. Go bully someone your own age."

Russo scowls.

The detective snatches up his pad, gives Russo a pissed-off look and walks out. She wastes no time getting in my face.

"Let me explain a few things, *Alice*, and since you've invoked your right to remain silent, I don't want to hear even one peep out of you. Not one peep. Understand?"

Her olive skin and dark hair and eyes, even her hectoring tone, remind me of Mrs. Bianchi, from sixth-grade, back in Georgia.

"First, you're going to be spending the night in a holding cell. In the morning you'll see a judge for your first detention hearing."

"The whole night? Seriously? Can't I get out on bail or something?"

She raises a finger to her lips. "Remember? No peeps? I can rephrase it for you if you need help. There is no bail for juveniles and the judge only holds detention hearings in the morning. This isn't a game. What's wrong with you?"

I almost answer honestly. *I don't know.*

"Your charges are serious. Felony assault and illegal gun possession. For some crazy reason, judges are not fond of kids carrying around guns and threatening to shoot people. Go figure. Then of course we have the icing on the cake, a murder warrant from another state."

Doors bang outside, a man yelling, "But I already tol' ya. I ain't drunk. It's just my medication."

"Sweetheart, I'll be honest. I'm guessing you're going to be spending a lot of nights in custody. Not here. Tomorrow you'll be taken to a juvenile detention center. If an extradition order comes through on your outstanding warrant, then ..." She doesn't finish.

"Then what?"

"I'll let the judge explain it tomorrow. In the meantime, here's some advice. I have a daughter about your age. I'd give her the same advice."

I knew she was a mom.

"You're going to be interacting with a lot of people in the criminal justice system. They can help or hurt you. Guards, cops, judges, other prisoners. Some of them are dangerous."

I'm not sure if she means prisoners or the whole lot.

"How you get treated is going to depend on how you act.

Keep insulting people and your life is going to be much harder. You have to go along to get along.”

Ironically, that’s how I survived my entire time on the run way back when, forcing myself to stay courteous always. All *Yes, ma’ams* and *No, sirs*, even to people who didn’t deserve it.

After the lecture, she took me to get *processed*: booked, searched and issued a men’s size sky-blue uniform and a small bag of hygiene stuff.

They entered me in the system as Alice Black. Maybe they haven’t confirmed I’m Emily Calby yet, but it won’t take long. Fingerprints don’t lie. That’s how the FBI found tall man, aka *Ronnie*, from his fingerprints on the gas can they used to burn down our house.

The FBI took my fingerprints and DNA the day they snatched me from the Mexican restaurant in Atlanta and put me in the hospital. Said they needed to verify my identity, didn’t bother to mention my data would stay in the system for three years and get sent to Arkansas.

I spend the night in a closet-size cell on a thin mattress pad that smells of urine. The minutes and hours tick by like a slow water drip in the basement. The more I want to fall asleep and make everything disappear, the more I can’t. Too many thoughts swirling in my tornado brain. I latch onto one and try to focus. *How do I fix this?*

... No clue. Even if I could talk my way around the gun charge, the murder warrant is, what did Russo call it, the *icing on the cake*? More like the world collapsing on my head.

I know what *extradite* means. They can send me to Florida to stand trial. It scares me, but also pisses me off. The whole time they interrogated me about tall man and stocky man, I only had one thought: *Why the eff do you care?* How can it *not* be okay to kill people who slaughter innocent mothers and daughters?

It never made sense to me. Never will.

4

THE COURTROOM is a large windowless rectangle with off-white walls, path-worn industrial carpet and an oppressively low ceiling, nothing like in the movies. Florescent bulbs cast mood lighting appropriate for the occasion: gray dimness.

The judge is a black man in a black robe with white hair and horn-rimmed glasses, sitting behind a huge desk-thingy on a raised platform. Set up that way on purpose, I'm sure, so they can look down at you, make you feel small.

I'm standing in front of it, wrists and ankles shackled to a chain around my waist. I jangle every time I move. Russo's here, in uniform, along with a handful of people in business clothes and a cop guarding the door.

"Good morning," the judge says in a friendly voice that surprises me. "I'm Judge Reed. And you're Ms. ..."

"Black. Alice Black."

"I see," he says. I can't tell if he already knows I'm Emily Calby.

"Wait, I retract that," I say. "I mean, if it's okay with you." Tossing and turning all night on the pee-stained mattress made Russo's words sink in. *Go along to get along*. They control me. *BE NICE*.

"You retract your name?"

"Yes sir, I mean, your, um, lordship."

A laugh from behind me. It's a guy with round wire glasses, long hair and a scruffy beard, wearing a brown suit that's at

least a size too big. He's sitting alone at a large rectangular table, strips of plastic wood laminate peeling from the edges.

"The appropriate term is *Your Honor*, but you can just call me Judge."

"Thank you, Judge!" Effervescence was key to my survival when I was on the run. Works on almost everyone. Men and women.

"Why do you want to retract your name?"

"On the ground it might incriminate me."

He nods like it's actually not a stupid point, which means he must know I'm Emily Calby. "Okay. What should I call you? How about *Defendant*? Will that work?"

"Sure, and thanks for asking!" Don't overdo it.

"This gentleman is an attorney for the county," he says, motioning to a cherub-faced guy with curly brown hair who looks like he could still be in high school.

"Please read the petition," the judge says.

Baby-lawyer reads a document outlining the charges: aggravated assault, minor in possession of a firearm, and an extra felony tacked on because of the obliterated serial number on the gun. But good news! Carrying a concealed knife apparently isn't a crime in Arkansas.

"Do you admit or deny these charges?" the judge says.

"I plead not guilty."

"We don't use that term in juvenile proceedings, but I'll put you down for a *deny*. How about that?"

I nod.

He shifts uncomfortably. "I understand your parents are not here today."

"Correct."

"Is there any way we can contact them?"

"No way I know of, Judge."

"Do you have another legal guardian?"

I have an illegal guardian. "No, sir."

"I take it you do not have an attorney."

I shake my head.

"Do you have any financial resources?"

"I had a few dollars when they arrested me, but they took it."

"Very well. I hereby appoint the public defender, Andy Ball, to serve as your counsel." He points to the guy with the long hair and scruffy beard, who looks half-asleep, tie tilted sideways, brown shoes scuffed to a light tan.

"Him?" What kind of lawyer is named *Andy*?

"Mr. Ball is an experienced public defender."

He directs me to go sit with him and calls Russo up to explain what happened. Every word makes me sound guilty as sin. I nudge my lawyer but he doesn't move.

When she finishes, the judge doesn't hesitate before declaring there is probable cause to believe I've committed serious crimes and am a threat to public safety. He orders me transferred to a juvenile center for detention pending further proceedings.

Andy the Lawyer yawns.

The judge cleans his glasses with his robe and scans the courtroom. "I don't need to remind everyone that juvenile proceedings are confidential, but I'm doing it anyway. This is an especially sensitive case."

I can think of only one reason it would be especially sensitive. He definitely knows it's me.

"If one word of these proceedings leaves this courtroom, I will hold whoever is responsible in contempt."

He excuses everyone except me and the two lawyers, asking us to *approach the bench*, the big wood desk. We do, with me sandwiched between them.

"We have one more matter to address, which is the unusual circumstance that based on a fingerprint match, there appears to be an outstanding arrest warrant for the defendant from another state. Gentlemen, I assume you are both aware of the situation?"

"Yes, Your Honor," the county attorney says.

"No clue, Judge," says Andy the Lawyer.

Of course not.

"The fingerprints match the prints for a girl named Emily Calby. Does the name ring a bell, Mr. Ball?"

Andy shrugs.

"She was, or is ... a ..." He gives me a pained look and stops, like he can't spit it out.

"She was a twelve-year-old girl from Dilfer County, Georgia," I say. "One day two psychopaths came to her house and raped and killed her mother and sister. Emily, the oldest child, ran—"

"That's enough," the judge says, holding up a hand. "You were right before to not want to incriminate yourself. There's still no verification that you are ... aren't Alice Black."

"Oh, I wasn't saying that was about me, Judge. I just remember reading about it and wanted to help out my lawyer," barely managing to hold back *who apparently hasn't seen the news in three years*.

"In any event," the judge continues. "If and when your identity is confirmed, it will be up to the State of Louisiana to decide whether to pursue your extradition."

I nod along until ... hold on. "State of Louisiana? You mean Florida."

"Excuse me?" he says.

"You said Louisiana, but you meant Florida, right?"

"What are you talking about? This warrant comes from Louisiana."

"Are you absolutely sure?"

He pulls a document close, looking over his glasses. "Yes. It says right here, *State of Louisiana, Saint Landry Parish*."

Saint Landry. I can see the green sign at the interstate exit. *Homemade apple pie to die for. ... Is this where the restaurant is? ... We're almost there.*

It's not about tall man and stocky man.

The judge reads my confusion. "I have limited information, but the charge apparently involves a deceased by the name of ..."

Scott Brooker.

"Scott Brooker," he says.

He continues, but I'm not listening, lost in clouded memories. Taylor Swift singing on the CD player, Brooker talking about his daughter and boring job selling business software, then taking us off the interstate, out to the bayou, to the middle of nowhere.

When I snap out of the fog, the judge is ordering my records sealed.

"The defendant will retain the identity of Alice Black until such time as I order otherwise."

Court adjourns and my lawyer takes me to a small adjoining room. A guard stands outside. I suppress my instinct to light into him.

"Um, Mr. Ball—"

"You can call me Andy."

"Yes, well, *Andy*, I was just wondering why you ..." *Didn't eff-ing do something.*

He cuts me off and explains almost serenely: Juvenile court is a lot less formal than regular court. Pray I don't get transferred to adult court in Louisiana. It was obvious Russo was telling the truth. Asking questions would have just pissed off the judge. I had no chance in a million years of getting released, especially with no legal guardian to take custody of me. Add in the fact that I'm a proven flight risk, having gone missing for three years.

It makes too much sense to argue with. "So what do I do now?"

Like he rehearsed it with Russo, "Try to get along with people. That's the best way to help yourself while things get sorted out."

"I'm sorry I reacted that way when the judge made you my lawyer. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. You're probably, I mean I'm *sure* you're a good lawyer."

"Apology accepted."

"Tell me about extradition. I want to fight it."

"You haven't got a prayer."