

Emily Calby Book 1

THE
HIDING
GIRL

DORIAN BOX



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*To the people in our lives who make us feel like
Emily, a scared child who will survive.*

Who in the world am I? Ah, that's the great puzzle.
—Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

Before

TWO MEN. I noticed them when I was unloading groceries from the F-150, handing the heavy bags to my little sister and daydreaming about the end of the sixth grade. They got out of a blue pickup truck with a crooked camper-top, parked down the road in front of nothing. Dilfer County is Georgia farm country. The next house is a half-mile away.

They walked to the back of the truck and I went back to daydreaming. Only two weeks until summer softball camp, my first year in fastpitch.

“These are too heavy,” Becky whined.

“It’s good for you,” I said, distracted. The two men were coming our way.

The driver was short and stocky, in a muscley way, with black hair and black clothes over pale skin. The passenger was a string bean with curly brown hair, wearing shorts and a t-shirt. He was carrying things, an orange sack and something with a handle.

They reached the long driveway just as a red-tailed hawk swooped low in the space between us, scanning for prey. I swore it looked right at me.

Mom came out of the house. I pointed. “Mom, look. Who are those two men?”

“I have no idea, Emily. Becky can’t carry those big bags. Give her the light ones.”

“They’re on our property,” I said.

“Yes, I can see.”

“They’re trespassing.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about. Maybe they’re lost. Come on, girls, get to work.”

Becky crept up beside me. Eyes wide, “Who are they?”

“They’re no one,” Mom said. “Emily, stop worrying your sister. You don’t have to be suspicious of everyone.”

I do. *Take care of your mom and Becky.*

The stocky man grinned and waved.

“Emily, get those bags inside before everything melts,” Mom said.

“But Mom—”

“No buts. Now.”

I climbed the steps to the kitchen deck and held the screen door for Becky. The men stopped ten feet from Mom.

“Can I help you?” she said.

“Sorry to disturb you, ma’am,” the stocky one said. “We ran out of gas and was wondering if you might be able to spare some.”

She smiled an apology. “We don’t have any gas. Someone else cuts our lawn.”

“Actually, we were hoping you might let us siphon a little from your truck. Those F-150s hold a lot. Just need enough to fill this one-gallon can.”

The tall man held up the can, a dented, rusty-red rectangle with yellow letters slashing down the front. *GASOLINE*. “Juss dis,” he said in a strange accent, eyes twitching between me and Mom. He had tattoos, one on his arm looked like a zombie, and sores on his face.

Mom hesitated. “Well, I don’t know. Are you men from around here?”

I let the screen door slam and stepped out on the deck, Becky attached to my hip.

“Why didn’t you get gas at the Exxon station at the bottom of the hill?” I said. “You had to pass it to get here.”

The stocky man chuckled. “That is a very observant girl

you've got there, ma'am. She is to be commended. Young lady, you are the spittin' image of your mother with that blonde hair of yours. Anybody ever tell you that?"

Only everyone. Mom smiled at me. I rolled my eyes. *Answer the question.*

"The fact of the matter is our gas gauge broke and we haven't had the financial resources to get it fixed."

He turned back to Mom. "We're from Kentucky. We do construction. All the work dried up back home when they closed the coal mine. Got jobs lined up in Florida, nice big condo project."

"This road goes east. Florida is that way," I said, pointing.

He cracked his neck. "Well, now, we're from out of town and don't know our way around these parts."

"Where in Florida are you going?"

He smirked at the tall man. "Inquisitive girl, yessiree."

"Emily, don't be rude," Mom said.

"Tampa area," he said, glancing back at the truck. "Assuming we make it that far."

"Mom," I said. "Me and Becky need your help putting away the groceries."

"Becky and I," she said. "Just a minute."

"But we need it now."

"In a minute."

The stocky man wiped sweat from his forehead. "Ma'am, we are proud men and I am embarrassed to tell you we are on hard times. If you could see fit to let us have a little gas, God bless you, and if you can't, bless you just the same. I'm sure we'll find another way."

Biting my lip, I watched Mom's mushy heart give in. Jesus Mary, she even apologized.

"I'm sorry. Of course. Take as much as you need."

I knew it was a mistake, but couldn't say exactly why. More than the stocky man's black clothes, which made his pale skin seem to glow in the sun, more than the tall man's zombie tattoo. Something out of place.

“You need a hose to siphon gas,” I said. Dad taught me how. Called it *a useful thing to know*.

The tall man pulled a piece of green garden hose from the orange bag and held it up. “Nots da first time she run out.”

The stocky man gave a little bow. “Thank you, ma’am. May the good Lord reward you and your beautiful family for your kindness. Please thank your husband for us as well.”

The remark jolted me. Mom too, a slight jerk of a head as the hawk circled above.

The man saw it. “Didn’t mean nothing personal. Just figured it was your husband’s truck because you don’t see many ladies driving F-150s.”

“Alright, then,” Mom said. “Get your gas and good luck to both of you.”

As she turned to climb the steps, the tall one’s mouth curled up. He laughed about something before the stocky man poked him in the ribs with a pasty arm.

His skin. He said they did construction. He should be baked brown, like everyone who works outside, like Dad. He had three skin cancers cut out before the accident made it all pointless.

Mom reached the deck, blocking the view. I backed up to let her in, stepping on Becky’s toe. She cried *Owee* and hopped around the kitchen on one foot.

“Those poor men,” Mom said as she crossed the threshold. “Becky, what’s wrong with you?” She closed the door, but didn’t lock it.

“*Mo-om,*” I said. “Who works outside and has skin like a vampire? Or carries around a hose to siphon gas?” I moved to the door, but it was too late. The knob was already turning.

1

I LOOK UP from the sketchpad and stare out the window, cows in green fields zipping past like a slideshow filmed with a shaky camera. There *blink* gone. There *blink* gone. Like me. Sometimes I feel I'm not here at all, like I am no one.

I pass time drawing and twisting my hair, waiting for the next stop, the next obstacle, trying to plan for all of them.

Bone-tired. The sky was still dark when I left Chicago. The train's soothing *clickety-clack, clickety-clack* has me nodding off. I chase it away.

"Natalie, are you sure your parents will be waiting for you in Memphis?" says the gray-haired woman sitting next to me. Her name is Mrs. Draper. She's wearing a sky-blue dress and pearl necklace.

Natalie is my name today. Memphis is today's destination.

"Yes, ma'am," I say. "And I can't wait to see them!"

Artificial sparkle. It works on almost everyone. The entire world apparently loves *effervescence*. *Vivacity*, *enthusiasm*, *a merry state*. To get my allowance, Mom, a middle-school teacher, made me look up five words every week and use them in sentences.

"And thank you again for letting me travel with you. My parents will be grateful too. We didn't know about the age limit for unaccompanied minors."

Lies. I know every regulation for unaccompanied minors doing anything, including all forms of transportation. I never used

to lie, not about big things. I told my best friend Meggie Tribet I liked her puke-yellow sundress, stuff like that. Now? I only tell the truth when it suits my needs, almost never.

I spend a lot of time outside train and bus stations, avoiding surveillance cameras while checking out passengers. I always pick a woman traveling alone, someone who looks like a mom or grandmother. When they hesitate I pretend to call my parents on my burner phone, but just as I'm about to hand it over, the call gets disconnected. "Not again," I say. "We live out in the country. No cellphone towers."

It doesn't always work. That I've been able to stay on the run for a month is almost a miracle.

Memphis is the first place I'm going to for a reason. At an internet café in Chicago, I got a lead to a place selling fake driver's licenses. A clerk helped me access the dark web on a computer with Tor. He got me to a search directory and the rest was easy. I'm good with computers and figuring stuff out. Got it from my dad. We were always building and fixing things.

At least a hundred websites advertised fake documents. Some were scams and most were in other countries. Then I came to *Best Fakes, USA*. It said *Serving Veterans* next to a fluttering American flag. I sent a message saying I'm a disabled veteran who the government won't give a driver's license to because my eye got shot out in Iraq. They sent me the price, seven hundred dollars in cryptocurrency.

Seven hundred. I agonized about it for two days. Almost a quarter of what's left. Grabbing Dad's hidden cigar box with the five thousand dollars from the garage was the only smart thing I did that day.

This is for an emergency, Emily, only to be used if the shit hits the fan. If I'm not here, we both know you're the only one strong enough to keep this boat afloat. I'm depending on you.

He made me swear to never tell anyone about the money, not even Mom. I took it and ran.

I finally wrote back and agreed to the seven hundred, but said

I can only do cash and in person. After a few more messages, they sent a Memphis address and code to use when I arrive.

Last night, in a clump of trees at a Chicago park, I counted the money, then took out seven hundred. It felt like cutting off an arm. I won't last long when the money runs out, but need the license. Using a fake ID will be dangerous, but not more dangerous than what I do now, and a lot easier. It's hard work convincing an adult stranger to vouch for a young girl traveling alone.

Mrs. Draper is asking about my trip to Chicago. I explain I went there to help my aunt take care of my new baby niece. She asks if I enjoyed it and I say everything except changing her diapers.

She laughs. "Aren't you the nice young lady, helping your aunt like that? What about school?"

They always ask the same questions. "It's already out for summer."

"Do you have brothers and sisters?"

An image of Becky's terrified face breaks loose from one of the black boxes stacked in my dark warehouse of a brain, ricocheting like an out-of-control rocket, leaving dents in the raw walls.

"No, ma'am. I'm an only child." I pull my hoodie around me. I wear it always, with my long pants and double tees, even in the dead of summer.

"Natalie, you're trembling. Are you okay?"

"Just a little cold in here."

Becky's face. So real, like she was suddenly here ... or I was there, like everything was happening all over. But what?

I know the results, from the internet, but the memories are locked away somewhere in the black boxes. *Put your worries in a box.* One of Mom's favorite happy sayings. Maybe that's where it came from. I remember that morning, Mom taking me and Becky to the drugstore soda fountain for milkshakes before we went grocery shopping. The next thing I knew I was sitting on a bus, all alone.

I lean against Mrs. Draper. “Thanks again for being so nice.” Sometimes I act touchy with the women strangers. It wards off attention by making people think we’re related, but it’s also my only human contact that’s not one-hundred percent fake. Only ninety.

She puts her arm around me. “You’re quite welcome, dear.”

I catch myself snuggling and pull away, grabbing my backpack from under the seat. I angle it to the window and unzip it. Everything in it except the cigar box is stolen.

At night I prowls for unlocked cars. That’s how I got my stun gun, folding knife with the saw-toothed blade, sunglasses, makeup, Chicago Cubs baseball cap, a Stephen King book and the backpack. Three backpacks actually. The one I kept is olive green. Before the day everything ended, I never stole anything in my life.

I pull out a deck of cards, swiped from the front seat of a convertible. “Mrs. Draper, would you like to play cards?”

“That’s a fine idea,” she says. “These train rides seem to take forever, don’t they?”

I nod wearily.

“What game?”

“Poker?”

“The only poker game I know is twenty-one,” she says. “Do you know that one?”

“Um-hm.” I know every poker game. Dad taught me. We used to play for fake money.

I see her looking at my wrists as I shuffle the cards. The marks are faded, but still visible. I shake my bead bracelets to cover them.

She’s sniffing again, no doubt because I stink like a dog. Once a week I buy a set of clothes at a thrift store and throw the old ones away, except for the athletic shoes I ran away in and my hoodie, which I wash in bathroom sinks. I smother myself in deodorant, but it can only do so much. It’s time for a new set.

My stomach gurgles as we play. The last food I ate was a bag

of cheese puffs at the Chicago train station. Mrs. Draper must hear it because she puts down her cards and says, "I'm famished. How about you? Would you like to go to the dining car with me?"

I say yes and hoist my bulky backpack.

"That looks awfully heavy. I'm sure it would be safe here. This meal is my treat."

"I like to keep it with me," I say.

I order a cheeseburger and fries. I'm gnawing on the burger like an animal when Mrs. Draper leans across the table and whispers, "Natalie, I don't know if you're aware of this, but they have public showers on this train."

I get the hint, but there's no way I'm being separated from my backpack or taking my clothes off on a train.

"That's good to know!"

Back at the seats, I try to nap. I hardly slept last night knowing I had to get from the park to the train station before dawn. I wrap my arms around the backpack, curl up and pray. *Please don't let me dream.*

* * *

It's late afternoon when the train chugs into the Memphis station. Aluminum parentheses on poles provide shade for happy people waving at their loved ones. I hate pulling into train stations.

I couldn't sleep, couldn't escape the picture of Becky's face. Why Becky? She was still learning to add and subtract. She hadn't even lost all her baby teeth. *I don't understand, God.*

"Do you see your parents?" Mrs. Draper says.

"Um, hold on a sec, my phone is vibrating."

I pull out the burner. "Hi Mom! Mm-hm, just pulling into the station. ... Oh no, I told him that truck needed work. Sure, no problem. Can't wait to see you either." I disconnect the fake call.

“That was my mom. They couldn’t get to the train station because my dad’s truck broke down. I’m going to take a cab.”

“Nonsense. My husband is picking me up and we’ll be happy to give you a ride home.”

“That is so nice, but I live really far away.”

“End of discussion. It is my responsibility to get you home safely. I won’t let you out of my sight until I meet your parents.”

This hasn’t happened before. “Well, that won’t be possible,” I say.

I know from her pursed lips she’s about to ask the question she’s been wanting to ask the entire trip. “Are you in some kind of trouble, Natalie?”

How many kinds are there? “No, I’m not in trouble ... but my family is. My dad had a stroke. He’s paralyzed. That’s the real reason I’m coming home today.”

Lately I’ve been getting confused about what’s real and for a microsecond wonder whether I may really have a sick dad.

“I was always planning to take a cab. I’m sorry I lied. I didn’t think you’d help me if you knew my parents wouldn’t be here. Dad’s practically in a coma and my poor mom’s a basket case. She won’t want to meet anyone. Nothing personal.”

“But the phone call, about the truck breaking down.”

“Oh, that?” I hunch my shoulders with my sorriest smile.

“Natalie—”

“I take cabs all the time.” That’s true, unfortunately. They’re my only option with a dumb phone and no credit card. “It’s no big deal. Really.”

“Do you have money for a cab? You said it’s far away.”

I tap my backpack. “Sure do. Know the exact fare. Forty-two dollars, including tip.”

Just in time, the whistle blows and the train screeches to a halt. Mrs. Draper reaches into her purse, slipping me cash as she clasps my hand. Not long ago I would have felt bad taking it.

“This is for your taxi. I’ve enjoyed our trip together.”

All sunshiny, “Me too, so much!”

“Natalie, I’ll pray for your father tonight, but also for you. I want you to know that if you need help, I’ll try to help you.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’m fine. Nice meeting you and thanks again for everything!” Slightly dizzy, I squeeze around her and hurry down the aisle.

2

“**BECKY!**” I bolt across the pavement, lean down and wrap her in my arms. “It’s gonna be okay, Bec. Everything’s gonna be okay. Don’t cry.” I stroke her silky hair.

Something’s wrong. These are my hands. Those are my feet. But nothing happened on pavement. We were inside the house.

“Hey!” A beefy, red-faced man shoves me to the ground. “Get your cotton-picking hands off of her.” He helps the crying, brown-haired girl to her feet. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“I-I ...” The girl doesn’t look anything like Becky. “She cried for help.” *She did.*

“Bullshit,” the man says. “You knocked her down. Ran right into her.”

“No, I didn’t.” *Did I?*

Exiting passengers gather in a circle, including Mrs. Draper.

“Go find a cop,” the man says to an overweight woman in a glittery *Elvis* top.

“It was a mistake,” I say. “I’m sorry.”

“Let it go, Hank,” the woman says. “We’re gonna miss our shuttle to Graceland. Angel’s fine.”

“Fucking nutcase. You should be locked up somewhere,” he spits, tugging Angel away by the arm.

“I tripped,” I hear her say.

Mrs. Draper is talking urgently into her phone. I flee to the parking lot, to a cab idling with the windows up. The air is hot and steamy, like everywhere in the South in late June.

I pound on the window. The startled driver checks me out before unlocking the doors. I jump in and read the address. "I'm in a hurry," I say, in case it wasn't obvious from my flushed face and jerky glances back at the platform.

"Wrong address," he says in an accent I've never heard.

I study the paper where I wrote everything down. "No, it's right." I repeat it.

"You no want to go to this address."

I insist I do and the car peels out, doors locking.

The surroundings deteriorate quickly, block by block, until we're passing buildings with windows covered by bars, bricks and sheets of wood. Some are just gaping holes. At a stoplight I study a wall mural of a red gun painted over a white background. Uneven letters say, *Don't Let Violence Ruin Your Life*.

The driver glances at the rearview mirror and I scoot out of view. We pass a light pole with three teddy bears hanging on it. A few blocks later we come to another teddy bear, nailed to a tree with plastic lilies next to it.

I replay the scene at the train station—not normal even by my low standards. Have I been acting that weird for a month without realizing it? My head's not right. Obviously. As usual, I decide not to think about it.

Think about the driver's license. Stay on mission. Sixteen or eighteen? Being twelve, both are a stretch. At sixteen I could take trains and buses by myself. Eighteen would be life-changing, the minimum age to stay at a hotel, where I could take a shower and sleep in a bed. I bathe with garden hoses in dark backyards and sleep in parks or city hidey-holes on mattresses of leaves or cardboard.

I'm tall for my age, five-three. I can talk like an adult. Mom called me an *old soul*. Adding makeup makes me look at least a little older.

The cab brakes in front of a corner building, two stories of brownish-orange brick. The ground windows are painted black and covered with bars. The second-floor windows have

plywood nailed over them, also black. There's no sign, but the street number above the door matches the one I wrote down.

"You think twice about this address?" the cabbie says.

"Is this South Fourth Street?"

He nods.

"Then this is it."

"I mean you think twice about going to this place?"

I look around. Graffiti. Barbed-wire fences. Tall weeds growing out of the sidewalks.

"Yeah," I admit.

I pay and the cab takes off in a hurry. The block is deserted. I cross the sidewalk to a security door and push a button on an intercom. The buzzing inside is loud, but there's no response. I push it again. Nothing.

Everything is eerily quiet until a gray car comes around the corner pumping rap music at a million decibels. *You all alone in these streets, cousin ...* I'm pressing myself into the door frame, watching the car pass, when a voice rips through the speaker.

"Who dere?"

"Um, Roscoe Pallatin." The name I used in the messages.

"Who?"

"Roscoe Pallatin. I came here for a business transaction. I sent you some messages."

"Don't do no business here."

I lean into the speaker and whisper the code from the slip of paper. "B, P, two, nine, seven, hashtag, *eight!*" I yelp. Something is yanking me from behind. I turn to face a wiry man with no front teeth, clutching a can in a brown-paper bag in one hand and my backpack in the other.

I pull away. "What did you say?"

"I said come walk wit me."

"No, thanks."

"Come walk wit me."

"I can't. Actually, I'm really busy right now."

I meet a lot of weird people on the street. Most are harmless.

The only time I react is when someone tries to touch me, which the wiry man is doing right now, crusty fingers reaching for my face. I whirl, face-first into the thick vertical bars of the swinging security door.

An enormous, dark-skinned black man with a shaved head stands in the threshold. He's like a giant, biceps bigger than cantaloupes and a chest that sticks out a half-foot in front of his shoulders. The handle of a black gun rises from his waistband. He shoots me a look of disgust.

"Get the fuck outta here," he says to the man holding the can.

The man raises his hands and backs away with a mumbled apology.

"You. Get your skinny ass inside."

I squeeze past him, hearing the doors lock behind me.

We're in a cavernous room with a high ceiling of peeling paint and rusted pipes. A battered restaurant counter runs along the back wall.

"So you Roscoe Pallatin," the man says. I have to tilt my head back to meet his smoldering eyes. "Disabled veteran of the *EYE-raq* War with his eye shot out."

Clenched-toothed smile, "Well, you see—"

"I was a fuckin' soldier in Iraq. I took a chance on you 'cause your story sounded exactly like somethin' our government would do. Send a man to war to get his eye shot out, then tell him he can't drive 'cause he got his eye shot out."

He looks through a peephole at the top of the door. "At least I know you ain't the police. Even they ain't stupid enough to send a little blonde girl into this zip code. So the question is, who the fuck are you and what the fuck you doin' here?"

I clear my throat. "Sir, I am *so* sorry I pretended to be someone else, but I really am here to get a driver's license. I brought the money. Seven hundred dollars."

"You carrying around seven hundred dollars? You fuckin' stupid?"

"I'm not stupid."

“Runaway?”

According to the internet, there was nothing left to run away from. “Not the normal kind,” I say.

He dismisses me with a wave of a hand as big as my softball glove. “I don’t do business with no kids. Get the fuck outta here.”

“I won’t tell anyone, if that’s what you’re worried about. Definitely not the police. I’m keeping secrets way bigger than this.”

He points to the door. “Git.”

“But we had a deal,” I plead.

“I had a deal with Roscoe fuckin’ Pallatin.”

I close my eyes, so tired. “I don’t get it. Why won’t you help me? I’m here and you can.”

“I ain’t got to give you no reason.”

“But just *why*? I’m not a bad person ... even if I am, why?”

Neck bulging, “*Why why why*? You sound like a fuckin’ broken record. Why the fuck should I?”

“Because I came all the way from Chicago, and I brought the money, like I said I would. It wasn’t easy getting here ... and I need help ... and don’t have any other place to go.”

He walks to the restaurant counter. “Git over here and sit.”

The counter is lined with round chrome stools bolted to the floor, just like the ones we sat on at the drugstore the morning the two men came. The early internet stories had a phone video someone took, a panorama of the soda fountain that captured a few seconds of us at the end. *Last Pictures of Family Alive*. I could never watch it.

I plant myself on one of the stools, feeling it turn. Nerves or habit, I take a wobbly spin around, coming to rest where I started, the giant’s dark eyes fixed on me.

“How old are you?”

“Twelve.”

A half-laugh, half-snort with a shoulder roll. “And you here for a driver’s license? How ’bout a library card? Twenty dollars.”

“I need an official ID. I travel a lot and it’s risky.”

“You doin’ somethin’ risky? I’m fuckin’ shocked. What’s your name?”

“Natalie.”

He slams the counter so hard the stool shakes. “We both know that ain’t your name. You wanna do business with me? Don’t you dare fuckin’ lie.”

“Emily. My name is Emily.”

“Emily what?”

I hesitate, tightening the hair twirl on my finger.

He points to the door. “Truth or you gonna be back out on the sidewalk.”

“Calby. Emily Calby.”

“What happened to your eye?”

“My eye?”

“Yeah, one of them holes in your head you look outta.”

“Just purple blush. I’m not very good at makeup yet.”

“Bullshit. I know a bruise when I see one. One more lie, you out. Last warning.”

Like the marks on my wrists, fading, but still there. I don’t remember how I got it, so I couldn’t tell the truth even if I wanted.

An air conditioner mounted high on the wall starts rattling like the motor’s about to fall out. He punches the wall and the noise stops. “Where you family?” he says.

“I don’t have one.”

A simmering look.

“I’m not lying. I had a family ... but they’re gone.”

“Gone fuckin’ where? Fishin’?”

“Dead.”

Something in his eyes. Not softer or harder, just different. *The eyes tell all*, Mom used to say.

“Your parents pass?”

“And my sister. I’m the only one left.”

I meet his stare until he breaks away. He goes behind the counter and pulls a can from a humming refrigerator, takes a sip and sets it down hard. A dust explosion reveals a green tile countertop.

“You want a drink?” he says. “In the children’s department, we got water and water.”

“Water would be good.”

He tosses me a bottle. “The fuck you doin’ to your hair?”

“Huh?”

“You been twistin’ it in knots since you walked in.”

For better or worse, my sheeny blonde hair has defined me since I was born. It took until last week, looking in a mirror at a bus station, for me to realize I had turned it into a rat’s nest.

“Um, it’s a bad habit I have.”

“Quit doin’ it. It’s annoyin’ as fuck.”

I untwine my hair and shake the loose strands on the floor until I see him glaring. I stoop and pick them up. “Um, do you have a trashcan I could borrow?”

Me holding the golden tangle out like an offering. Him continuing to glare, muttering curse words, until his puffed-up chest deflates.

“Lucas,” he says. “Some people call me Big EZ. You call me Lucas. You tellin’ the truth about the money?”

“It’s in my backpack. I can show you.”

“I take you word. Follow me.”