

Each cabin is named after a tree. Yours is Dogwood. Next door is Maple. You check the names of each, trying to pick one the girls might have wandered into it. You picture an impromptu sleepover. You begin to squint into windows and crack open, unlocked doors, scanning the double-decker rows of sleeping girls for signs of additional campers. In one of the cabins—Blue Spruce—you startle a girl awake. She sits up in her bottom bunk, a gasp caught in her throat.

“Sorry,” you whisper before closing the door. “Sorry, sorry.”

You make your way to the other side of the camp, which normally bustles with activity from sunrise until twilight. Right now, though, sunrise is still just a promise, nothing but faint pinkness inching above the horizon. The only activity involves you marching toward the sturdy mess hall. In an hour or so, the scents of coffee and burnt bacon should be wafting from the building. At the moment, there’s no smell of food, no noise.

You try the door. It’s locked.

When you press your face to a window, all you see is a darkened dining room, chairs still stacked atop long rows of tables.

It’s the same at the arts and crafts building next door.

Locked.

Dark.

This time, your window peek reveals a semicircle of easels bearing the half-painted canvases of yesterday’s lesson. You had been working on a still life. A vase of wild flowers beside a bowl of oranges. Now you can’t shake the feeling the lesson will never be completed, the flowers always half-painted, the bowls forever missing their fruit.

You back away from the building, rotating slowly, contemplating your next move. To your right is the gravel drive that leads out of camp, through the woods, to the main road. You head in the opposite direction, right into the center of camp, where a mammoth, log-frame building sits at the end of a circular drive.

The Lodge.

The place where you least expect to find the girls.

It’s an unwieldy hybrid of a building. More mansion than cabin. A constant reminder to campers of their own, meager lodgings. Right now, it’s silent. Also dark. The ever-brightening sunrise behind it casts the front of the

building in shadow, and you can barely make out its beveled windows, its fieldstone foundation, its red door.

Part of you wants to run to that door and pound on it until Franny answers. She needs to know that three girls are gone. She's the camp director, after all. The girls are her responsibility.

You resist because there's a possibility you could be wrong. That you overlooked some important place where the girls might have stashed themselves, as if this were all a game of hide-and-seek. Then there's the fact that you're reluctant to tell Franny until you absolutely must.

You've already disappointed her once. You don't want to do it again.

You're about to return to deserted Dogwood when something behind the Lodge catches your eye. A strip of orange light just beyond its sloped back lawn. Lake Midnight, reflecting sky.

Please be there, you think. Please be safe. Please let me find you.

The girls aren't there, of course. There's no rational reason they would be. It feels like a bad dream. The kind you dread the most when you close your eyes at night. Only this nightmare has come true.

Maybe that's why you don't stop walking once you reach the lake's edge. You keep going, into the lake itself, slick rocks beneath your feet. Soon the water is up to your ankles. When you start to shiver, you can't tell if it's from the coldness of the lake or the sense of fear that's gripped you since you first checked your watch.

You rotate in the water, examining your surroundings. Behind you is the Lodge, the side facing the lake brightened by the sunrise, its windows glowing pink. The lakeshore stretches away from you on both sides, a seemingly endless line of rocky coast and leaning trees. You cast your gaze outward, to the great expanse of lake. The water is mirror-smooth, its surface reflecting the slowly emerging clouds and a smattering of fading stars. It's also deep, even in the middle of a drought that's lowered the waterline, leaving a foot-long strip of sun-dried pebbles along the shore.

The brightening sky allows you to see the opposite shore, although it's just a dark streak faintly visible in the mist. All of it—the camp, the lake, the surrounding forest—is private property, owned by Franny's family, passed down through generations.

So much water. So much land.

So many places to disappear.

The girls could be anywhere. That's what you realize as you stand in the water, shivering harder. They're out there. Somewhere. And it could take days to find them. Or weeks. There's a chance they'll never be found.

The idea is too terrible to think about, even though it's the only thing you can think about. You imagine them stumbling through the thick woods, unmoored and directionless, wondering if the moss on the trees really does point north. You think of them hungry and scared and shivering. You picture them under the water, sinking into the muck, trying in vain to grasp their way to the surface.

You think of all these things and begin to scream.

PART ONE

TWO TRUTHS

One

I paint the girls in the same order.

Vivian first.

Then Natalie.

Allison is last, even though she was first to leave the cabin and therefore technically the first to disappear.

My paintings are typically large. Massive, really. As big as a barn door, Randall likes to say. Yet the girls are always small. Inconsequential marks on a canvas that's alarmingly wide.

Their arrival heralds the second stage of a painting, after I've laid down a background of earth and sky in hues with appropriately dark names. Spider black. Shadow gray. Blood red.

And midnight blue, of course. In my paintings, there's always a bit of midnight.

Then come the girls, sometimes clustered together, sometimes scattered to far-flung corners of the canvas. I put them in white dresses that flare at the hems, as if they're running from something. They're usually turned so all that can be seen of them is their hair trailing behind them as they flee. On the rare occasions when I do paint a glimpse of their faces, it's only the slimmest of profiles, nothing more than a single curved brushstroke.

I create the woods last, using a putty knife to slather paint onto the canvas in wide, unwieldy strokes. This process can take days, even weeks, me slightly dizzy from fumes as I glob on more paint, layer upon layer, keeping it thick.

I've heard Randall boast to potential buyers that my surfaces are like Van Gogh's, with paint cresting as high as an inch off the canvas. I prefer to think I paint like nature, where true smoothness is a myth, especially in the woods. The chipped ridges of tree bark. The speckle of moss on rock. Several autumns' worth of leaves coating the ground. That's the nature I try to capture with my scrapes and bumps and whorls of paint.

So I add more and more, each wall-size canvas slowly succumbing to the forest of my imagination. Thick. Forbidding. Crowded with danger. The trees loom, dark and menacing. Vines don't creep so much as coil, their loops tightening into choke holds. Underbrush covers the forest floor. Leaves blot out the sky.

I paint until there's not a bare patch left on the canvas and the girls have been consumed by the forest, buried among the trees and vines and leaves, rendered invisible. Only then do I know a painting is finished, using the tip of a brush handle to swirl my name into the lower right-hand corner.

Emma Davis.

That same name, in that same borderline-illegible script, now graces a wall of the gallery, greeting visitors as they pass through the hulking sliding doors of this former warehouse in the Meatpacking District. Every other wall is filled with paintings. *My* paintings. Twenty-seven of them.

My first gallery show.

Randall has gone all out for the opening party, turning the place into a sort of urban forest. There are rust-colored walls and birch trees cut from a forest in New Jersey arranged in tasteful clumps. Ethereal house music throbs discreetly in the background. The lighting suggests October even though it's a week until St. Patrick's Day and outside the streets are piled with dirty slush.

The gallery is packed, though. I'll give Randall that. Collectors, critics, and lookyloos elbow for space in front of the canvases, champagne glasses in hand, reaching every so often for the mushroom-and-goat-cheese croquettes that float by. Already I've been introduced to dozens of people whose names I've instantly forgotten. People of

importance. Important enough for Randall to whisper who they are in my ear as I shake their hands.

“From the *Times*,” he says of a woman dressed head to toe in shades of purple. Of a man in an impeccably tailored suit and bright red sneakers, he simply whispers, “Christie’s.”

“Very impressive work,” Mr. Christie’s says, giving me a crooked smile. “They’re so bold.”

There’s surprise in his voice, as if women are somehow incapable of boldness. Or maybe his surprise stems from the fact that, in person, I’m anything but bold. Compared with other outsize personalities in the art world, I’m positively demure. No all-purple ensemble or flashy footwear for me. Tonight’s little black dress and black pumps with a kitten heel are as fancy as I get. Most days I dress in the same combination of khakis and paint-specked T-shirts. My only jewelry is the silver charm bracelet always wrapped around my left wrist. Hanging from it are three charms—tiny birds made of brushed pewter.

I once told Randall I dress so plainly because I want my paintings to stand out and not the other way around. In truth, boldness in one’s personality and appearance seems futile to me.

Vivian was bold in every way.

It didn’t keep her from disappearing.

During these meet and greets, I smile as wide as instructed, accept compliments, coyly defer the inevitable questions about what I plan to do next.

Once Randall has exhausted his supply of strangers to introduce, I hang back from the crowd, willing myself not to check each painting for the telltale red sticker signaling it’s been sold. Instead, I nurse a glass of champagne in a corner, the branch of a recently deforested birch tapping against my shoulder as I look around the room for people I actually know. There are many, which makes me grateful, even though it’s strange seeing them together in the same place. High school friends mingling with coworkers from the ad agency, fellow painters standing next to relatives who took the train in from Connecticut.

All of them, save for a single cousin, are men.

That’s not entirely an accident.

I perk up once Marc arrives fashionably late, sporting a proud grin as he surveys the scene. Although he claims to loathe the art world, Marc fits in perfectly. Bearded with adorably mussed hair. A plaid sport coat thrown over his worn Mickey Mouse T-shirt. Red sneakers that make Mr. Christie's do a disappointed double take. Passing through the crowd, Marc snags a glass of champagne and one of the croquettes, which he pops into his mouth and chews thoughtfully.

"The cheese saves it," he informs me. "But those watery mushroom rooms are a major infraction."

"I haven't tried one yet," I say. "Too nervous."

Marc puts a hand on my shoulder, steadying me. Just like he used to do when we lived together during art school. Every person, especially artists, needs a calming influence. For me, that person is Marc Stewart. My voice of reason. My best friend. My probable husband if not for the fact that we both like men.

I'm drawn to the romantically unattainable. Again, not a coincidence.

"You're allowed to enjoy this, you know," he says.

"I know."

"And you can be proud of yourself. There's no need to feel guilty. Artists are supposed to be inspired by life experiences. That's what creativity is all about."

Marc's talking about the girls, of course, buried inside every painting. Other than me, only he knows about their existence. The only thing I haven't told him is why, fifteen years later, I continue to make them vanish over and over.

That's one thing he's better off not knowing.

I never intended to paint this way. In art school, I was drawn to simplicity in both color and form. Andy Warhol's soup cans. Jasper Johns's flags. Piet Mondrian's bold squares and rigid black lines. Then came an assignment to paint a portrait of someone I knew who had died.

I chose the girls.

I painted Vivian first because she burned brightest in my memory. That blond hair right out of a shampoo ad. Those incongruously

dark eyes that looked black in the right light. The pert nose sprayed with freckles brought out by the sun. I put her in a white dress with an elaborate Victorian collar fanning around her swanlike neck and gave her the same enigmatic smile she displayed on her way out of the cabin.

You're too young for this, Em.

Natalie came next. High forehead. Square chin. Hair pulled tight in a ponytail. Her white dress got a dainty lace collar that downplayed her thick neck and broad shoulders.

Finally, there was Allison, with her wholesome look. Apple cheeks and slender nose. Brows two shades darker than her flaxen hair, so thin and perfect they looked like they had been drawn on with brown pencil. I painted an Elizabethan ruff around her neck, frilly and regal.

Yet there was something wrong with the finished painting. Something that gnawed at me until the night before the project was due, when I awoke at 2:00 a.m. and saw the three of them staring at me from across the room.

Seeing them. That was the problem.

I crept out of bed and approached the canvas. I grabbed a brush, dabbed it in some brown paint, and smeared a line over their eyes. A tree branch, blinding them. More branches followed. Then plants and vines and whole trees, all of them gliding off the brush onto the canvas, as if sprouting there. By dawn, most of the canvas had been besieged by forest. All that remained of Vivian, Natalie, and Allison were shreds of their white dresses, patches of skin, locks of hair.

That became No. 1. The first in my forest series. The only one where even a fraction of the girls is visible. That piece, which got the highest grade in the class after I explained its meaning to my instructor, is absent from the gallery show. It hangs in my loft, not for sale.

Most of the others are here, though, with each painting taking up a full wall of the multi-chambered gallery. Seeing them together like this, with their gnarled branches and vibrant leaves, makes me realize how obsessive the whole endeavor is. Knowing I've spent years painting the same subject unnerves me.

“I *am* proud,” I tell Marc before taking a sip of champagne.

He downs his glass in one gulp and grabs a fresh one. “Then what’s up? You seem *vexed*.”

He says it with a reedy British accent, a dead-on impersonation of Vincent Price in that campy horror movie neither of us can remember the name of. All we know is that we were stoned when we watched it on TV one night, and the line made us howl with laughter. We say it to each other far too often.

“It’s just weird. All of *this*.” I use my champagne flute to gesture at the paintings dominating the walls, the people lined up in front of them, Randall kissing both cheeks of a svelte European couple who just walked through the door. “I never expected any of this.”

I’m not being humble. It’s the truth. If I had expected a gallery show, I would have actually named my work. Instead, I simply numbered them in the order they were painted. No. 1 through No. 33.

Randall, the gallery, this surreal opening reception—all of it is a happy accident. The product of being in the right place at the right time. That right place, incidentally, was Marc’s bistro in the West Village. At the time, I was in my fourth year of being the in-house artist at an ad agency. It was neither enjoyable nor fulfilling, but it paid the rent on a crumbling loft big enough to fit my forest canvases. After an overhead pipe leaked into the bistro, Marc needed something to temporarily mask a wall’s worth of water damage. I loaned him No. 8 because it was the biggest and most able to cover the square footage.

That right time was a week later, when the owner of a small gallery a few blocks away popped into Marc’s place for lunch. He saw the painting, was suitably intrigued, and asked Marc about the artist.

That led to one of my paintings—No. 7—being displayed in the gallery. It sold within a week. The owner asked for more. I gave him three. One of the paintings—lucky No. 13—caught the eye of a young art lover who posted a picture of it on Instagram. That picture was noticed by her employer, a television actress known for setting trends. She bought the painting and hung it in her dining room, showing it off during a dinner party for a small group of friends. One of those friends,

an editor at *Vogue*, told his cousin, the owner of a larger, more prestigious gallery. That cousin is Randall, who currently roams the gallery, coiling his arms around every guest he sees.

What none of them knows—not Randall, not the actress, not even Marc—is that those thirty-three canvases are the only things I’ve painted outside my duties at the ad agency. There are no fresh ideas percolating in this artist’s brain, no inspiration sparking me into productivity. I’ve attempted other things, of course, more from a nagging sense of responsibility than actual desire. But I’m never able to move beyond those initial, halfhearted efforts. I return to the girls every damn time.

I know I can’t keep painting them, losing them in the woods again and again. To that end, I’ve vowed not to paint another. There won’t be a No. 34 or a No. 46 or, God forbid, a No. 112.

That’s why I don’t answer when everyone asks me what I’m working on next. I have no answer to give. My future is quite literally a blank canvas, waiting for me to fill it. The only thing I’ve painted in the past six months is my studio, using a roller to convert it from daffodil yellow to robin’s-egg blue.

If there’s anything vexing me, it’s that. I’m a one-hit wonder. A bold lady painter whose life’s work is on these walls.

As a result, I feel helpless when Marc leaves my side to chat up a handsome cater waiter, giving Randall the perfect moment to clutch my wrist and drag me to a slender woman studying No. 30, my largest work to date. Although I can’t see the woman’s face, I know she’s important. Everyone else I’ve met tonight has been guided to me instead of the other way around.

“Here she is, darling,” Randall announces. “The artist herself.”

The woman whirls around, fixing me with a friendly, green-eyed gaze I haven’t seen in fifteen years. It’s a look you easily remember. The kind of gaze that, when aimed at you, makes you feel like the most important person in the world.

“Hello, Emma,” she says.

I freeze, not sure what else to do. I have no idea how she’ll act. Or what she’ll say. Or even why she’s here. I had assumed Francesca Harris-White wanted nothing to do with me.

Yet she smiles warmly before pulling me close until our cheeks touch. A semi-embrace that Randall witnesses with palpable jealousy.

“You already know each other?”

“Yes,” I say, still stunned by her presence.

“It was ages ago. Emma was a mere slip of a girl. And I couldn’t be more proud of the woman she’s become.”

She gives me another look. *The* look. And although that sense of surprise hasn’t left me, I realize how happy I am to see her. I didn’t think such a thing was possible.

“Thank you, Mrs. Harris-White,” I tell her. “That’s very kind of you to say.”

She mock frowns. “What’s with this ‘Mrs. Harris-White’ nonsense? It’s Franny. Always Franny.”

I remember that, too. Her standing before us in her khaki shorts and blue polo shirt, her bulky hiking boots making her feet look comically large. *Call me Franny. I insist upon it. Here in the great outdoors, we’re all equals.*

It didn’t last. Afterward, when what happened was in newspapers across the country, it was her full, formal name that was used. Francesca Harris-White. Only daughter of real estate magnate Theodore Harris. Sole grandchild of lumber baron Buchanan Harris. Much-younger widow of tobacco heir Robert White. Net worth estimated to be almost a billion, most of it old money stretching back to the Gilded Age.

Now she stands before me, seemingly untouched by time, even though she now must be in her late seventies. She wears her age well. Her skin is tan and radiant. Her sleeveless blue dress emphasizes her trim figure. Her hair, a shade balanced between blond and gray, has been pulled back in a chignon, showing off a single strand of pearls around her neck.

She turns to the painting again, her gaze scanning its formidable width. It’s one of my darker works—all blacks, deep blues, and mud browns. The canvas dwarfs her, making it look as though she’s actually standing in a forest, the trees about to overtake her.

“It’s really quite marvelous,” she says. “All of them are.”

There's a catch in her voice. Something tremulous and uncertain, as if she can somehow glimpse the girls in their white dresses beneath the painted thicket.

"I must confess that I came here under false pretenses," she says, still staring at the painting, seemingly unable to look away. "I'm here for the art, of course. But also for something else. I have what you might call an interesting proposition."

At last, she turns away from the painting, fixing those green eyes on me. "I'd love to discuss it with you, when you have the time."

I shoot a glance to Randall, who stands behind Franny at a discreet distance. He mouths the word every artist longs to hear: *commission*.

The idea prompts me to immediately say, "Of course." Under any other circumstance, I already would have declined.

"Then join me for lunch tomorrow. Let's say twelve thirty? At my place? It will give us a chance to catch up."

I find myself nodding, even though I'm not entirely sure what's happening. Franny's unexpected appearance. Her even more unexpected invitation to lunch. The scary-yet-tantalizing prospect of being commissioned to paint something for her. It's another surreal touch to an already strange evening.

"Of course," I say again, lacking the wherewithal to utter anything else.

Franny beams. "Wonderful."

She presses a card into my hand. Navy print on heavy white vellum. Simple but elegant. It bears her name, a phone number, and a Park Avenue address. Before leaving, she pulls me into another half hug. Then she turns to Randall and gestures toward No. 30.

"I'll take it," she says.