

Prologue

THEY WERE THE biggest, shiniest, most gorgeous things on wheels that Emma had ever seen. Why couldn't they save her life?

"Skycruiser," she read aloud from a chrome badge breathlessly after running to meet the lead vehicle. What a rig! Tall as a building with dark factory glass and studded flaps, the man behind the wheel up top wore a stitched khaki vest and pleated pants. Even as Emma stood alongside that gleaming behemoth, her mouth gapped open like a bedazzled child's, more trucks and vans arrived, their air-brakes sighing as they fell into line at the curb.

"Can I help you, miss?" the driver asked, opening up when she banged on the doors.

Emma hopped up the steps, grinning and uninvited. "Is this bus from Hollywood?" she asked. "We've been expecting you guys for days."

The driver rolled his eyes. "We're down from Crystal River," he told her. "And this here is a coach, young lady. It certainly ain't no bus."

Emma peeked down the coach's dark center aisle. Most of the movie types inside sat in high-backed seats, their eyes closed and mouths opened wide, asleep. "Not to argue with you, Mister," she whispered, "but this no-bus of yours says Warner Brothers all over it."

"Then why'd you ask?" the driver came back.

Emma shrugged. He had a point. She didn't know.

I. Vireo

1. A disastrous precedent

IT SEEMED TO Emma that growing up in Vireo, a fishing town on Florida's lower Gulf coast with five boat ramps, three bars and no dentist, was very much like being shipwrecked—except that shipwrecks were sometimes saved. But Vireo was hopeless. Even if one counted Emma's most recent humiliation in that backward, lonely place—and almost everyone did—nothing truly important had happened there until the movies came to town.

Eli Kaplan, Emma's stepdad, was to blame. Before it all began... Long before once innocent Emma knew a thing about mosquitoes, ticks or grits, Eli lived alone in Vireo running a small, plain-food diner and an even smaller motel.

Almost two full decades before Warner Brothers showed up and turned things upside down, Eli was struck by a nagging notion; he wasn't getting younger. Someday, he would certainly need help. Committing then what he later described as *the grievous error of growing lonely*, he phoned Buffalo long-distance on an empty afternoon and proposed marriage to Emma's mother, his probable distant cousin whose spouse, like his, had died too young.

"Sarah Rosenquest," the old man began over a surprisingly good connection, "please come south and be my bride..." Then he added quickly afterward (because The Great Depression was building steam and Sarah had four kids), "...in order to save your lives."

Sarah agreed to his terms and disconnected.

Eli seemed pleased at first, filled with plans and expectations but, soon after he met Sarah's children, he knew he would never save anyone.

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Sarah was no looker and all her kids were strange; one shy, one feeble, one lazy and another, Emma, completely nuts. After two-plus days of taxing travel, that meshuge little girl who, it happened, turned six on the day they arrived in town, bounced down the steps of a Trailways bus and demanded a birthday party.

"What?" Eli asked, incredulous, when Sarah, upon learning that Vireo had no bakery, insisted that he take her to Fort Myers.

"You heard me," Sarah said.

Hindsight is almost always useless but it can sometimes teach us lessons. Establishing a precedent that proved to be disastrous, Eli drove his new wife and children north to buy a cake and willingly paid for everything.

2. Myra never married

WHILE MYRA ROSENQUEST, Emma's older sister, did little more than watch, seventeen years of lonely life flew by without Myra's noticing. After a long and frightening world war, Vireo, the gloomy little backwater in which Myra had lived since age sixteen, boasted a local newspaper, state-chartered bank and hundreds of winter visitors. Thanks to its nearby sandy beaches and mild winter weather, the odd place had become a little famous too. Millionaire Yankees, not knowing better (and blessed with too much cash to care), had built scores of spectacular vacation homes along the town's once pristine gulf shore.

As the years passed, Eli's roster of dependents blossomed too. Myra's once "little" brother, Max, returned all grown up from the great war in Europe, thank God, intact. Little Herb, Myra's youngest sibling, brought home a stuck-up wife from Missouri after serving a boring stint in the army at Fort Leonard Wood.

After her husband died, Aunt Helen, Sarah's older, only sister, joined the family in Vireo too. Her unplanned arrival, a lodger's untimely death and the awful luck, not yet discussed, that knocked Emma off her feet, combined to shut down Eli's motel; though the diner had remained open for business, seven of Eli's eight guest units had been overrun by family.

Myra had not married.

She believed she never would.

3. Like a perfect, tolling bell

ON AN ORDINARY, nothing morning that began like every other in Emma's lonely life, her habitually cranky stepfather read excitedly from his Herald. "Warner Brothers Pictures," he began...

...has announced plans to shoot a major, feature-length film set during the Second Seminole War. Entitled Distant Drums, it will star the internationally famous actor, Gary Cooper. Filming is scheduled to begin early in 1951 on location at the historic fort at Castillo de San Marcos in St. Augustine.

"Now get this," Eli added while the family yawned together around the breakfast table...

Locations also under consideration for filming the movie's many Everglades action scenes include Weeki Wachi Springs, Venice, Vireo and Everglades City on Florida's west coast.

"They'll never come to Vireo," Myra sighed, true to her hopeless nature.

Eli agreed, of course, but Emma, as if having heard a perfect, tolling bell, raised her chin, fluttered her eyelids and crossed her hands upon her chest. "Even monumental boredom," she sighed, perhaps a bit dramatically, "cannot last forever." And from that moment, though they laughed at her, Emma embraced a plan.

4. Good riddance to a rotten egg

AS MYRA AND Emma grew from girls to gals in Vireo, differences in looks, temperament and ages led to frequent disputes and tension. A plain girl at best, Myra had been largely ignored by the opposite sex but Emma, cute as a pin and always disrespectful, stayed perpetually in demand.

Partial to *bad boys*, as she called them, Emma had smoked and drank in public since the day she hit tenth grade. When Myra warned her younger sister of her darkening reputation, Emma ignored her advice. “I can handle myself, Mire,” she told her, “and I couldn’t care less what some rowdies might say behind my back.”

Old Eli, when not shouting, sometimes behaved like a father. “If you continue to play with fire,” he warned Emma one evening, “you will certainly get burned.” *Truer words*, as it happened. Nearly two years before the movies arrived, Eli’s grim forecast materialized as two swaddled bundles—one pink, one blue—lying on either side of Emma’s bed in a Fort Myers maternity ward.

“At least I live my life, Mire,” Emma defended her mistake months later. “I don’t hide alone in my room every night, cloistered away like you.”

“Who’s hiding?” Myra shot back. “I’ve been busy helping our mother raise your illegitimate kids.”

Emma did not laugh. Emma never laughed, at least not joyfully, and the father of her twins was to blame. Bradley Fozo, a Vireo native, expert fisherman and highly-regarded roofer, had apparently impressed Emma too much one morning in the diner by sliding two bits beneath his pie plate. Emma cried for days after Bradley, who had remained in town briefly after the blessed event, got cold feet and ran away. A small, purple birthmark on his new son’s otherwise perfect chin had panicked him—but a girl can’t choose whom she’ll love.

As always, Eli, an avid reader of both the Tanach and Miami Herald, saw things differently. “Thank the God of Israel,” he told his sullied stepdaughter not long after she gave birth, “that Junior’s birthmark doesn’t resemble an airboat, a flying eagle or four-leaf clover. Otherwise that yokel would have married you on the spot.”

Eli sighed when the girls ignored him, one past her prime, the other shamed. “If you two don’t shed your sourness,” he warned, “you shall never be fulfilled. You don’t need rednecks or babies, ladies, what you need is God.”

Emma let the comment pass—the Almighty knew nothing of Vireo—but Myra, like always, stuck her two cents in. “Good riddance to a rotten egg,” she told her younger sister. “Neither love nor companionship can be found in food service, especially on breakfast shift.”

After such thorough heartbreak, how could Emma dare disagree?