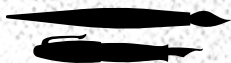


PRETEND SHE'S HERE

LUANNE RICE



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CHAPTER ONE

When you come from a big family, you're never alone—or at least, not often enough. That afternoon, all I wanted to do was walk home by myself. But Bea, my next-oldest sister—we were seven siblings in all—was crowding me.

“Are you okay?” Bea asked as we stood on the steps of Black Hall High after school.

“Yes! I'm excellent!” I said, injecting an extra dash of pep into my words to convince her to go on her merry way.

“You don't seem okay,” Bea said.

“Just because I feel like walking home?”

“Well, you had that fight with Mom this morning. Also, your lips have been moving again.”

“Uh, that happens when I talk.”

“Uh, but there's no one there when you do it,” she said.

“Do you have to point that out?” I asked, backing away from her. Bea and I shared a bedroom, a million freckles, and a ton of secrets. But when it came to anything involving my best friend,

Lizzie, my sister could be very intrusive, and frankly, it set me on edge.

“Emily, I know it’s really hard,” Bea said to me. “It’s coming up on the anniversary, and you’ve seemed down, and I’m sorry—I’d just feel better if you’d let me and Patrick drive you home. It’ll be fine.”

“It *is* fine,” I said, giving Bea my brightest smile. “Don’t worry about me.” I took a deep breath, because I knew I had to be convincing.

Bea was right—I’d been thinking about Lizzie more than ever lately. Three hundred and twenty-two days had gone by since my best friend had died. I was feeling *feelings*, giving in to my *moods*, as the shrink would say—and that’s why I’d snapped at my mother that morning.

“Trust me, okay?” I said to Bea.

“Well, all right,” Bea said. “But you’re missing out. Patrick and I are stopping for fried clams. His treat. Last chance . . .”

I gave her a big one-armed hug around her neck and shoved her away, laughing. She patted my head in that big-sister way that was simultaneously patronizing and endearing. Then she headed toward the parking lot where our brother Patrick had the rusty orange Subaru running. The driver’s window was down, and Patrick’s elbow was resting on it. He and Bea looked exactly alike: dark hair and Atlantic Ocean–gray eyes. Unlike them, I was blond and blue-eyed. Patrick grinned and stuck out his tongue at me. I did the same to him—the Lonergan family salute.

I watched Bea get into the car. They drove in the opposite direction of our house, toward the fish shack. I had one brief

moment of regret—my stomach growled as I imagined the tasty, crispy clam roll I was missing.

I spotted my friends Jordan Shear and Alicia Dawkins across the parking lot. Jordan waved. I was afraid she'd want me to do something with them, so I pretended not to see. I turned and started walking. Alone at last.

Fall was Lizzie's favorite season. She was everywhere. I felt her presence in the red and yellow leaves, the golden marsh grass, the diamonds of sunlight sparkling on bright blue Long Island Sound.

Hey Lizzie, Dan Jenkins texted me. Should I text back right away or wait till tonight? If people were looking at me, saw my lips moving as I hurried along by myself, they might have thought I was crazy—or learning lines for my latest play. Either way, I didn't care. Talking to my best friend made me feel like she was right by my side. And I needed that, especially now, because of the fight with my mom, because of how many days I'd been missing Lizzie, and because I honestly wanted to be going anywhere but home.

So maybe that's why I was barely surprised when I heard her sister's voice.

"Emily!"

I turned, and there was Chloe Porter, the former bane of Lizzie's existence, sitting on a stone wall across the street, as if she and her parents hadn't moved away last February. Had I conjured her? But no—she was there, and she was real.

"Chloe!" I said. In such a hurry to get to her, I flew across the street, snagged the toe of my shoe in a pothole, and just missed getting hit by a blue car. Its horn was still blaring when I dropped my backpack on the sidewalk, the better to hug her hard.

“It’s really good to see you,” Chloe said when we let go.

“You too,” I said, scanning her face. She was two years younger than me and Lizzie, but she looked so old now—thirteen, a teenager. Startling emerald-green eyes, shoulder-length hair—unnervingly the exact same cut as Lizzie’s, with a tendril that curled over her left ear, a brown so dark it was nearly black. I almost said that I didn’t remember Chloe having that curl, and that her hair had been reddish-chestnut, not the dramatic and glamorous glossy black of Lizzie’s. But I didn’t. I just stared at her. It was almost as if Lizzie had come back to life. For real—not just part of my dreamy conjurings and imaginary conversations.

“Are you visiting?” I asked. Dumb question, because why else would she be here?

“Sort of,” she said.

I tilted my head, waiting for more.

“My parents want to put flowers on her grave.”

My heart skipped. It made sense. In forty-three days, it would be a whole year since Lizzie had died—on the day between our birthdays. I used to visit her grave pretty often. I’d leave weird things she had loved—twigs with acorns, a handful of moonstones collected from the beach, an iridescent bee’s wing, a page of whatever I was writing, a cup of M&M’s. Sometimes I found bouquets of roses and ivy tied with white ribbons, with notes attached from Mrs. Porter, so I knew she had been there.

“Want to come with us?” Chloe asked.

I almost said no, that I’d discovered the essence of Lizzie was nowhere near the cemetery, that she was right here with me as I walked along talking to her. But Chloe’s face had turned so pale,

her lips nearly blue, that I actually thought she might pass out. I got it—grief was not for the faint of heart. It was as physical as a stab wound.

“Sure,” I said. “Where are your parents?”

“Over there,” Chloe said, pointing at a white minivan parked up the street. Why did that give me such a pang? Maybe because it was yet another thing that Lizzie would never know about: that her family’s old navy-blue van—the one she’d started learning to drive in—was long gone. The blue-and-white Connecticut plates had been replaced with white-red-and-blue ones from Massachusetts.

“I thought you moved to Maine,” I said.

“Oh, we did,” Chloe said. “But then we . . . uh . . .”

“Moved again?” I supplied, because she still looked so wobbly.

“Yeah.” She swallowed hard. Then she gave out a laugh that sounded like a bark. “Sorry for being weird. It’s just, the cemetery freaks me out. I hate going.”

“I get it,” I said.

We headed toward the minivan. There were her parents, sitting in the front seats. They gazed at me with such warmth, such familiar friendliness, that I choked up and wasn’t sure my voice would work. The Porters had been my second family. It wasn’t till that very instant, being in their presence for the first time in so long, that I realized how badly I missed not only Lizzie, but all of them.

Something crossed my mind, made me feel ashamed: In August, I had seen Mrs. Porter from a distance. I’d been walking

my dog, Seamus, through the marsh. I'd glanced across the pond and I saw Mrs. Porter sitting on a driftwood log. I froze.

I hadn't seen Lizzie's mom since the funeral. Her grief at the gravesite had been so extreme. She had keened, a high, thin wail I didn't think a human could make, one that pierced my heart and made my bones feel ice cold. She had collapsed against Mr. Porter, and he and Chloe practically had to carry her to their car. As often as I'd thought of writing or calling her, just to say I was thinking of her, I was afraid that hearing from me would remind her too much of Lizzie and cause her more pain.

So that August day, instead of circling around the pond toward her, I'd gone the opposite way, toward the woods. At the last minute, I saw her notice me. She waved, called my name. I pretended not to hear and spent the rest of the afternoon feeling guilty. It made sense that she would have returned to Black Hall to visit Lizzie's grave, but I'd wondered why she was in the marsh—it was my favorite place to walk, but Lizzie hadn't liked the mud or the smell of low tide. She had preferred walks through town, past the church and the shops and galleries, up Library Lane.

Now, reaching the Porters' minivan, I felt tense, worried that Mrs. Porter would feel hurt that I'd avoided her that summer day.

Chloe slid open the back door. "Hop in," she said, and I did.

And all my fears were gone: Mrs. Porter turned in her seat, reaching to grab my hand. I hugged her from behind, leaning over to kiss Mr. Porter's cheek.

"Oh, my goodness, here you are!" Mrs. Porter said, still clutching my hand. I gazed into her eyes—the exact same green as Lizzie's and Chloe's—and noticed that her dark hair had much

more silver in it than before, as if sorrow had bleached the life from it. Lizzie had inherited her mother's sharp cheekbones and wry smile.

"I'm so happy to see you!" I said, scouring her face to see if she was mad or hurt about what had happened in August.

"It's as if no time has gone by at all," she said. "No time at all."

"It's true," I said.

Mr. Porter was oddly quiet. He cleared his throat, as if he had a cold.

I stared at the back of his head—he had thick, curly brown hair, the same color Chloe's used to be. I remembered when we were really little, third grade or so, Lizzie would hug him, giggles spilling out, saying his hair smelled like spaghetti, as if that was the funniest thing in the world.

The minivan was already running, and Mr. Porter pulled away from the curb. He did a U-turn, and we headed down Main Street, past the big white church, along the narrow road lined with sea captains' houses and hundred-year-old trees.

"I brought juice packs!" Mrs. Porter said. "Chloe, in the cooler."

"That's okay," I said. "I'm not thirsty."

"Oh, but, sweetie—I always brought juice when I picked you up from school."

It jostled me to be called "sweetie"—that's what she'd always called Lizzie. But my heart was aching for Mrs. Porter. It must have been intense to be talking to me—the first time since Lizzie's funeral. And the juice part was true. Mrs. Porter and my mom vied for the title "Queen of Snacks." They never drove us

anywhere without lots of juice and trail mix. My mom prided herself on making her own mixture of nuts and dried cranberries, but I wouldn't ever have told her that I preferred Mrs. Porter's because her concoction always included Lizzie's favorite—M&M's.

"Have some," Chloe said, handing me an ice-cold pack of orange-mango juice.

Perfect, I thought—Lizzie's number one choice. I slugged some down. A few drops spilled on the beige seats. I wiped them up with the sleeve of my green army jacket.

"How was school?" Mr. Porter asked, the first thing he'd said.

"Pretty good," I said. "I have an English test tomorrow. Lots of homework . . ." At that second, I realized that in the excitement of seeing Chloe, I'd left my backpack next to the stone wall. "Oh, could we go back a sec, actually, I forgot . . ." I started to say.

"Lizzie, English was always your best subject," Mrs. Porter said. "You'll have nothing to worry about. A poet, that's what I always said of you. My girl, the poet."

"Um," I said. "You mean Emily."

Lizzie wrote poems; I write plays. I couldn't really blame Mrs. Porter for the slipup, though.

"It's better we start right now, sweetie," Mrs. Porter said. "No going back, no being stuck in old ways. It's better just to move on from the start. You'll get used to it. We already have, haven't we, Chloe?"

"Yeah," Chloe said, looking away from me, out the window.

"Used to what?" I asked. I felt a tiny bit sick to my stomach—not the most unusual thing in the world. I was known to get carsick, but not usually right here on the sleepy country lanes of my hometown.

“Tell her, Chloe,” Mrs. Porter said.

“You’re my sister,” Chloe said.

“True, we’re just like sisters,” I said. I looked across the seat at her, but she was still staring out the window. That’s when I noticed we had driven past the cemetery. We were at the stop sign, about to turn onto Shore Road.

“Not ‘like,’” Mr. Porter said.

Nausea bubbled up in me. I was going to be sick. “Please, could you pull over?” I asked.

No one replied. Mr. Porter just drove faster, past the gold-green salt marsh where I’d spied Mrs. Porter in August. We passed the fish shack. There were Patrick and Bea getting out of our old orange car. When I started to wave, Chloe caught my arm to keep my hand down. I noticed all three Porters avert their faces, and it hit me like a ton of bricks that they didn’t want to be seen by my brother and sister.

“Stop,” I said, feeling dizzy.

Mr. Porter didn’t, though, and no one spoke. I saw the traffic light looming—once we went through we’d be on I-95, the interstate heading to wherever—and my head spun with the fact that these were people I loved, trusted as much as anyone, but who were acting so bizarrely. This couldn’t be happening—I didn’t even know what “this” was, but my gut was telling me it was now or never. This was my chance.

We stopped at the red light. I grabbed the handle and pulled, trying to yank open the door. Nothing happened.

Childproof locks, but I was nearly sixteen.

I tugged harder. The door stayed shut. My hand dove into my

jacket pocket, closed around my cell phone. I fumbled, starting to pull it out, but my fingers felt clumsy. I was getting really tired.

“It’s better you relax,” Mrs. Porter said. “We have a long ride ahead of us, Elizabeth.”

“Chloe, say your sister’s name,” Mr. Porter said.

“Lizzie,” Chloe whispered. And I felt her hand—cold and sweaty—close around mine and squeeze four times, just as my eyelids fluttered shut and I forgot every single thing in the world.