

THE PROGENY

A NOVEL

TOSCA LEE

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FOR BRYAN.
OURS IS MY FAVORITE STORY.





THE CENTER

No one speaks when you enter the Center for the final time. There's no need. You've gone through the counseling, tests, and a checklist of preparations to get the plastic bracelet you wear the day of treatment. The one that saves a life. They don't need to know why you're doing it anymore. Or that you lied about it all. Just the scratch of the stylus as you sign your name on the screen one last time.

A nurse takes me into a room and I lie down on the table. I give her the sealed packet—the only thing I brought with me. There's cash, meds, and an address inside, the one for “after.” It's a thousand miles away. She'll pass it to the companion assigned to me. No point meeting her now.

I'm twenty-one years old and my name doesn't matter because it's about to be erased forever. I'm choosing to forget the ones I love, and myself, in the process.

They say your life flashes before your eyes when you die. But they don't tell you that every detail comes screaming back to life. That you taste each bite of every meal you savored, feel the shower

of every rain you walked in . . . smell the hair against your cheek
before that last, parting kiss. That you will fight to hold on to mem-
ory like a drowning person gasping for poisoned air.

Then everything you knew is gone. And you are still alive.

For now.

1

There's a figure standing by the window. Arms crossed, outlined against the fuchsia sky, looking out at what must be a spectacular sunset. When her chin lifts I wonder if she's seen something in the trees.

I push up from the cabin's lone sofa. An afghan with a giant moose stitched on it is tangled around my legs. It in no way coordinates with the moose valance in the kitchen or the fixture in the bathroom. Despite the name of the lake—Moosehead—I've yet to see a real moose anywhere since arriving here four weeks ago.

"You're awake." My caretaker, Clare, turns from the window. Her blond hair is pulled back in the loose ponytail she's worn every day since we arrived and she set up house. Going into town for groceries as I slept, taking me through two-hour assessments in the afternoon, complimenting my recent attempts at dinner, including the underseasoned chicken casserole I made last night. It was the first time I'd tried it, I said, but I don't know if that's true.

"Yeah, finally."

My name is Emily Porter. I'm twenty-one years old and I am renting a cabin on a tiny island in the north woods of Maine for reasons I no longer remember.

I go through this mental routine each time I wake, if only to assure myself I didn't get the lobotomy I joked about yesterday before sleeping—what, fifteen, twenty?—hours until just now. I don't even remember going to sleep. Nor do I remember where I lived before this, or if I went to college, or the name of the high school with the blue lockers and squeaky gymnasium floor where I graduated. Including what happened to the garnet ring on my index finger as I accepted my diploma, or the name of the woman who gave it to me other than simply Mom.

Names, identifiers, faces up to age nineteen and everything in the two years since. All gone.

"A certain amount of postprocedure depression is normal. That will change, in time."

I slide my hand to the curve of my skull just above my left ear. To the stubby patch concealed by the longer hair above it. Not so stubby anymore. It could almost qualify for a military cut.

"As will that."

"Not fast enough." I flip the afghan off my legs, pop two pills from the bottle on the coffee table, already trying to decide what culinary disaster I'll create tonight. *Caretaker* is a misleading word; ever since I reached the two-week observation and recovery mark, Clare has seen to it that I cook, do laundry, find a job and my way around town as though I were already on my own.

"I'm thinking I should stay away from casseroles for a while. How do you feel about tuna quesadillas?" I get up and pad toward the kitchen, wash my hands. When she doesn't respond, I glance at her and say, "That good, huh?"

That's when I realize she's wearing the same blouse and skirt she

wore the first day, the wooden tao cross hanging just below her collar. It looks like a capital *T*, which is what I thought it was the first time I saw it, for her last name: Thomas. And then I see the suitcase by the door.

A surge of panic wells up inside me.

“Today was my last day, Emily,” she says quietly. “I was just waiting for you to wake.”

“Oh.” I put down the dish towel, finish drying my hands on my sweatpants. Look around me, lost.

Clare tilts her head. “We talked about it when you got up for a while this morning—remember?”

No. I don’t remember. But I don’t need to turn to see the calendar hanging on the fridge behind me, to follow the line of *X*s through each day in September to today—the twentieth—to know she’s right.

“Are you sure you want to go now?” I say. “I mean, it’s almost dark.” I gesture to the window, already in shadow.

I’m not ready for this.

She comes to stand in front of me and lays her hands on my arms. Her left brow is angled a few degrees higher than her right. But instead of making her appear asymmetrical, which all faces are, it intensifies her gaze.

“You’re doing fine, Emily. Your procedure was a success. You have your fresh start. It’s time to live.”

A fresh start. A weird concept when you don’t know what you’re starting over from.

She gives me a squeeze and shoulders her purse. “I could, however, use a lift to shore and into town.”

“Right. Of course.” I pull my jacket from the peg near the kitchen door. I knew this day was coming. Then why do I feel like I’m being abandoned?

I shove my feet into my boots and grab my keys, but the questions that came at me like a hoard of insects those first few days—

before Clare firmly counseled me to trust my decision—have come swarming back, louder than ever. I push them away, but when she meets me at the door there's something in her hand. An envelope.

The handwriting on the outside is mine.

She holds it out. "You wrote this before your treatment."

I take it slowly. It's sealed, my initials scribbled across the flap where it's stuck shut.

"Most patients choose to write a letter to reassure their postprocedure selves. You can read it when you get back."

I nod, but a part of me wishes she hadn't shown it to me at all. I slide it onto the counter. "Okay."

Outside, we climb into the johnboat and I start the outboard motor. It takes all of five minutes for me to guide us into the dock two hundred yards away. I grab the flashlight from the boat, knock it with the heel of my hand when it sputters. The owner's beat-up Ford Bronco is waiting near the slip.

I ask what time her flight is as we turn onto Lily Bay Road, make small talk about the magnificent foliage around the lake. Finally ask if she ever saw a moose. No, she says, she never did.

Twenty minutes later we pull into the Food Mart at the top of the hill—the same place I caught my breath as the lake first appeared below us the day we arrived. There's a black town car waiting in the parking lot, and she directs me toward it.

I put the truck in park, wondering what one says in a situation like this. I'm glad it's nearly dark out.

"I've got it," she says when I start to get out. After retrieving her suitcase, she leans in through the passenger door.

"You're going to be fine, Emily. It's a brave decision to go through something like this."

It doesn't feel brave, to want to forget.

"Read your letter. Trust yourself. But just in case—" She pulls

the tao cross over her head and presses it into my hand. “If you ever find yourself in trouble.”

Impulsively, I lean across the seat to hug her.

And then she’s gone.

Maybe I don’t want to waste the trip to town, or maybe I just don’t feel like getting the crap scared out of me by the stuffed bear in the bedroom that has managed to freak me out every time I try to sleep in there like a normal person. As soon as that black car disappears up the road, I hang the cross from the rearview mirror and decide to pick up some supplies.

But the truth is I’m not ready to read that letter. I don’t know what I’ve left behind—my mind has run the gamut from rape to abusive boyfriends and post-traumatic stress—and part of me is both dying and terrified to hear from that person *before*. Afraid of any indication of the thing that landed me on an island the size of a Dorito in the backwoods of Maine with roots five shades lighter than the rest of my hair.

Inside the Food Mart I distractedly fill a basket with deli cuts, bananas, microwave popcorn, tampons. The grocery is connected to the Trading Post—a camping, fishing, hunting store—making it the type of place you can buy vegetarian nuggets and a rifle, all in one trip. Or, in my case, wool socks and flashlight batteries. I stop in the wine aisle last. It seems fitting to toast my past as I hear from my former self. Who knows, depending on what’s in the letter, I may even need to get drunk.

I’ve just picked a cabernet with a cool label off the sale shelf—because how else do you choose when you don’t know one from the other?—when I sense someone staring at me farther down the aisle.

I look up to find a guy in a green Food Mart apron frozen on a

knee where he's been stocking a lower shelf. For a minute I wonder if he thinks I'm shoplifting or, more likely, not old enough to buy booze.

I deliberately slide the bottle into my basket. As I start to leave, I hear quick steps behind me.

"Hey. Hey—"

I turn reluctantly. Not only because I already wish I had just gone home but because, now that he's closer, I can see the chin-length hair tucked behind his ear, the blue eyes beneath thoughtful brows. And I'm standing here with bad roots and tampons in my basket.

He grabs something from the shelf. "We just got this in," he says, eyes locked on mine. The couple days' stubble on his cheeks is the color of honey, a shade lighter than his hair.

I glance at the bottle of nonalcoholic cider. "Thanks," I murmur. "I'm good."

"It's organic," he says, not even looking at it. He's got an accent so slight I can't place it, but it isn't local.

By now I just want to get out of here. The letter sitting on the counter back at the cabin has launched a march of fire ants in my gut. If what's written in that envelope is meant to be reassuring, I need that reassurance now, because I was doing a lot better with my questions before Clare and her level counsel left and I ever knew the letter existed.

I put the wine back and grab a bottle of tequila on my way to the register.

There's no one there. I swing the basket up onto the conveyor belt and look around. A moment later the same guy comes over and starts to ring me up.

"Hi again." He smiles. I look away.

Halfway through checkout, I realize I can't find my debit card. I pull out my keys and dig through my jacket pockets. And then I see it lying on the counter back at the cabin, right next to the list of all the things I just bought.

"I forgot my card," I stammer.

He shrugs. "No problem. I can set these aside or have them delivered if you want. You can pay for them then."

"No," I say quickly, stepping away. "That's okay." By now two more people are waiting in line behind me. "Sorry." I turn on my heel and hurry to the door, leaving the things on the conveyor belt.

Outside, bugs swarm the lone parking lot light. I get to my truck, grab the door handle . . . and then drop my forehead against the window with a curse. My keys are back inside on the little ledge old ladies use to write checks.

I peer through the dark window like the truck is going to come unlocked by sheer force of will. It doesn't. And there's the flashlight with the nearly dead batteries lying between the seats.

"Hey!" The voice comes from the direction of the mart's automatic door. I push away from the truck.

It's the guy, holding up my keys. "You forgot something."

"Yeah. Like my mind."

He hands me my keys and two plastic grocery bags. I look at them, bewildered.

"On me," he says.

"Oh. No, I can't—"

"Already done. Besides, that tequila looked pretty important," he says with a slight smile.

"I'll pay you back."

"It's no problem." He hesitates, and then wishes me a good night.

I pass a whole five cars on my way up Lily Bay and none on the road to the lake. Six houses tucked in the trees along this mile-and-a-half stretch of gravel called Black Point Road share the dock where the

boat is tied beneath a motion-sensor light. Modest homes of normal people living lives full of details they might like to forget, but have somehow learned to live with.

The water is black beneath the boat and I'm glad for the cabin's wan kitchen lights, relieved even for its parade of moose above the window, the bear waiting in the bedroom.

Inside, I dump the bags on the counter and sit down on the sofa with the letter, not bothering to take off my boots. After a long moment of staring at my name, I slide my finger under the edge of the envelope and tear it open.

Emily, it's me. You.

Don't ask about the last two years. If everything went as planned, you've forgotten them along with several other details of your life. Don't try to remember—they tell me it's impossible—and don't go digging.

Start over. Get a job. Fall in love. Live a simple, quiet life. But leave the past where it is. And keep your face off the Web. Your life depends on it. Others' lives depend on it.

By the way, Emily isn't your birth name. You died in an accident. You paid extra for that.

I look up from the letter and take in the tiny, ecofriendly cabin with new eyes. No computer. No phone. No cable television. I'm twenty minutes from the nearest town, population sixteen hundred, where people are outnumbered by invisible moose.

I didn't come to start over.

I came to hide.

If you enjoyed this preview of *The Progeny*,
check out the entire novel!

