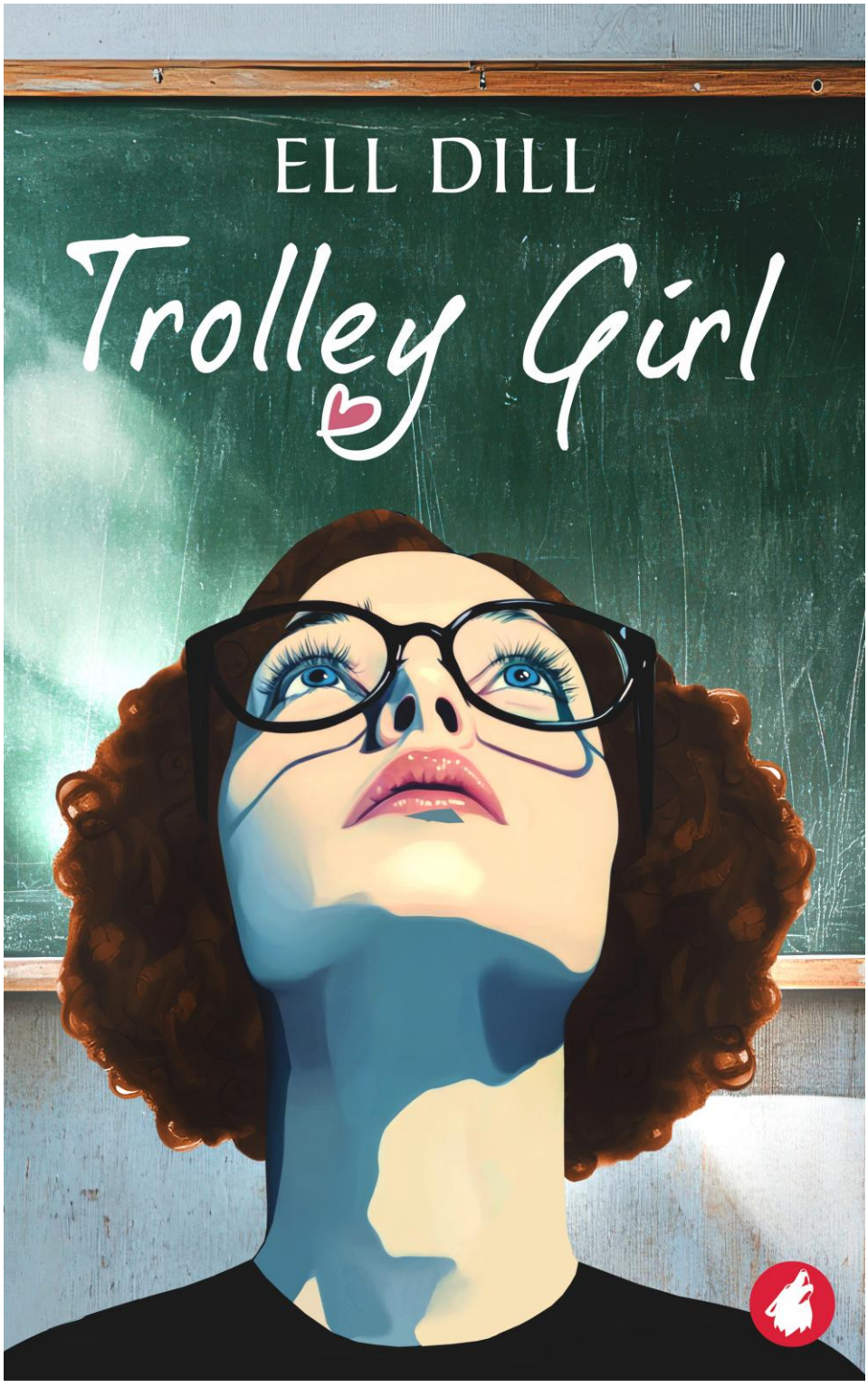

ELL DILL
Trolley Girl

Chapter 1

"Why the actual hell are you taking Jeff's shoe off his foot?"

I wish I could say that I wasn't often found asking questions like that, but I taught high school boys: turn your back for two seconds to sneeze and they go completely feral on you, which was the case with the attempted kidnapping of Jeff's shoe.

"He took mine first!" Dylan pointed accusingly at Luke.

I looked, and, sure enough, Luke had a third shoe resting between his two. How had he done that without me seeing? The desks were in a U, and they sat nowhere near each other!

"So Luke took your shoe—Luke, how and why?"

That was met with only a shrug and a cocky smirk.

"And your response to that was to take Jeff's shoe?" I confirmed with Dylan.

"Jeff is the obvious next choice! I was doing a moral thing and preventing it!" Dylan proudly declared, dragging our subject into his defense.

"What…? But that isn't… Sit down!" My voice cracked from my frustration as I gestured to Dylan's empty desk on the other side of the room. Normally, a teacher's voice hitting a pitch that only dolphins could hear would result in infantile giggling and a loss of all authority for a solid twenty minutes. However, I'd never labored under the delusion that I could be intimidating to teenage boys when I came in at five feet tall and one hundred and five pounds on a good day, so squeaking out an instruction like that really only added to the cartoonish charm I relied on instead.

I looked over at Jay, one of my rational and sarcastic favorites, and asked, "Why do I bother asking?"

"Beats me. The answer never makes any sense." Jay shrugged but couldn't help chuckling.

"It makes perfect nonsense," Henry (next to Jay) pointed out.

"That it does, Henry. That it does. Anyway, back to the concept of freedom," I said, returning to my lesson. "Now, freedom is not the ability to do whatever you want without consequences, like Jeff, Luke, and Dylan seem to think. Freedom is the ability to do what you need to do while being able to be who you are."

I've never been good at admitting that I was good at things, but teaching was something I'd always owned. By turning the attempt to disrupt my class by stealing each other's shoes into a perfect example of the concept I was teaching, I had the whole class's eager attention.

My students launched themselves into a passionate breakdown of why Jeff didn't need his shoes stolen: taking turns at the board listing the things humans needed to live, adding next to them how having his shoes stolen would prevent Jeff from living well, and repeating the process for Luke and Dylan as shoe thieves. Hard to argue with those results.

When the bell rang, I dismissed my class with a gesture to the door. "Gentlemen, thank you for listening. Go do something good."

Once my classroom cleared out, I headed downstairs to the tech office. I'd created a promotion for myself at the start of my third year of teaching by pointing out that the reliance on technology in a pandemic/remote year required more than just the one set of hands our tech office had at the time. Given that about half the faculty at Philip Neri Prep was old white men who screamed in outrage when the switch from chalkboard to whiteboards happened, it didn't take much convincing. Now it was official, and I was paid to offer tech support during my off blocks.

"What up, dingus?" Luis greeted me and held his hand up as I walked in.

"Same old, dumdum." I high-fived him with as much oomph as I could muster.

"Ooo, good one!" He shook his hand out, no doubt feeling the same tingling that I had in my own hand. "Class good?"

"I've got a shoe-thievery ring in my D block," I told him. "They're stealing each other's shoes right off their feet."

"And you naturally turned that into an example for your lesson." Luis grinned.

"Well, what else are you going to do when the shoe thievery starts? I'm just glad they waited until the morality unit to start that." I dropped my bag on the floor and myself into my desk chair. "How's the load today?"

"Not bad. I do need your tiny baby hands on a ticket, though."

"Switch cabinet or power button?" I asked. I swear half my tech job was reaching into small spaces to unplug or switch something on.

"Switch cabinet. Aubrey's office. Vamos." Luis locked his desktop, sending all three of his monitors dark, and took a few steps out the door.

"Luis," I called accusingly after him, not getting up yet.

He didn't even need to turn around. Luis backed up until he was able to grab his phone and keys off his desk. He held both up dramatically before putting them in his blazer pockets.

"What did you use to do without me?" I teased as I got up to follow him into the now empty hallway.

"Use the security cameras to track where I'd left my phone or keys." He nudged my shoulder with his elbow, gleefully taking advantage of our massive height difference yet again.

We strolled through the carpeted first floor toward the office with *Assistant Headmaster* hanging over the door, teasing each other lightly as we went.

Luis took the lead into Aubrey's office. "Hey, Aubrey. Mind if I have Erin reach her baby hands into the switch cabinet?"

"I swear, you just keep me around to make jokes like that." I rolled my eyes.

"Job security is always nice," Aubrey said. "Unless you plan to grow any."

"Not since the fifth grade, unfortunately." I sighed dramatically. "Mind if I squeeze awkwardly behind your bookshelves?"

"Be my guest."

Aubrey's office had a weird alcove that was lined with bookshelves and housed one of the school's three big switch cabinets on the back wall. We didn't mess with this one much, which I was thankful for since it required some acrobatics to get to.

I pulled my claddagh ring and Vibe band off my right hand and gave them to Luis. The elastic cloth bracelets with motivational phrases were my only rotating jewelry. *What's the best that could happen?* today's said. I'd learned the hard way to not reach into a switch cabinet while wearing a Vibe unless I wanted it to get caught on something and break; RIP ironic *Make Mistakes Today* band. "Okay, boss. What am I doing?"

"Can you follow this purple cable back to its port?" Luis tugged on a cable.

"Can do." I squeezed myself between the wall, bookshelf, and switch cabinet that was now pulled as far away from the wall as it could go (not very).

I spent a minute following the purple cable with my fingers. When it vanished into the nest between the sides of the routers, Luis tugged on it so I could be sure I was following the right one.

"Hey, Luis, I heard back from Emlex this morning," Aubrey said from her desk.

"Really? Are they in?" Luis asked excitedly.

"They're in. They'll send someone here Wednesday morning."

I tugged on the cable I was following. "Still have the right one?"

"Yeah, that's it. You're still not at the outlet yet?"

"Hey, man, it's tangled like Christmas lights, and I'm doing this blind. It's gonna take a minute," I replied.

"Since we have you trapped here, Erin, we need to ask you for a favor," Aubrey said.

"Oh, that can't be good."

"Wednesday morning, an engineer from Emlex is coming to start setting up our new boilers and solar-powered grid."

"Wow, how'd we get that?" I asked as I was forced to reach my free hand in to untangle the knot my cable was stuck in, making me press awkwardly back against the wall with my foot to keep me balanced. "They're the top tech company in the world. That must've been expensive."

"The CEO is an alumnus, and he's looking to test out his new system. Good press for him, free upgrades for us," Aubrey explained. "How are you still upright like that?"

"Don't ask, or gravity might notice I'm cheating it." I was now on tiptoe on my left foot with my right out on the adjacent wall. "And what can I do to help with this upgrade?"

"We were hoping you'd act as the liaison for the engineer," Luis said. "You know where everything is and have two back-to-back off blocks."

"You're also very friendly and can put a good face on the school," Aubrey added.

"You mean I'm the least threatening female teacher in theology, and you'd like to show off the commodity." Wouldn't be the first time.

"A little," Aubrey said. "This whole upgrade is about progress. That's you."

Progress. If only she knew how right she was.

"Got it!" I yelled triumphantly as the Ethernet cable clicked back into place.

"And we've got link lights," Luis said from where he was watching the other end of the cable. "Good work, dingus."

"Thank you, dumdum."

It took some fancy maneuvering to get back on solid ground and out from the corner I'd been wedged into. When I was finally on both feet and putting my ring and Vibe back on, I looked at Aubrey. "So, I just show them where to go?"

"No, I'd like you to stay and be helpful. Learn all you can about the new system, so we'll know what we're working with once it's up and running."

"I'm making you the point person on this system," Luis said. "I want you to get to know all of it."

"Really? Are you sure you want me doing this?" I wasn't nearly important enough for that responsibility.

Luis rolled his eyes. "You can handle it. Now say yes so we can go see if that worked."

"I'll do my best," I answered with a shrug.

"Excellent," Aubrey said. "Then I will send the engineer to you when he gets here on Wednesday. I wasn't told a name, but I'll let you know if I find out before then."

"Sounds good."



I was packing my stuff up to head home when Luis asked me, "You sure you're good to help out with the upgrade? I know I kind of put you on the spot there."

"Yeah, I can handle it. I don't know how much help I'll be, but I'll give it a shot. If nothing else, I can pass tools and reach into small places."

"At least try to learn as much as you can so we can manage this thing on our own. I don't know how much tech support we'll get from Emlex once it's up and running."

"I'll do my best. I look forward to a new boiler. Maybe now my classroom won't be Dante's Inferno in the winter."

"Be nice to the engineer, and he'll make sure of that." Luis's eyes glistened with mischief. "He could also be your new boyfriend."

"Who's Erin's new boyfriend?" Holly asked as she came into the office with her stuff.

Holly taught junior and senior English at Neri. She and I met in September of my first year, and she decided that I was stuck with her now. I really didn't get a say in the matter, but she quickly became the best friend I ever had. No one in my life really got me the way Holly did.

"Hey, lady." I smiled at her. You couldn't not feel better when Holly was around, best friend or not. "Luis has me babysitting the engineer from Emlex when they're here, giving us an upgrade. You know how his mind runs."

"Is this engineer even her age?" Holly asked Luis.

"I don't know," Luis replied, maintaining his evil look. "Not like it matters, though. You know Erin will hook up with anything that moves."

He made jokes like that constantly, enjoying watching my uncomfortable, perpetually single ass squirm at the thought. I'd grown up in a conservative Irish Catholic family, which meant I knew next to nothing about such adult topics except to feel guilty for any kind of sexual urges I felt. I'd spent my time since moving out of my parents' house prioritizing figuring out my mental health, which meant that I was only just beginning to work through that sexual guilt. That innocence was Luis's favorite button to push.

"Maybe." I got up and threw on my coat and backpack to leave with Holly. "Yet it will be a cold day in hell before I ever hook up with you."

Luis choked on his indignation as I walked past, Holly following me and laughing her head off.

"I love you so much, lady!"

"Evil!" Luis called after me.

Holly and I walked out of the building into the late January cold. Winter in Berch, Massachusetts, didn't bother me much, but Holly hated the cold and would complain about it constantly.

"So, what about this engineer?" Holly burrowed farther into her coat. "Could you actually date him?"

"I don't know a name, an age, or even a gender." I shook my head. "That's just Luis being Luis."

"Well, here's hoping it's a young, cute guy." Holly crossed her fingers.

"Totally," I played along as I put my stuff in my car. "See you later."

I got into my car and sighed, pushing away the first thought that came to mind at that statement: could also be a young, cute *girl.* I immediately shut that thought down. It was not allowed. Never would be for a Catholic theology and morality teacher. I'd get those thoughts to stop someday.

Chapter 2

Wednesday morning found me standing in front of my mirror in a red plaid button-down and navy uniform pants, looking very much like my normal self despite Luis and Holly getting into my head about the engineer being a potential boyfriend. I did have to tuck my shirt in, though, which meant a belt and the satisfaction of knowing I looked at least a little nicer than normal, just in case.

I left my brown hair the same as always: short, curly, side bangs that kept falling behind my glasses. I would already be anxious meeting this new engineer and trying to learn a new system in the building; the last thing I needed was to be worrying about attempting something new with my hair. The best thing I could do for my brain today would be to keep as much the same as I possibly could.

"Whoa, a belt," Holly said as she came into the office. "What's the occasion?"

"My shirt was too big to leave untucked. So, belt." I tried not to be self-conscious that she immediately noticed and commented.

"Very adult of you."

"That is so hurtful. I don't call you mean names."

Holly laughed. "You're twenty-nine. You're an adult. Deal with it."

"Hurtful!"

Holly stayed in the office, telling me about the restaurant she and her husband Neville had gone to the night before. It sounded pretty upscale, and they'd gone for the elaborate multi-course tasting menu. I'd have hated every second of that, but Holly's whole face lit up while she was explaining it to me. She was way too cool to be hanging out with me.

"You meet the engineer today, right?" she asked.

"Yeah, dunno when, though. I still have no information on them, and I'm still unclear about what they expect of me. The best I can do at engineering is plugging in the red, white, and yellow cables and switching to video 3."

"That is honorary-doctorate-level work."

"I earn nothing until I beat the Bugs Bunny game," I grumbled.

"Will you ever let that go?" Holly rolled her eyes.

"I can't. It haunts me," I whispered with a dramatic shudder. "I will never forgive my dad for unplugging the TV. We—"

"You and your brother were at the last level, and there was no reason for your dad to swap the attic TV with the old living room one immediately like that, yadda yadda yadda." She flatly recited the rest of the story and patted my knee. "Try not to wallow. I have to go print quizzes."

I froze. "Isn't your quiz today?"

"Yeah. So?"

"You're printing quizzes the morning of? Lady, the copiers can smell fear!"

It's true. There wasn't a teacher alive who would disagree with the scientific fact that copying/printing a test or quiz the morning of was a guarantee that the machine would jam or break.

"I know, I know. I've been a bit behind lately. It'll be fine."

"You don't believe in that word," I said.

Holly shrugged. "I know, but I've got no other choice. I'm desperate."

"Gah, stop it!" I covered my ears. "Why not just say Beetlejuice three times, woman? Get out of my office with this nonsense!"

Holly laughed and held out her foot for me to tap three times with my own before heading off to her inevitable copier doom.

While I waited for the engineer to show up, I turned to the annoying parent email I'd gotten at eleven thirty the previous night. As a rule, I didn't answer school emails after five, especially in this case, where the parent wanted me to reopen a month-old extra-credit assignment that her son chose not to do the first time.

Just as I was artfully crafting my closing "so there" paragraph, footsteps approached behind me. They were too light to be Luis's and not clunky enough to be Holly's boots.

"Excuse me," a gentle voice said.

"One second." I didn't look up from my email. "I will forget what I was about to say if I don't write it out now."

"That's relatable." The person chuckled.

I finished my email and saved it as a draft for Holly to check later. "Okay, how can I help you?" I swiveled around in my desk chair, and damn was it worth the effort.

Standing in my office was a tall woman who looked to be about my age, her long black hair in a braid over her shoulder. Her face was gentle and warm, and her green eyes popped from whatever shade of eyeshadow she'd applied perfectly to her light-brown skin. Her cherry-red lips grinned back at me. She wore a black leather jacket with the hunter-green Emlex logo on each biceps, brown fitted cargo pants tucked into knee-high boots, and held a motorcycle helmet under her arm.

My brain blue-screened at the sight of her.

"I'm looking for Erin Fitzpatrick," she said. "I'm here from Emlex. The office downstairs told me I could find her in the tech office."

This was the engineer? Oh, the fact that I was getting paid to spend my free time with this vision was proof to me that not only did God exist, but that he was good.

Snap out of it! You're just staring at her! Words!

"You found her," I managed to say. "I'm Erin."

"Samira Azusa. It's nice to meet you." She smiled and offered her hand.

As I got up to shake her hand, the shoelace on my right shoe somehow worked its way under the wheel of my chair, sending it flying after me when I took a step forward. The seat slammed into my knees and threw me back down into the chair, which then rolled into the water cooler.

"Oh my God! Are you okay?" Samira put her helmet down on Luis's desk and rushed over to me while the water cooler glugged in protest at the attack.

"I'm more mortified than anything else. What just happened?" Strike what I said about God being good. God was a Looney Tunes animator.

"Looks like your shoelace is hooked on the wheel of the chair. Don't move; I got it." Samira crouched and carefully freed my foot from the chair wheel, putting her right in front of me and pushing the air out of my lungs.

Was breathing important?

"There you go," Samira said.

I cleared my throat and tried to ignore my ears burning. "Did it at least look less cartoonish than it felt?"

"Nope, that was straight out of the Muppets. I swear I've seen Kermit the Frog fall exactly like that," Samira teased. "It's okay. Saves me from doing the first embarrassing thing of this partnership."

"Glad to be of service, then." I couldn't help smiling as I stood up. She was a full head taller than me. "Can we try this again? I'm Erin Fitzpatrick."

"Samira Azusa."

"Wait, Azusa? Like Emlex CEO Arham Azusa?" I asked. No way did they send in the CEO's daughter to our rinky-dink school for upgrades.

"Yup, that's my dad. I'm the head engineer." Samira's brow creased as she quickly added, "Don't worry, I'm fully capable of handling the upgrades."

"I have no doubt," I replied. Emlex was known for its high-quality work; they wouldn't have sent someone who couldn't handle a test project like this.

We shook hands without any further slapstick comedy, thankfully. Samira had a firm handshake, her callused skin announcing that this woman was no stranger to hard work.

"So, you're the engineer I've been assigned to shadow?"

"That would be me. I'm sorry I'm early. They told me school started at eight forty-five, but I figured I'd try to beat the kids here so I wasn't weaving my bike around half-asleep teenagers."

"Smart idea. You can leave your helmet on my desk. Unless you think we'll have need for a motorcycle helmet while inspecting the boilers."

"That depends. How often do things like that happen to you?" She put her helmet on my desk and gestured to my chair.

"Hey, I will have you know that I am the epitome of grace."

"So, all the time?"

"At least once a week, yeah."

"Well, don't worry. I'll be sure to watch out for your head while I'm here. You won't need a helmet."

Before we could say anything else, my pocket pinged with Holly's text tone.

"Sorry, that's my best friend. Let me just make sure she doesn't need tech help." I pulled out my phone.

Holly: *You may have been right about the copier smelling fear. Help?*

"I'm so sorry. Do you mind if I go fix a copier before we get started?"

"Not at all. To the copier." Samira gestured for me to lead the way out of the office.

I pulled my pad of sticky notes from my back pocket and wrote a quick "with the engineer" note to leave on Luis's desk before leading the way from the office.

"Wow, that's resourceful," Samira said as she followed me.

"Yeah, I've found my memory to be unreliable, so I've come up with a system. I'm probably the only human to go through a whole pad of sticky notes once a month. It's kludgy, but it's only stupid if it doesn't work."

"Yo, Fitz!" A tall senior walked by and held out a fist to me.

"Yo, Aiden!" I matched his tone and fist-bumped him, turning so we could watch the following explosion before continuing the walk down the hall. "At this point, I should probably buy stock in the company with all the sticky notes I go through."

Samira looked back at Aiden before turning to me with a slight frown. "How did you just do that?"

"The average high school teacher goes through about twenty-eight fist bumps a week," I told her my made-up statistic on the way to the English office. "Eventually, you can just kinda tell who's an explosion guy and who isn't."

"No, not the fist bump. You just paused a conversation about sticky notes, switched your entire demeanor to match a teenage boy's, then dove back into the conversation without missing a beat."

I shrugged, inwardly delighted that I'd manage to impress her somehow. "I'm not entirely about cartoonish mishaps, you know."

"Yes, I'm beginning to see that."

I stopped at the door with a wooden sign declaring it to be the English office and opened it wide enough for Samira to follow me inside.

"Lady, what did you do?" I demanded of my best friend, who was kneeling in front of an angrily beeping copier.

"It jammed, and none of us can reach it."

"And what did I tell you about copying quizzes the day of?" I asked.

Holly sighed. "You were right, Erin."

"Even a blind squirrel occasionally finds a nut," I said as I pulled off my Vibe (*You Got This!*) and ring and handed them to her. "At least tell me you got enough for your first class."

"No, I barely got half. Please fix it," Holly begged.

"Damsel in distress doesn't suit you, lady." I squeezed her wrist three times before getting on the floor in front of the beeping copier to find the jam. "Holly, that's Samira, the engineer from Emlex. Samira, this is Holly, my foolish best friend, who copied her quizzes the morning of."

"Copiers smell fear." Holly sighed. "Nice to meet you, Samira."

"Likewise."

"You see it?" Holly asked me.

"Yup, there it is." I pushed my rolled sleeve farther past my elbow before shoving my arm into the copier drawer to reach the jam. "Damn, that's really stuck in there. You really angered this thing." I nudged my glasses back into place with my shoulder as I tugged on the stuck paper.

"Oh, hush," Holly grumbled.

"Hey, man, I only get to be right once every blue moon. I'll take my victories where I can get them." Another careful maneuver and tug and the jammed paper finally let me get it free of the rollers without ripping. "Ah-ha!"

I pulled my now toner-covered arm out of the copier and put all the drawers back in place.

The machine stopped beeping, the inside started moving, and more of Holly's quizzes were being spit out into the printer tray. The other two English teachers in the office sarcastically began clapping for me as I took a mock bow.

"Thank you, thank you. I'll be here all week," I played along.

"Lady, thank you." Holly sighed with relief as she offered my Vibe and ring back.

"I got you." I took them in my left hand. "Next time, copy two days in advance, okay?"

"I'll do my best," she said. "You two working on the upgrades?"

"Yup, boilers first," Samira answered. "Actually, Erin should probably get the toner off her arm first."

I held my inked-up arm at eye level and twisted it to see how covered it was. "Yeah, not a bad idea."

"Thanks for fixing the copier," Arthur, the department chair, said before going back to his newspaper. "Send Holly the bill."

"I'll be sure to do that." I laughed. "See you guys later."

Samira opened the door, stepped out into the hallway, and shifted aside to let me out so I could lead the way to the bathroom.

"So, is that your typical tech emergency?" she asked as we weaved through the suddenly crowded hallway.

"Oh, yeah. I can't go a week without having to blindly stick my arm into something," I told her. "I'm like the only one in the building with tiny hands to reach into tight places."

"So, if you got a dollar for everything you've had to blindly stick your hand into…?"

"I could custom-design my own house in the market our parents ruined with a library and a giant pond in the backyard."

"Impressive." Samira laughed, the melodic sound lifting me up for a moment.

At the women's room I had to hand my Vibe and ring to Samira so I could fish my keys out of my pocket to unlock the door.

"Wow, you must be important around here," Samira said as she closed the door behind us. "How many keys is that?"

I glanced at the keys in my palm and counted. "Nine including the new one for the boiler room Luis gave me yesterday."

"How many does the average teacher get?"

"Just one usually."

"See? Important. Good to know they set me up with someone at the top."

I chuckled as I stuck my arm under the tap and turned the water on. "Please. I'm barely top-adjacent. It's just easier to send me to do the grunt work if I have the right keys."

"Accept the compliment."

"I've never been good at that," I admitted as the toner washed off my skin into the sink. "Genuine compliments make me squirm."

"Noted. I'll have to break you of that."

I laughed while scrubbing the last of the toner off. It took too many of the crappy school paper towels to dry my arm off before I could reclaim my Vibe and ring. "Good luck with that. Holly hasn't broken me yet."

The PA beeped to life in the ceiling. "Good morning. Please stand."

"Ah dip, the bell rang." I stared up at the loudspeaker. "How'd I miss that?"

"Morning prayer?" Samira asked.

"Yeah, we gotta wait in here. There's no moving in the halls during prayer." I slipped the Vibe and ring back on.

We stood in the silence, listening to the poorly written prayer about a saint that no one had ever heard of who met a gruesome death while awkwardly staring at the tiled floor. I made the sign of the cross automatically at the end, but Samira didn't.

Prayer over, I led the way out of the bathroom toward the stairs to the first floor. It was way easier to navigate between classes when there weren't a thousand kids in the hallway staring at their phones. Samira was able to walk next to me now instead of behind.

"So, what's first?" I asked.

"First I just want to see what you've already got," she told me. "I've never been here, and the blueprints they sent me were a million years old, so I doubt they're up-to-date."

"Oh, I'm sure they are. It's rare that you'll find a Catholic school that's entirely updated. Just having air conditioning is huge, even more so if it's central air and not window units."

"Wow, really?"

"Yeah, that's fairly standard. Where'd you go to school as a kid?"

"I went to boarding school in Rhode Island," Samira said. "It was all new and state of the art. My father wouldn't have sent me if the school wasn't getting new upgrades of some kind every five years or so."

Before I could even think of what to say to that, one of my current students panic-walked toward us.

"Whoa, hey." I held my hands up to stop him. "Where's the fire, Tuck?"

"Miss Fitz, I'm so cooked." Tucker panted. "My little brother got sick this morning so it took forever to get out of the house so I'm late and they didn't give me a pass and Mr. Edwards is gonna murder me."

"Okay, okay, breathe." I squeezed his shoulder and held eye contact. "I got you, okay? I would never let Mr. Edwards kill you before baseball season starts."

That got me a chuckle from the sophomore as he regained control of his breathing. "But—"

"No buts," I said firmly. We headed to the classroom at the end of the hall that belonged to Mr. Edwards. "As much as I would enjoy having one less journal to grade every week, you're not nearly annoying enough for me to let you get murdered before the end of the third trimester."

"I am late, though," Tucker said.

"Look, life happens. Sometimes we just gotta own up to it and face the music," I said as we got to his class. "Today's not one of those days, though."

"Huh?"

I opened the door and ushered Tucker in before looking at the scowling history teacher. "So sorry, Mr. Edwards. Tucker was with me."

"Oh. Well, okay, then. Take your seat, Mr. Ranges."

Tucker looked back at me in wonder as he realized that he was not about to die prematurely.

I winked before closing the door and going back to Samira. "Sorry about that. To the boilers?"

"Uh, right. Boilers." She scrunched her eyebrows together. "How'd you do that?"

"Eh, just trying to throw him a bone. He's a good kid, and being two minutes late because his brother got sick is not detention-worthy if you ask me."

"How often do you find yourself rescuing wayward teenagers?"

I shrugged. "Who keeps track?"

Samira chuckled and kept up with me. It was clear she had more questions, but she wasn't asking. Maybe there were too many to pick where to start. Or maybe she decided it wasn't worth it. I figured we would be spending a solid amount of time together anyway, so they'd probably come up later.

We moved in silence past the main office and the nurse's office on the way to the boiler room.

"Hi, Nurse Erin!" I called as we passed.

"Hi, Teacher Erin!" she called back.

"Friends with the nurse with the same name?" Samira asked.

"I have to be since I'm prone to cartoonish mishaps," I said. "Here we go."

I stopped at the odd, too-big door in the front vestibule and pulled out my newest key to unlock it. It creaked loudly as I pulled it open.

"Oh, I'm gonna get murdered down there, aren't I?" Samira peeked over my shoulder.

The door opened all the way to reveal a rickety wooden staircase leading down to a dark, stone-walled basement that looked straight out of a horror movie.

"I'm convinced there's at least one body buried down there." I tilted my head toward the basement. "When Luis showed me around, he called it the Murder Tour."

"So, who wants to go down into the Murder Cellar first?"

"After you." I dramatically gestured down the stairs.

"Aren't you supposed to be my tour guide?" Samira just as dramatically clutched her imaginary pearls. "Chivalry is truly dead, Erin."

"Chivalry isn't dead; I'm just a coward." I held both hands up with a chuckle.

"Together?"

"Together."

We each took an exaggerated deep breath and went down the creaky stairs side by side.

The cellar was dimly lit from the light in the hallway and smelled just as stuffy as every other basement I'd been in. The room was long and narrow and lined by ancient boilers that had definitely been there since at least the Clinton administration. Dust mites floated around in the stale air, and I knew without a doubt there would be at least one massive cobweb in the corner when I turned the lights on.

"Yup, this is creepy." Samira grabbed my arm. "We're definitely getting murdered down here."

When I could breathe again at the feeling of her holding on to me, I managed to joke, "I'm flattered you think I'm safe. How do you know I'm not the murderer?"

"Because you lost a battle between gravity and your shoelace." She gripped my arm just a bit tighter. "You are the least intimidating person I've ever met."

"That's exactly what I want you to think." I patted her hand. "The light switch is on the other side of the room. Do you want to stay here or come with me?" I tried to sound as gentle as I could, not liking her being scared.

"It's on the other side of the room? What kind of design is that?"

"I didn't say it was a good design; I just said that's where the switch is."

"I'm gonna stick with you if that's okay," she said quietly.

"Absolutely." I had exactly zero problems with letting her hang on to my arm like that for longer. "Just so you know, if the bogeyman shows up, I'll be using you as a shield."

"You're the worst." She chuckled.

"Aren't I, though?" I loved knowing that I'd managed to make her feel better.

It took both way too long and way too short for me to find the light switch. The room was significantly less creepy with the lights on. I was right: massive cobwebs.

Samira looked around. "This is by far the creepiest boiler room I've ever been in."

"I imagine you've been in many in your line of work," I said. "That's a bummer."

"I've never had a tour guide, though," she replied. "Most places just point me to where they need the work done and leave me to it."

"We want to be self-sufficient. If we know the basics, then we don't have to bother you if something has a little problem."

"I respect that." Samira was quiet for a moment as she looked around, then seemed to realize she was still holding my arm and let go quickly. "Sorry about that. Dark cellars scare me."

"Hey, I'm glad you feel safe enough with me to trust me in the Murder Cellar," I told her honestly. "Okay, what's first?"

Samira handed me a notepad and asked me to write down whatever she said while she poked around the boilers.

I sat on one of the steps and jotted down anything she called out loud to me. I didn't understand a word of it, but Samira knew what she was doing. It was amazing getting to see someone so clearly in their element, confidently doing the thing they were best at. Samira had no problem navigating through the cobwebs and dust to find whatever she was looking for around the boilers. By the time the bell rang for the end of E block, I'd written her three pages of notes that made no sense to me, but I was deeply impressed with Samira.

"Do you have to go?" Samira finally turned to face me for the first time since she got to work.

"Nope, I'm good for the next fifty minutes," I said. "I'm off two blocks back-to-back. That's why they assigned me to you."

"Is that why?"

"It's certainly not because of my engineering prowess," I said. "I couldn't tell you what any of this means."

"Just as long as I can read it." Samira reached for the notepad. "Whoa, cursive."

"Is that okay?"

"Yeah, it's gorgeous. I don't know anyone who writes in cursive."

"I went to Catholic school all my life. We learned cursive in second grade and weren't allowed to use print after that," I explained. "My print is terrible. My cursive isn't great either. Using gel pen just makes it look cooler."

"No, I love it. It's got personality."

What do you say when someone compliments your handwriting like that? I just smiled and nodded, hoping that would be sufficient.

Samira looked through the notes I'd taken and decided she had everything she needed to get started with her crew. She called her team and gave instructions I couldn't follow as I pretended to not be listening to the conversation.

"Okay, they're on their way to start disconnecting these clunkers," she told me after hanging up. "Nothing to do now but wait."

"Cool. You wanna wait down here or—?"

"Please let's wait outside," she cut me off. "I need to know the sun still exists."

I laughed and headed toward the stairs. "We've only been down here an hour."

"That's an hour longer than I expected to spend in a Murder Cellar today, Erin."

We hustled up the stairs to get out of the boiler room. Thankfully, it was only a few feet from the front door, allowing us to step right outside.

Samira lifted her head toward the sun, taking in a deep breath of the oddly warm morning air. "So much better." She smiled into the cold breeze. The gentle wind blew her hair back as the sun lit up her face.

"Yeah, better," I breathed out. I couldn't help staring at her. The woman had no business being that gorgeous. It was all I could do to shake the thoughts out of my head, struggling hard to push that feeling way down.

"So, how long have you been a teacher?" Samira asked, thankfully oblivious to my internal existential crisis.

"This is my fifth year," I told her.

"You must really like it."

I shrugged. "It just makes sense to me, you know?"

"Yeah, I do. Engineering makes sense to me like that."

"How long have you been doing it?"

"Oh, forever." She smiled softly. "My mother was an engineer. I used to love seeing her work on things when I was a kid. She would take things apart and then show me how to put them back together again. She taught me to read blueprints and how to build things out of any materials. By the time I was four, she had me making elaborate bridges out of any random shape of uncooked pasta."

"I bet the blanket forts at your house were the best," I said, feeling as if I could drown in her eyes the way they sparkled as she talked.

"Oh, my blanket forts could go miles." She laughed.

"What did your mom think when you decided to go into the business? Was she over the moon on a pasta bridge you built her?"

Samira's smile dimmed, and the twinkle in her eye went right out, making me feel as if I'd been punched in the gut knowing I'd caused that somehow.

"I'm sorry," I said quickly, needing to understand how I'd hurt her so I could never do it again. "What did I say?"

"No, it's all right." She sat down on the front steps. "My mom died when I was nine."

My stomach dropped at that revelation. I sat next to her, not knowing what to say. "I'm sorry."

"I think that's why I love this work so much. It's the closest I get to her now that she's gone," she whispered, tugging at her braid.

"I'm sure she'd be real proud of you," I offered. "How could she not be?"

"Thanks." She grinned a little at that.

We sat together in silence for a bit, just feeling the heaviness of that unexpected twist in conversation.

Samira eventually let out a deep breath and chuckled. "Sorry about that. Didn't mean to spoil the mood."

"Hey, no worries," I answered. "Your mom is connected to your work. It's okay to think about her."

"Yeah, but I try not to bring people down with that."

"Anyone who isn't willing to embrace why engineering is important to you isn't worth talking about it to," I said firmly. "It's your work and your passion. You're allowed to feel however you feel about it."

Samira shifted to look at me more carefully. She was searching my face for something very intensely.

I didn't like that. I'd let myself get too comfortable with her already and forgotten that I needed to protect myself. I was giving too much away that I wasn't allowed to feel. Before she could say anything else, I changed the topic just slightly.

"Hey, I have an engineering question I've always wondered about. How many ducks do you think it takes to equal horsepower?"

"What?" Samira laughed.

"Like if we switched from measuring in horsepower to duckpower, how many ducks do you think equal one horse?"

"Well, that depends," she played along. "Are we talking about boats or cars?"

"Interesting, does it change for boats?"

"Boats are aquatic, as are ducks. So, logic would suggest that it would take fewer if we're talking about duckpower in the water than on land."

We sat laughing while debating the intricacies of duckpower versus horsepower for a while. It was good to just sit and laugh about nothing and way safer than the emotional topics we'd been on before. I was already starting to feel my social battery drain from that conversation even if we were past it already. It'd be a long day of teaching after that.

When the crew showed up, Samira snapped into boss mode and started directing them on where to go and what tools they would need.

I hovered behind her and tried to stay out of the way.

The crew clearly knew what to do and were flying around me like a hurricane, Samira conducting safely from the eye while I was treading water just out of reach. It only took a few minutes of that whirlwind for my anxiety to kick in and insist that I get out of there *now*: *too many people too much noise don't know what's happening we are in the way MOVE!*

Thankfully, the bell would be ringing to announce the next block within the next ten minutes, giving me an out. Samira was so focused on her crew, and I had neither the words nor ability to explain sensory overload to her, so I just slipped back inside and made a beeline for the bathroom on the second floor.

I locked myself in one of the stalls and closed my eyes while taking careful deep breaths. Breathe in for four, hold it for seven, breathe out for eight. *It's okay. You're safe. You're alone. The crowd is gone. You're not in the way here.*

Four, seven, eight.

Four, seven, eight.

You did your best. You're safe. You have time to regroup. You can just call a catch-up day if you can't teach.

Four, seven, eight.

You're okay.



By the time I managed to drag myself down to tech after school, the hallways were mostly empty. I walked past the occasional student on their way to practice as I tried to rehearse what I'd tell Luis when he asked why I'd ditched Samira.

When I got to tech, I found it empty with Luis's chair facing the door, telling me that he'd run out to take a call.

The guilt was already stirring, but I'd been handed an out and I needed to take it. I threw my coat on, got my stuff, and left, texting Luis that I had to go.

There was nothing quite like the feeling of coming home. All the remaining tension left me the moment I cleared the landing and dropped my keys in the bowl on my end table. Luis had simply texted back a rock-on emoji, which meant I was free from any explaining for the day. The familiar bling coming from my phone when I dropped into the corner of my sectional, however, reminded me that I'd skipped a step in my hasty retreat from the building.

Holly: *Lady?*

I'd forgotten to tell her I was leaving. We didn't always head out together, but we always at least let the other know when we were going. Her car had still been in the lot when I left, which meant she saw my empty parking spot and worried.

Erin: *I'm sorry. I forgot to text you when I left. I'm home.*

Holly: *You ok?*

No. Not remotely. Today had been exhausting and wonderful and scary and beautiful, and I had no idea how to express any of that to Holly, who had no idea what internal struggles I was fighting. I could barely figure the words out for myself, let alone explain it to my best friend despite how much I wished I could talk to her about it. But I couldn't. I could never talk to anyone about it.

Erin: *I'm fine.*

That was a mistake. Holly didn't believe in that word. But I couldn't tell her what was actually wrong with me, and I couldn't lie for crap. So I said the only thing I could and just hoped she'd let it go.

Holly: *I'm here. What do you need?*

What did I need? I needed today to have gone better. I needed my family to not be conservative Irish Catholics. I needed the Catholic Church to be inclusive and not permit its followers to spread hatred of people who were different. I needed to not still be so heavily influenced by my family's beliefs. I needed to feel more confident and less anxious.

I needed to stop the knowledge I'd pushed deep down from popping back up.

I needed to not be bisexual.

Erin: *Nothing. I'll be ok.*

To continue reading,
please purchase

Trolley Girl

By Ell Dill

This excerpt is offered by Ylva Publishing.
Its primary function is the orientation of interested readers.
Ylva Publishing | www.ylva-publishing.com