

*Adults: If you are reading LIVE WIRE, you may want to wait until you're finished before reading this excerpt, as it may contain spoilers.*

# SHELTER

## chapter 1

**I WAS WALKING TO SCHOOL**, lost in feeling sorry for myself—my dad was dead, my mom in rehab, my girlfriend missing—when I saw the Bat Lady for the first time.

I had heard the rumors, of course. The Bat Lady supposedly lived alone in the dilapidated house on the corner of Hobart Gap Road and Pine. You know the one. I stood in front of it now. The worn yellow paint was shedding like an old dog. The once-solid concrete walk was cracked into quarter-size fragments. The uncut lawn had dandelions tall enough for the adult rides at Six Flags.

The Bat Lady was said to be a hundred years old and only came out at night, and if some poor child hadn't made it home from a playdate or practice at the Little League field before nightfall—if he or she risked walking home in the

dark instead of getting a ride, or was maybe crazy enough to cut through her yard—the Bat Lady got you.

What she supposedly did with you was never made clear. No child had vanished from this town in years. Teenagers, like my girlfriend, Ashley, sure, they could be here one day, holding your hand, looking deep into your eyes, making your heart go *boom-boom-boom*—and be gone the next. But little kids? Nope. They were safe, even from the Bat Lady.

So I was just about to cross to the other side of the street—even I, a mature teenager entering my sophomore year at a brand-new high school, wanted to avoid that spooky house—when the door creaked open.

I froze.

For a moment, nothing happened. The door was all the way open now, but no one was there. I stopped and waited. Maybe I blinked. I can't be sure.

But when I looked again, the Bat Lady was there.

She could have been a hundred years old. Or maybe two hundred. I had no idea why they called her Bat Lady. She didn't look like a bat. Her hair was gray and hippie long, hanging down to her waist. It blew in the wind, obscuring her face. She wore a torn white gown that resembled a bridal costume in an old horror movie or heavy-metal video. Her spine was bent like a question mark.

Slowly Bat Lady raised a hand so pale it was more vein-blue than white, and pointed a shaky, bony finger in my direction. I said nothing. She kept pointing until she was sure

I was looking. When she saw that I was, Bat Lady's wrinkled face spread into a smile that sent little icicles down my spine.

"Mickey?"

I had no idea how she knew my name.

"Your father isn't dead," Bat Lady said.

Her words sent a jolt that knocked me back a step.

"He is very much alive."

But standing there, watching her vanish back into her decrepit cave, I knew what she was telling me wasn't true.

Because I had seen my father die.

Okay, that was weird.

I stood in front of Bat Lady's house and waited for her to come back out. No go. I walked over to her door and looked for a doorbell. There was none, so I started pounding on the door. It shook under the onslaught. The wood was so rough it scraped my knuckles like sandpaper. Paint chips fell off as if the door had a bad case of dandruff.

But the Bat Lady did not appear.

So now what? Kick down the door . . . and then what? Find an old lady in a weird white dress and demand she explain her whack-a-doodle rants? Maybe she had gone upstairs. Maybe Bat Lady was now getting ready for her loony day, changing out of her white dress, heading to the shower . . .

Ugh.

Time to go. I didn't want to miss the first bell anyway. My

homeroom teacher, Mr. Hill, was a stickler for punctuality. Plus I still hoped that Ashley would show up today. She had vanished into thin air. Maybe she would just reappear the same way.

I met Ashley three weeks ago at high school orientation for both new kids (Ashley and me, for example) and incoming freshmen, all of whom already knew one another because they went to middle school and elementary school together. No one ever seems to leave this town.

An orientation should consist of visiting your classes, getting a tour of the facilities, and maybe meeting a few classmates. But no, that's not enough. We had to participate in these moronic, dehumanizing, and totally awkward "team building" exercises.

The first involved the "trust fall." Ms. Owens, a PE teacher with a smile that looked like it'd been painted on by a drunk clown, started off by trying to fire us up.

"Good morning, everyone!"

A few groans.

Then—and I hate when adults do this—she shouted, "I know you're more excited than that, so let's try it again! Good morning, everyone!"

The students yelled "Good morning" louder this time, not because they were excited but because they wanted her to stop.

We were broken down into groups of six—mine featured three incoming freshmen and three upperclassmen who had

just moved to town.

“One of you will stand on this pedestal and wear a blindfold!” Ms. Owens exclaimed. Everything she said ended in an exclamation mark. “You will cross your arms and now I want you to pretend that the pedestal is on fire! Oh no!” Ms. Owens put her hands on her cheeks like the kid in *Home Alone*. “It’s so hot that you’ll have to fall back!”

Someone raised his hand. “Why would we keep our arms crossed if the pedestal was on fire?”

Murmurs of agreement.

Ms. Owens’s painted-on smile didn’t change, but I thought I noticed a twitch in her right eye. “Your arms are tied!”

“They are? No, they’re not.”

“Pretend!”

“But if we pretend that, why do we need the blindfold? Can’t we just pretend not to see?”

“Or close our eyes?”

Ms. Owens fought for control. “The pedestal is so hot from the fire that you fall backward off of it.”

“Backward?”

“Wouldn’t we jump, Ms. Owens?”

“Really. Why would we fall backward? I mean, if it’s that hot.”

Ms. Owens had enough. “Because I say so! You will fall backward! The rest of the group will catch you! Then you’ll switch places until everyone has a turn falling backward!”

We all did this, though some of us were hesitant. I’m

six-four and weigh two hundred pounds. The group winced when they saw me. Another girl in my group, an incoming freshman dressed all in black, was on the fat side. I know I should call her something other than fat, something more politically correct, but I'm not sure what without sounding condescending. Large? Chubby? Heavy? I say those without judgment, the same way I might say small, bony, or skinny.

The big girl hesitated before she climbed onto the pedestal. Someone in our group laughed. Then someone else.

Other than to show this girl that cruelty will not stop when you enter high school, I had no idea how this exercise was supposed to help anyone.

When the girl didn't fall back right away, one of the freshman boys snickered and said, "C'mon, Ema. We'll catch you."

It was not a voice that gave her confidence. She pulled down her blindfold and looked back at us. I met her eye and nodded. Finally she let herself fall. We caught her—some adding dramatic grunts—but Ema didn't look any more trusting.

We then played some dumb paintball game where two people got hurt and then we moved into an exercise called—I wish I were kidding—"Poisoned Peanut Butter." For this event, you had to cross over a ten-yard patch of Poisoned Peanut Butter but, as Ms. Owens explained, "Only two of you can wear the Anti-Poison shoes to get across at a time!"

In short, you had to carry other team members on your back. The small girls laughed with a tee-hee as they were

carried. A photographer with the *Star-Ledger* newspaper was there, snapping away. The reporter asked a glowing Ms. Owens questions, her answers filled with words like *bonding*, *welcoming*, *trusting*. I couldn't imagine what sort of story you'd do on something like this, but maybe they were desperate for "human interest" material.

I stood in the back of the Poisoned Peanut Butter line with Ema. Black mascara was running down her face with what might have been silent tears. I wondered if the photographer would get that.

As it came closer to Ema's turn for teammates to carry her across the Poisoned Peanut Butter, I could actually feel her start to shake in fear.

Think about it.

It's your first day at a new school and you're a girl who weighs probably two hundred pounds and you're forced to put on gym shorts and then, to complete some inane group task, your new smaller classmates have to lug you like a beer keg for ten yards while you just want to curl up in a ball and die.

Who thinks this is a good idea?

Ms. Owens came over to our team. "Ready, Emma?!"

Ema (with a long *e*) or Emma. I didn't know what her name was now.

Emma/Ema said nothing.

"You go, girl! Right across the Poisoned Peanut Butter! You can do it!"

Then I said, “Ms. Owens?”

She turned her gaze on me. The smile never changed, but the eyes narrowed slightly. “And you are?”

“My name is Mickey Bolitar. I’m an incoming sophomore. And I’m going to sit out this exercise, if it’s okay.”

Again the flutter in Ms. Owens’s right eye. “Excuse me?”

“Yeah, I don’t really think I’m up for being carried.”

The other kids looked at me like I had a third arm growing out of my forehead.

“Mr. Bolitar, you’re new here.” The exclamation point was gone from Ms. Owens’s voice. “I would think you’d want to participate.”

“Is it mandatory?” I asked.

“Excuse me?”

“Is participating in this particular exercise mandatory?”

“Well, no, it’s not manda—”

“Then I’m sitting out.” I looked over at Ema/Emma. “Would you mind keeping me company?”

We walked away then. Behind me I could hear the world go silent. Then Ms. Owens blew a whistle, stopping the exercise and calling for lunch.

When we were a few more feet away, Ema/Emma said, “Wow.”

“What?”

She looked me straight in the eye. “You saved the fat girl. I bet you’re really proud of yourself.”

Then she shook her head and walked away.



I looked behind me. Ms. Owens watched us. She still had the smile, but the glare in her eyes made it clear that I'd managed to make an enemy my first day.

The sun beat down upon me. I let it. I closed my eyes for a moment. I thought about my mother, who was coming home from rehab soon. I thought about my father, who was dead and buried.

I felt very much alone.

The school cafeteria was closed—school opening was still weeks away—so we all had to bring our own. I bought a buffalo chicken sub at Wilkes Deli and sat by myself on a grassy hill overlooking the football field. I was about to bite into it when I noticed her.

She wasn't my type, though I really don't have a type. I've spent my entire life traveling overseas. My parents worked for a charitable foundation in places like Laos and Peru and Sierra Leone. I don't have any siblings. It was exciting and fun when I was a kid, but it got tiresome and difficult as I grew older. I wanted to stay in one place. I wanted to make some friends and play on one basketball team and, well, meet girls and do teenage stuff. It's hard to do that when you're backpacking in Nepal.

This girl was very pretty, sure, but she was also prim and proper and preppy. Something about her looked stuck-up, though I couldn't say what. Her hair was the pale blond of a porcelain doll. She wore an actual, well, skirt, not one of those short-short ones, and what might have been bobby

socks, and looked as though she'd just walked out of my grandparents' Brooks Brothers catalog.

I took a bite of my sandwich and then I noticed that she didn't have a lunch. Maybe she was on some kind of weird diet, but for some reason I didn't think so.

I don't know why, but I decided to walk over to her. I wasn't much in the mood to talk or to meet anyone. I was still reeling from all the new people in my life and really didn't want to add any more.

Maybe it was just because she was so pretty. Maybe I'm just as shallow as the next guy. Or maybe it was because the lonely can sometimes sense the lonely. Maybe what drew me to her was the fact that, like me, she seemed to want to keep to herself.

I approached tentatively. When I got close enough, I gave a half wave and said, "Hi."

I always open with super-smooth lines like this.

She had her knees pulled against her chest. She looked up at me and shaded eyes the green of emeralds. "Hi."

Yep, very pretty.

I stood there, feeling awkward. My face reddened. My hands suddenly felt too big for my body. The second thing I said to her was, "My name is Mickey."

Man, am I smooth or what? Every line is killer.

"I'm Ashley Kent."

"Cool," I said.

"Yeah."

Somewhere in this world—in China or India or a remote section of Africa—there was probably a bigger dork than me. But I couldn't swear to that.

I pointed at her empty lap. "Did you bring lunch?"

"No, I forgot."

"This sandwich is huge," I said. "Do you want half?"

"Oh, I couldn't."

But I insisted and then she invited me to join her. Ashley was also a sophomore and also new in town. Her father, she said, was a renowned surgeon. Her mother was a lawyer.

If life were a movie, this was the part where you'd start the music montage. Some sappy song would be playing while they flashed to Ashley and me sharing lunch, talking, laughing, looking coy, holding hands—and ending with that first chaste kiss.

That was three weeks ago.

I made it into Mr. Hill's class just as the bell sounded. He took roll call. The bell pealed again, and it was time for first period. Ashley's homeroom was across the hall. I waited and saw that yet again she wasn't here.

I described Ashley before as my girlfriend. That might have been an exaggeration. We were taking it slow, I guess. We'd kissed twice—no more. I didn't really like anyone else at my new school. I liked her. It wasn't love. But it was also early. On the other hand, feelings like this usually diminish. That's the truth. We like to pretend that they grow as we get closer to our new partner. But most times, it's the opposite.

We guys see that gorgeous girl and we get this big-time crush, one that makes it hard to breathe and makes us so anxious, want it so bad, that we always blow it.

If we do somehow land her, the feelings begin to diminish almost immediately. In this case, my feelings for Ashley really did grow. That was a little scary in a good way.

Then one day I came to school and Ashley was absent. I tried her cell phone, but there was no answer. She was gone the next day too. Then the next. I wasn't sure what to do. I didn't have her home address. I checked the name Kent online, but they must have been unlisted. In fact, there was nothing about her online at all.

Ashley had simply vanished into thin air.