

A
MISFORTUNE
OF
LAKE
MONSTERS

A Young Adult Horror Novel

NICOLE M. WOLVERTON

A
MISFORTUNE
OF
LAKE
MONSTERS

A
MISFORTUNE
OF
LAKE
MONSTERS

NICOLE M. WOLVERTON



CamCat
Books

CamCat Publishing, LLC
Fort Collins, Colorado 80524
camcatpublishing.com

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

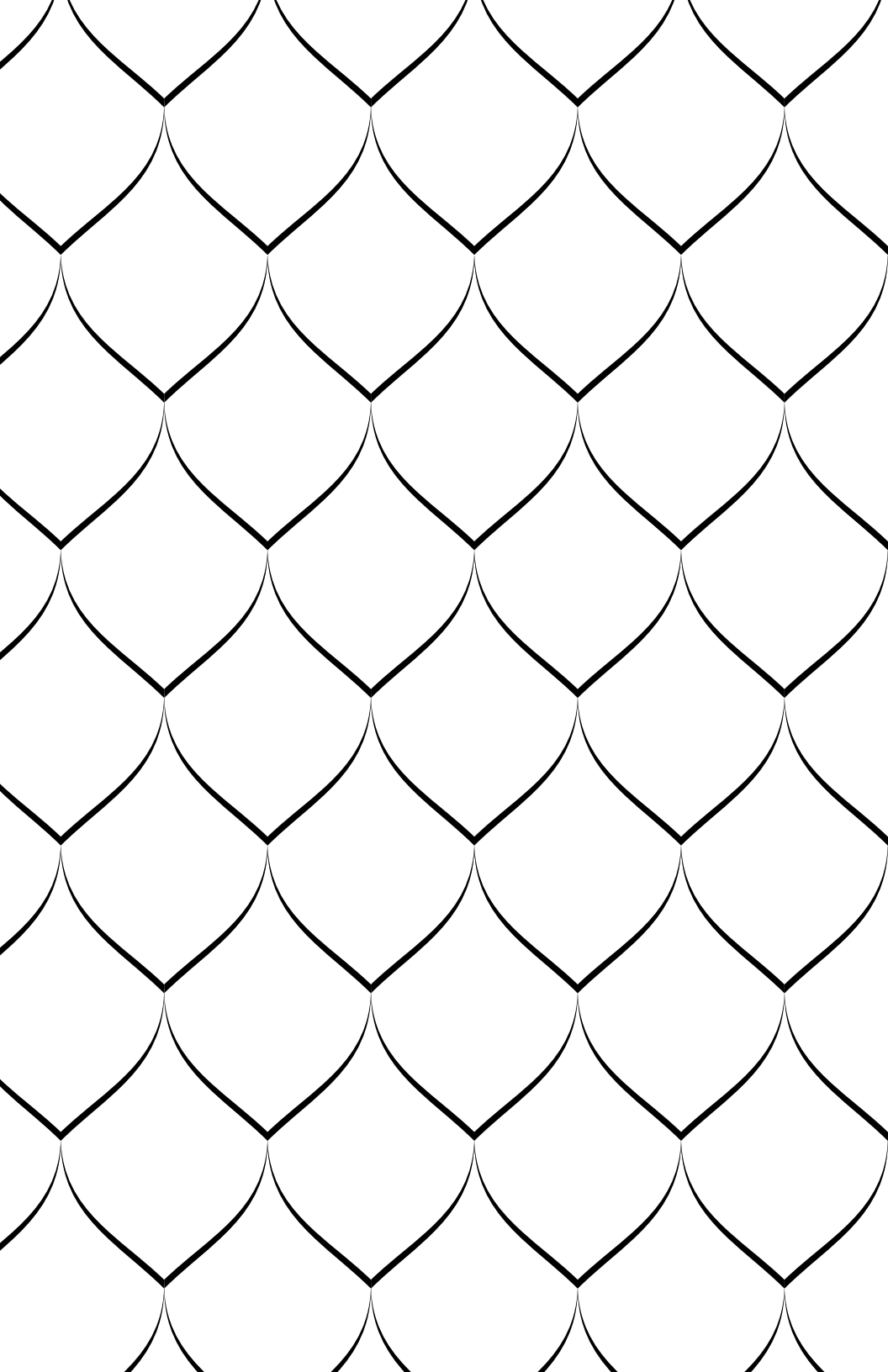
© 2024 by Nicole M. Wolverton

All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, address CamCat Publishing, LLC, 1281 East Magnolia Street, #D1032, Fort Collins, CO 80524.

Hardcover ISBN 9780744309584
Paperback ISBN 9780744309607
Large-Print Paperback ISBN 9780744309645
eBook ISBN 9780744309621
Audiobook ISBN 9780744309669

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data available upon request

Book and cover design by Maryann Appel
Interior artwork by Alenaohneva, David Goh, Ninochka, Marek Trawczynski

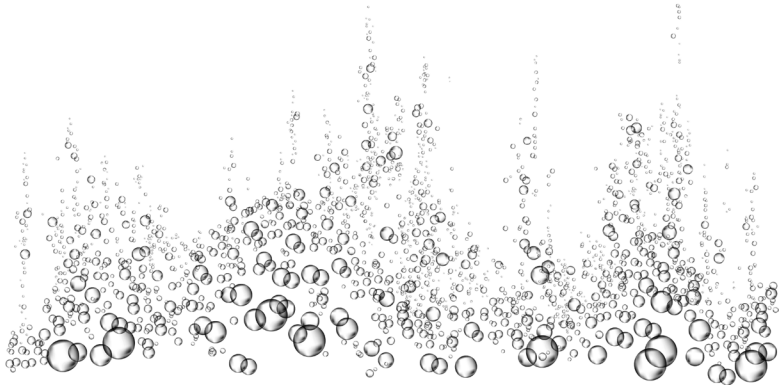


“**M**onsters cannot be announced. One cannot say: ‘Here are our monsters,’ without immediately turning the monsters into pets.”

—Jacques Derrida, *Some Statements and Truisms about Neologisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, and other small Seismisms*, *The States of Theory*.

I

L E M O N



IF IT WEREN'T FOR THE dry suit strangling me from toes to tonsils, hypothermia would have set in thirty minutes ago—and graduating from high school with all my digits intact is a record I want to hold on to. Inside the Old Lucy costume, my toes and fingers scrunch. The good news is that I can feel them. Being the gooey human center of a neoprene and latex lake monster burrito isn't my favorite way to spend a Monday night. And here's more good news: things are about to wrap up—a cluster of shadowy figures is suddenly flitting like moths around the hazy lights on the dock about two hundred meters away.

That *this* is what's passing for good news is full-on crap, but whatever—it's go-time. A sudden flash of heat in my veins chases away the April-cold Lake Lokakoma water, and I clear my throat. It's sandpapered near raw from the oxygen I've been sucking from the tank strapped to my back. "Now, Lemon, it hain't no different than takin' a breath on

land,” is what Pappap’s told me on more than one occasion. He keeps saying I’ll get used to it—like the longer I’m the supersecret Old Lucy impersonator, it’ll all magically feel normal one day.

Nothing about faking a lake monster is normal and never will be. Not swimming around in a monster costume on a dreary night. Not hiding behind the boulders at Peter’s Island to keep watch for people on the dock. Not constantly lying to my best friends. And definitely not being trapped in Devil’s Elbow for the rest of my natural life.

The crisp air fills my lungs, even though it feels like it has to claw over broken glass to do so. Best get used to it now instead of wallowing in my misery. Hey, I *want* to wallow, but I can wallow when I’m dead . . . or at least after this impersonation is done. I check the silver dive watch strapped over the iridescent scales on my wrist and calculate how much time is left on my oxygen tank. Every thought in my head pares down until all I can do is visualize the Old Lucy impersonation routine, exactly as Pappap taught me. Nothing too showy. Just give them a taste, just a glimpse. And let them hear Old Lucy roar.

Light drizzle pings off the surface of the water and smacks my chin. I duck back behind the boulder, clear my throat again, and rip out the high-pitched ululation of an Old Lucy cry, complete with a long, eerie note that hangs over the lake as heavy as mist.

No wonder the oxygen doesn’t hurt Pappap’s throat—he probably doesn’t have any pain receptors in there anymore after a lifetime of ululating.

A girl’s voice is the first thing that comes sliding across the water. “Did you hear that?”

And then a guy’s whoop. “Old Lucy’s out there! Can you see her? Get some video.”

“My phone’s not picking up anything—it’s dark as shit tonight.”

I fit the regulator back into my mouth, swallow around the stale air from the tank, and adjust my goggles before clicking the face mask back into place. The new moon makes for a sky that might as well be

a black hole, sucking all of Devil's Elbow and the towns surrounding it into nothingness. Low clouds obscure the stars, and there's a thick gloom hanging just above the water—all the better for that extra bit of mystery. It's the perfect night to stage an Old Lucy appearance, whether I like it or not.

The urge to think *and I don't* is hard to resist.

The words swim through my brain in big flaming black letters. Even the sweet almond perfume of forsythias blooming on Peter's Island temporarily masking the stink of sweat-embedded monster suit latex isn't enough to cheer me out of this funk.

The cold water closes over me as I sink into the lake. I've practiced the sighting route so many times that even my seemingly perma-depressed mood isn't a distraction. I've dreamed this route, woken up gliding through my blankets like a water bug. Ten yards clear of the island, five yards toward the dock for the tail flick. My body corkscrews up through the water like a drill, and I jackknife to thrust my legs and hips and the latex tail upward.

For a brief moment, the absence of water resistance is glorious, and I'm something close to triumphant.

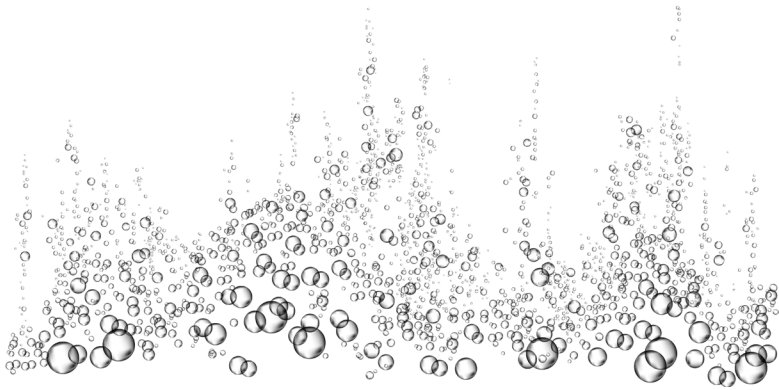
Then it's off to the bottom of the lake, to the submerged wreck of a car that's been there for as long as I can remember. The rough texture of the old rope that Pappap installed as a guide is evident even through my monster mitts. Hand over hand, I pull myself along the line and shoot up to the surface again, just out of sight of the dock. There are a few spots like that between here and our boathouse—places where I can splash around, make some noise, and hope the people on the dock can hear it, even if they can't see me.

The satisfied feeling is fading now, though I've successfully just pulled off my first solo Old Lucy impersonation. The neoprene strangles tighter. Being trapped inside a generations-old, disgustingly smelly, fake monster costume is just the perfect metaphor for the dumpster fire of my new life.

The bridge of my nose prickles. I dive toward the bed of the lake and practice fake smiling around the regulator for the benefit of my grandparents while swimming for home. *I am a grateful granddaughter. I am a grateful granddaughter. I am a grateful . . .*

2

L E M O N



RAIN BREAKS OVERNIGHT, LEAVING THE sky bright and clear, with a blue so blue it hurts my eyes. The sun bullies its way into the cafeteria of *Devil's! Elbow! High!*—that's the way it sounds when the cheerleaders scream it at pep rallies—and shines up the scuffed linoleum floor. A beam of light gleams across the cheery banner hung against one wall that reads “Home of the Lake Monsters” with a cute purple Old Lucy illustration smiling from one edge.

Tuesday's mystery meat glistens on Pepto-pink lunch trays around the room. The banana Troy left in my locker this morning looks safer by comparison, but the combination of blue, pink, and yellow is too cheerful for my mood. I set the banana on the fake wood table, close my eyes, and brood. I'm getting really great at it.

Pappap would tell me I'm being a baby, to soak up all the Old Lucy buzz and count it as a job well done. The talk in homeroom and the

hallways this morning was *Did you hear* and *Well, he said*. That is a good thing. Danetta Harvey's about ten feet away right now, recounting last night's Old Lucy sighting for a rapt soccer team audience, which isn't doing much for my sulking capabilities—but maybe it means I won't have to do another impersonation too soon.

"I never really believed in Old Lucy until now." Her voice is high-pitched, melodramatic. "But Billy shined a flashlight out on the water and . . ."

She's even wearing a glittery Old Lucy T-shirt from one of the tourist shops on Front Street. She probably ran out this morning before school and bought it for this very occasion; it looks new. Maybe I *should* be proud of my contributions to Devil's Elbow—Danetta's family owns a pizza shop downtown called Monster Pepperoni that bakes up a special Old Lucy-shaped pie during the summer for tourists, and I can name at least two or three dozen more kids in this cafeteria whose parents make their living on summer visitors drawn to town for monster hunts at the lake. The monster *I* now impersonate. It's not like there's any *other* reason to visit this town. I know deep down that I'm doing a good thing, but I'd give anything for my biggest worry to be something more mundane and boring than keeping the economy of an entire town afloat. I mean, I'm seventeen, not forty-seven.

The table jolts, and I jolt with it. Skeet Jenkins slouches on the bench next to me, sitting backward, one elbow propped perilously close to my water. His eyes are aimed at what little cleavage I have in my V-neck. My stomach crawls like a wriggling pile of slimy worms have been let loose, squirming and poking.

Someone nearby stage whispers, "Oh my god—look."

"So, Ziegler." Skeet leers at me, all dimples and crooked teeth, topped with a lewd wink. It seems like my annual encounter with Skeet has arrived—he makes it a point to harass everyone with boobs at least once each school year. What I am *not* expecting are his next words: "Prom's coming up."

My guts go on turbo-spin. It's exacerbated by a strategic rip in his jeans at the thigh that shows off an overabundance of black curly leg hair. I have nothing against body hair, but showing it off so carefully seems so . . . intentionally icky. Everything about him feels like it's designed to cause a reaction. The sleazy way he feels entitled to hit on everyone regularly, the clear outline of a condom that's always visible in the back pocket of his too-tight jeans, the rifle rack on his truck, the retch-inducing smell of too much musky body spray. I'm reacting, all right: it's called nausea. He's the small-town cliché in every television show . . . on hairy legs.

This is *not* what I had in mind when wishing for more mundane worries.

"Prom, right. How could I forget." It's becoming painfully obvious that half the people in the cafeteria have abandoned their Old Lucy talk and are now watching the impending train wreck that's playing out at my lunch table. Why couldn't he just stick to making some disgusting comment about my body and then running off, like he usually does? The weight of all those eyes on me—including Skeet's—is almost as strangling as the Old Lucy costume.

"What do you think?" He licks his thin, chapped lips. "Me and you at the prom? I'm getting my pickup detailed and everything. I'll get one of my cousins to buy us a few cases of beer. We can party in the woods after. It'll be a good time." He runs the tip of his finger up my arm. "I'll even pack a tent for us to camp overnight."

The worms move from stomach to skin, leaving gross goo trails where Skeet touches me. A polite if not tense smile is spreading over my face, and I hope like anything he doesn't mistake it for interest of any sort. He studies me, smutty-eyed and calculating.

Danetta whispers to her admirers and smirks in my direction.

I adjust my shirt over my chest and flinch away, trying not to be too obvious about it. "Uh, Skeet, wow. I . . . don't . . . I mean, thank you for asking. That's so sweet of you." My brain trips over itself. Anything I say

is going to make him mad—and convincing people to forget I exist is my only goal in life these days. Confrontation gives me a raging headache. “It’s just that . . . I’m already going with someone else. But really, I’m so flattered.”

The lie hangs between us like a balloon blown too full of air. The urge to cram the silence with awkward chatter is loud in my head, and so is my silent, horrified screaming. Even though I’ve just said no, he has *Expectation* face.

Maybe he thinks I’ll bail on my hypothetical date and go with him—or maybe he knows I’ve made zero plans for prom and will admit it if he smolders at me long enough. The pained smile feels perma-affixed to my face.

Skeet’s mouth tugs into a scowl, and a small measure of fear hisses over my skin when I think again of his gun rack and that time I saw him punch someone in the lunchroom for stepping on his cowboy boots.

“Bitch. I don’t want to go with you anyway.” He jerks toward me, threatening, then stalks away, heels banging on the linoleum sharp as gunshots.

I slam my head into my hands as soon as my muscles loosen enough to move. I’ve had my fill of drama today. The thought of giving up, ditching school, and trying again tomorrow is attractive—if I was the kind of girl who did that kind of thing. I’m too afraid of Grammy and Pappap finding out. I suppose I should be grateful to Skeet on some level—Old Lucy has been out-of-mind for the entire four minutes of our delightful encounter.

Maybe if I concentrate hard enough I really will just—*poof*—dissolve into a hazy cloud of discontented smoke.

“Taking a nap, Lem?” Darrin Flanagan climbs onto the bench across the long, rectangle-shaped table ten minutes later and grins when I look up. “Or were you knocked unconscious by the glory of the cafeteria?” He tosses his brown bag down, and it spins like a top.

My anxiety calms to a dull twitch.

“Both, simultaneously,” I say, just before Troy Ramirez slides into the spot beside Darrin and plunks down his own pink tray of shiny meat. His shoulders are suddenly taking up a lot more space than they used to. Sitting next to him, Darrin looks like a mouse next to a moose. To be fair, Darrin is the opposite in almost every way, with a light brown mop of unruly curls and a soft, round face that makes him look like a sixth grader.

I reach over and squeeze both their wrists for a few seconds. It’s a relief to have company that doesn’t actively make me uncomfortable for having skin.

Troy smiles at me, brown eyes sweet and untroubled as usual. “Hey, didn’t see you this morning. Everything okay? I left you a ban—”

“Yeah, thanks.” The banana still sits exactly where I left it. “You saved me from having to eat”—I gesture to his own tray of mystery meat—“whatever *that* is.”

Troy laughs and gently nudges my arm. “Here to serve. I know you’re opposed to Turkey Loaf Tuesday. Hey, heard about the Old Lucy sighting last night? Classic.”

The polite, frozen expression crawls back onto my face.

“Oh, fuck Old Lucy,” Darrin says. “Can’t you see our Lemon is bored of that noise? She wants to discuss the mysteries of the universe beyond the limits of Devil’s Elbow. She’s all about the unending enigma of spontaneous combustion. False flag conspiracies and crisis actors.” He cocks his head and looks across the cafeteria—everyone has gone back to minding their own business—before glancing back at me. The corner of his mouth quivers. “Or maybe she wants to talk about Skeet Jenkins.”

Troy frowns at Darrin for a split second.

“Okay, someone has had one too many coffees today.” I point my banana at Darrin for emphasis, hoping he won’t see that my hand is shaking a little. *Drop it*, I think in his direction. *Drop it*. “That’ll stunt your growth, you know.”

“Not all of us can be giants.”

Troy’s mouth loosens. He rubs a hand over his short dark hair. “Heard Billy Voorhees was out at the lake last night. Said Old Lucy came right up to him and ate one of those fruit leather snacks out of his hand.”

Before I can attempt another subject change, Darrin lets out a cackling laugh and bangs the table once with his hand. “Was he drunk? Because it sounds like he was drunk. More to the point, are *you* drunk? You believe him?”

It’s apparently too much to ask to exist in a space where Skeet and Old Lucy don’t exist, even for fifteen minutes. My sigh is barely audible next to the cafeteria din.

“Sure, I believe him. Why not?” Troy bites into his apple, chews, and swallows. “Look—not saying I believe there’s a lake monster for real, but I don’t *not* believe, either. Never seen it with my own eyes is all. Maybe it’s a law enforcement thing—only believe what you can see and touch, but never rule out the possible. My dad says it all the time. Says it’s something he learned from your grandfather when my dad worked under him in the police station, Lemon.”

“That sounds like Pappap,” I say, though inside my head is filled with sour laughter. Pappap puts on a good show in public, but he flatly refuses to accept there are things beyond his knowledge—and he’s certain he knows everything. If people thought that way, Ziegler’s Ferry Tours would go out of business.

No one would believe that Old Lucy could exist, so why bother looking for her on a ferry tour of the lake? For one brief moment, I fantasize about jumping up from the table and shrieking, *It’s all fake! Old Lucy is a hoax! This whole town is a lie!*

See and touch *that*.

Darrin smirks. “So, Troy—you’re telling me that you’re agnostic about the existence of lake monsters because your dad absorbed the wisdom of sheriffing and receptiveness from Ike Ziegler?” He throws

a napkin at Troy. “Something doesn’t seem right there. Ike is a bit too authoritarian to be open to the existence of cryptids.” He turns to me. “Come on—tell me the truth—does Ike come home and make fun of people for believing in our sainted lake monster?”

My brain repeats back one of Pappap’s rules for the job: promote the hype—all day, every day. I hope I don’t look like I want to throw up all over the place when I say, “We live with Old Lucy, plus with the ferry tour company, he knows she’s out there in the water, and I guess . . . I guess I do, too.”

Troy and Darrin both gape.

“Screw Billy Voorhees—are *you* drunk?” Darrin says. “In the entire time I’ve known you, you’ve been *sure* Old Lucy is fake.”

“Not true,” I say, fighting the bitter edge surfacing in my voice. “I’ve just never cared one way or another.”

“And now you do?” Troy says. “You have a sighting we don’t know about?”

I shrug. Grammy likes to say, *Encourage the talk, say you believe, but never admit to seeing Old Lucy yourself. It gets you noticed, and that’s the last thing you want.*

And that don’t do you no good, Pappap always chimes in. *You just blend into the woodwork, easy as you please.*

Here I am . . . blending like a champ.

“Ever heard the theory that the Loch Ness monster is really an elephant?” Darrin says. “You know I’m not an Old Lucy believer,” he says. “I like conspiracy theories—I just don’t believe them. So, maybe it’s an elephant.”

The struggle to keep my face neutral is real. Darrin doesn’t buy into the conspiracy theories he’s always going on about? Since when? “That is so random,” I say. “Are you suggesting one of my neighbors has a pet elephant that regularly bathes in the lake?”

Darrin steals my banana and peels the first strip. “Elephants can live to be sixty years old or some shit.”

“Yeah, but Old Lucy sightings go way back further than the mid-1900s,” Troy says. “And elephants? That might be weirder than your conspiracy theory about the Denver airport.”

“You believe in Old Lucy but not that American Nazi pukers could be using an airport as their base of operations?” Darrin finishes peeling the banana and eats it in two bites. “And hey, it’s *a* conspiracy theory, not *my* personal belief. Nazis and anyone Nazi-adjacent suck, no matter where they operate.”

“Fair enough. I’ll give you that one because Nazis do, indeed, suck,” I say. “If the elephant thing is true, though, it would make me the most unobservant person on the planet.”

Darrin grins. “Don’t sell yourself short—you’ve got that hot girl thing going for you.”

“Hey!” I kick him under the table, but he’s not Skeet: he doesn’t say it like he’s picturing me naked.

Troy taps Darrin in the arm with his fist. “Don’t talk about Lemon like that.”

Darrin rubs the spot. “Fine. Lem, you’re the smartest goddamn girl I know, a feminist icon for the ages. And you just happen to be a blond Amazon.”

I kick him again for good measure, but my heart isn’t in it. Prom and graduation are only a monthish away, and Darrin and Troy will leave me behind not long after that. I’ll miss Troy’s directness and the way he’s always looking out for me. Darrin’s jokes. Troy’s willingness to just be a nice guy.

Even Darrin’s casual manly crap and constant trucker mouth and his wild theories about secret societies, although I’ll never let on that I find that stuff endearing—at least on him.

“Just because I’m taller than you is no reason to be sarcastic,” I say, poker-faced.

“*Everyone* is taller than me,” Darrin says. “But I make up for it with my incredible charm and sex appeal.”

“That has to do with elephants and lake monsters *how?*” Troy says, attempting a menacing growl that just comes off as too funny to be scary.

“Quit encouraging him.” I smile to mask the fact that I want to bottle the two of them up to have their friendship with me always. There’s no way to bright-side this because there’s nothing good about losing my best friends while simultaneously having my future ripped away. I know I should be thinking about it like I’ve had a future handed *to* me on a silver platter instead, but it’s hard to be excited when it’s not the one I want.

“It doesn’t have anything to do with anything.” Darrin shrugs. “I’m just trying to make you forget I referred to Lemon as a hot girl. It’s true, of course, but you get so testy about it. It’s a good thing you ruled out following in your dad’s and Ike’s footsteps as a career move—you clearly do not have the temperament for being a cop. Or maybe you do. I’ve seen all those police brutality cell phone videos all over the place.”

Troy rabbit-punches Darrin’s arm again. We’re all being a little loose with the violence today. I know why I’m all salty and tense, but what’s Troy’s excuse?

He opens his mouth to say something more, but the overhead lights flicker—once, twice, a pause, then another blink. The cafeteria is dead silent for a millisecond before it explodes into a din of nervous tittering and jokes.

Darrin says, “Well, shit, Lemon—you didn’t have to go—” He breaks off and winces, clapping his hands over his ears. “What’s up with the air pressure?”

A vibration like the buzzing of bees zings through the bottom of my feet.

Troy’s face goes confused. “Whoa, feel that?”

“What is that?” As the last word leaves my mouth, the floor lurches. A grinding scrape tears the air. My head jerks toward the commotion, but then it’s everywhere. The overhead lights swing. A voice—a boy—

screams, and the cafeteria turns into a tinderbox of noise, louder than before. The table shudders, and Darrin's brown bag goes flying.

Troy is on his feet. He clamps onto my arm and hauls me up. My feet hit the rolling ground. It's total chaos. Everyone running. Shoving. Bumping into me. My legs are too liquidy to work properly.

Darrin clamors over the table like he's in a movie, sliding over the hood of a car. Troy's tray upends and claps some first-year girl in the chest. She doesn't seem to notice as she bulldozes her way past, mystery meat juice dripping off her. There's a sound louder than the yelling, something that rumbles and cracks. The lights still swing. Troy wraps his arms around me and lifts me, backing us both out of the crowd.

"What are you doing?" We are nose-to-nose, and it occurs to me to worry about my breath.

"Earthquake." *His breath smells like apple.* The fire alarm suddenly blares.

Earthquake?

Something cold and solid presses into my back, and Troy smooshes against me from the front. The sound of my ribs creak in my ears. I suck in my first real breath. My feet dangle. Troy has me pinned to a doorframe. I yell out to Darrin, but the rumbling and the alarm and the screaming drown out everything but what's happening inside my head.

The pressure against me lessens. I slide down the doorframe. My legs are still like jelly, but the ground is solid enough now. Troy hovers over me. Where once everything was on fast-forward, now it's all slow motion. People running by. Danetta puking into a garbage can. Nothing seems real at all.

Darrin appears at my shoulder. His voice shakes when he says, "You okay?"

"I think Troy tried to suffocate me." I touch an achy spot on my ribs.

"Sorry, Lemon." Troy shrugs, but his face doesn't look anywhere near casual. He has *High Alert* face. "You were frozen, so I moved you. The doorway seemed like the best place."

Darrin sags, hands on knees. “Wow. That was . . .”

“We should go,” Troy says. “Aftershocks, y’know?”

In that moment, everything sharpens. “We just had an earthquake.”

Darrin laughs once, incredulous. “Welcome to the party, Lem. Where the hell you been?” He jerks his head toward the corridor. “Let’s get moving, hey?”

Troy herds me down the crowded hall like a sheep dog, rushing after Darrin. “Seriously—you’re fine?” Troy says in my ear. He’s close enough that the apples on his breath are still evident. His body heat clings to me, even as the cold of the doorframe lingers in my bones.

The worms are back in my stomach, but for a much different reason. “Yeah. That was unexpected.” I glance around—it’s all still intact: the Old Lucy mural, the lockers painted purple to match. “The whole building should be coming down, but it looks like nothing happened. Weird.”

The doors ahead of us are open, but there’s a bottleneck of bodies. No one seems to have any sense of urgency about getting anywhere. I clutch the back of Darrin’s T-shirt and say to Troy, “How did you know what to do? To get in the doorway? It’s not like we have earthquake drills.”

“When would we have time?” Darrin calls over his shoulder. “Between active shooter drills and standardized tests, the school year is chock full of excitement to keep us from learning to think for ourselves.”

The top of Principal Showalter’s bald head is visible through the door. He shouts, “Everybody out. Come on, get moving.”

Even with the principal partially blocking the exit, it’s not too long until we pop through the front door of the school. The color of the sky has intensified, and it’s oddly alarming—still a little too surreal for my liking. I eye the ground in case a sinkhole decides to open beneath our feet. Between officially taking over as the Old Lucy impersonator last night, Skeet asking me to prom, and now this, anything feels possible in the very worst way.

Darrin leads us across the lot until we reach Troy's massive puke-green Buick.

Troy leans against the car and plays with this phone. "What are we supposed to do? Assure my mom the school's still standing—and what then?"

Darrin says, "Watch the teachers lose their shit, I guess. I get it—earthquakes aren't exactly an everyday thing in Pennsylvania."

"That's not entirely true." I will myself to relax—that is, until glowing neon of the Lucy-licious Fluff and Fold across the street blasts into my sight line. There's just no getting away from my destiny in this town. "Grammy told me once that there are usually one or two earthquakes each month around here, but they're tiny. There were even a few really small ones that registered on the seismograph at the lake the other day."

"There's a seismograph at the lake?" Darrin says.

"It's part of the equipment the police department keeps to monitor the water quality and rainfall amounts and stuff like that," I say. "Pappap keeps a few instruments out there, too—he says it helps him understand lake conditions."

Troy nods. "Dad was just talking about those little earthquakes. Some guy at the station said it could be fracking related. Started happening a dozen years back—the fracking quakes, that is. That's why Dad was rambling about earthquake drills. It's why I knew what to do when it hit today. Anyway, bunch of fracking operations are set up maybe thirty minutes from here."

"Figures." Darrin's nose wrinkles. "Old people, right? How much sense does it make to destroy the planet just so they can make more money? I'd like *not* to die before I graduate from college."

I catch sight of Skeet's pickup truck parked a few rows away. He's behind the wheel, glaring in my direction. My phone buzzes in my pocket, and part of me wants to ignore it in case it's a text from him. The last thing I need is a continuation of his *you're a bitch* crap.

"Should text my dad, I guess," Troy says.

Right. And I should check on Grammy and Pappap. I fish my phone out, about to speed-dial one of them, but the text that buzzed is from Grammy: *Are you okay, sweetie? Where are you?*

Me: *I'm good, in parking lot at school. You and Pappap okay?*

We're fine, cleaning the boats today. No real damage from the quake.

“Grandparents?” Troy says.

I nod, and Darrin laughs. “Speaking of old people . . .”

“It’s Grammy, making sure I’m not dead. They’re over at the ferry office.”

Because *of course* they are. Tourist season is coming, and they’ve got be ready to reap the benefits of my impersonations.

Everything to do with Old Lucy is turning me into someone I don’t like—I can barely even give my own grandmother the benefit of the doubt. I know she loves me, but from here on out I’ll never be sure if she’s actually worried about me, or if she’s just concerned I’ll die and Pappap will have to go back to impersonating the lake monster and ruin their retirement plans. It’s not like my Uncle Bobby, Aunt Nan, or my cousin are going to vote themselves to be the new heirs to the questionable Ziegler fortune, and Grammy knows it. They don’t live in Devil’s Elbow. They don’t care about what happens here or about the family legacy. I don’t care much about it, either—but saying no to my grandfather is impossible. My mouth tightens.

“Did you get a text from Ike?” Darrin says.

“Oh, please,” I say. “Pappap barely knows how to use a cell phone beyond making a simple phone call. It’s like magic to him.” Right on cue, my phone rings.

“Hey, Pappap.” I make a face at Darrin. He nudges Troy away.

“Well, hain’t that a kick in the pants.” Pappap’s voice is rough as the ever-present stubble on his wrinkly cheeks. “All that shaking, and now it’s like it ain’t never happened. The lake’s as calm as a baby and smooth as glass. Earthquakes are funny things.”

“I told Grammy I’m fine.”

“I know—she’s standing right here. But you can’t find no fault in me checking.” He chuckles. “Are them kids at your school talking about Old Lucy?”

I suppress yet another sigh. Of course he doesn’t care about how *I’m* doing—he only cares about how the family legacy is holding up. “Yeah, I heard some things this morning.”

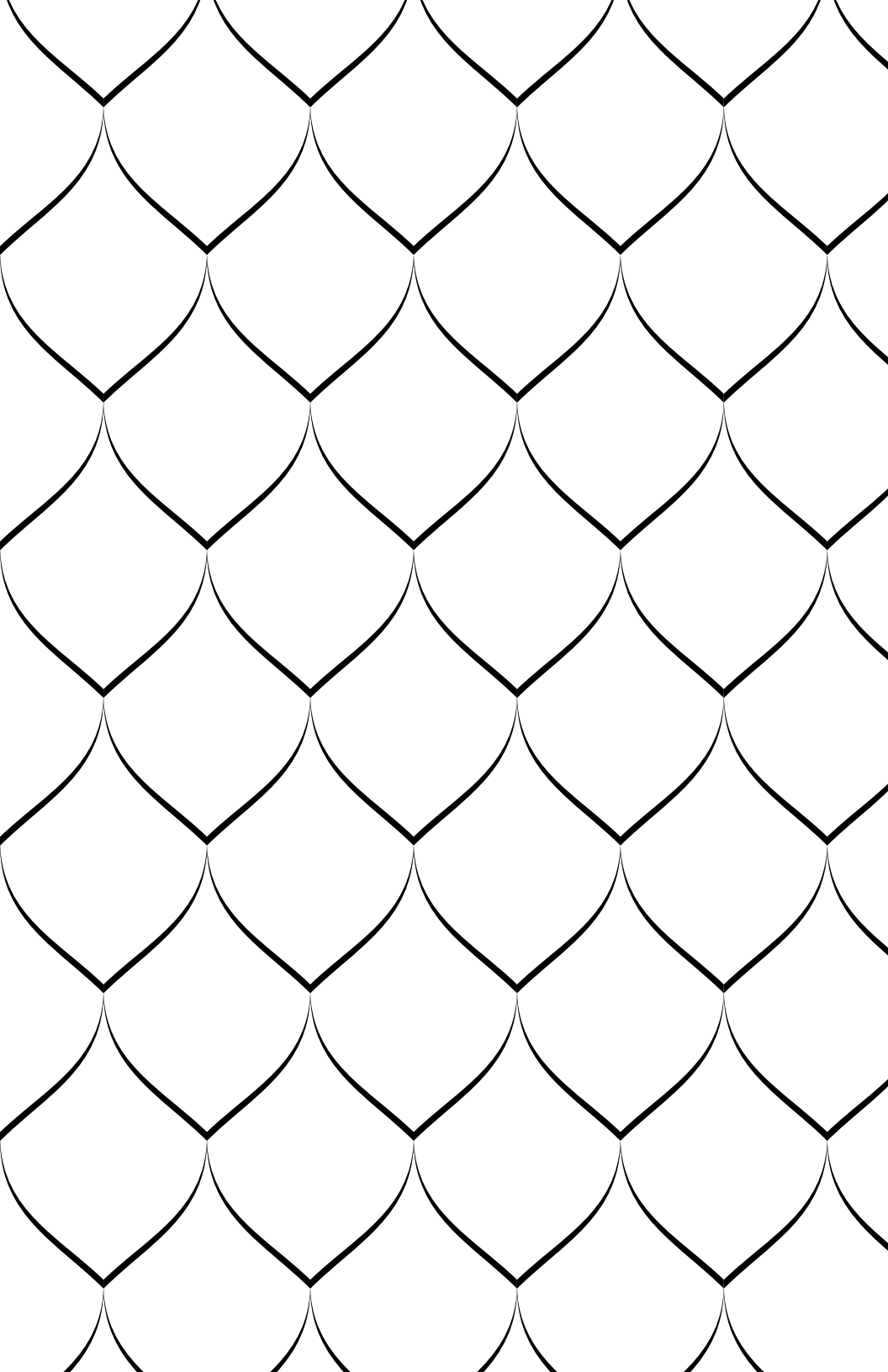
“Good. The earthquake hain’t going to help none, though, I tell you what. We might have to schedule another sighting a few weeks from now.”

My heart instantly fills with sand. “Do we *have* to?”

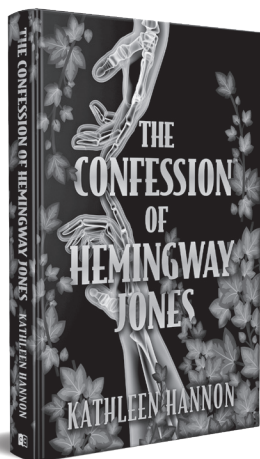
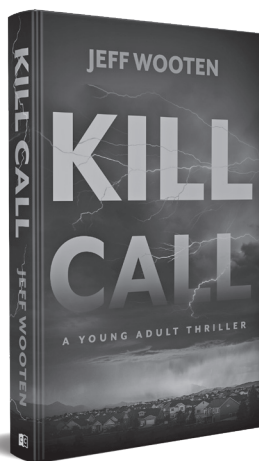
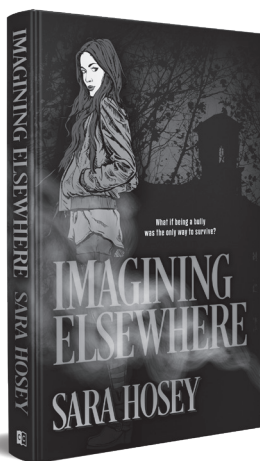
“There won’t be no need if the earthquake talk dies down pretty quick. We’ll see. If there hain’t been a fresh Old Lucy sighting to get people talking, folks might go to one of them water parks in the Pocos instead of coming here. Best see if you can’t get Old Lucy back atop everyone’s minds.”

“Sure, Pappap. Okay.”

I say bye, hoping my voice doesn’t sound too miserable. Maybe I can start a new rumor about an Old Lucy sighting. Maybe that’ll be enough. *Anything* to avoid strapping on the Old Lucy latex and neoprene so soon. At least Skeet’s truck is gone when I turn around. I’ll take good news anywhere I can find it.

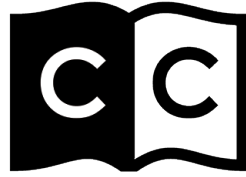


MORE CHILLING READS FROM CAMCAT BOOKS



Available now, wherever books are sold.





CamCat Books

VISIT US ONLINE FOR MORE BOOKS TO LIVE IN:
CAMCATBOOKS.COM



SIGN UP FOR CAMCAT'S FICTION NEWSLETTER FOR
COVER REVEALS, EBOOK DEALS, AND MORE EXCLUSIVE CONTENT.



CamCatBooks



@CamCatBooks



@CamCat_Books



@CamCatBooks

WHEN LEGENDS BITE BACK.

Lemon Ziegler wants to escape rural Devil's Elbow, Pennsylvania to attend college—but that's impossible now that she's expected to impersonate the town's lake monster for the rest of her life. Her family has been secretly keeping the tradition of Old Lucy, the famed (and very fake) monster of Lake Lokakoma, alive for generations, all to keep the tourists coming. Without Lemon, the town dies, and she can't disappoint her grandparents . . . or tell her best friends about any of it. That includes Troy Ramirez, who has been covertly in love with Lemon for years, afraid to ruin their friendship by confessing his feelings. When a very real, and very hungry monster is discovered in the lake, secrets must fall by the wayside. Determined to stop the monster, Lemon and her best friends are the only thing standing between Devil's Elbow and the monster out for blood.



**CamCat
Books**

Cover Design: Maryann Appel
Illustration: Tithi Luadthong



BE THE FIRST TO HEAR about new CamCat titles, author events, and exclusive content! Sign up at camcatbooks.com for the CamCat Publishing newsletter.