

Time trap

by Valeria Corciolani

Chapter 1 – Half hour

Black. Only black.

I hold my breath and open my eyes even wider.

Not that it helps.

The human eye takes at least half an hour to adjust to the dark.

I know that because Pigato, my science teacher, asks that in every test — the kind of fact that drills into your brain even when you don't want it to, and then pops out when you least expect it. Like now.

Anyway, it's an insanely long time, an eternity when your life might depend on it.

And that's exactly the problem: staying alive.

Not just me, but Leila, Mela, Stringa, and Vigo too.

Because if we got ourselves into this stupid mess, it's my fault.

All mine.

I'm Eleven. I'm fifteen years old.

And maybe, in half an hour, I'll be dead.

Chapter 2 – Emma vs Eleven

Four days earlier

“Emma, can I come in?”

I don’t even lift my eyes from the page. “Ok,” I say — loud enough to get through the wooden door of my room, but not so loud it sounds hostile. I’ve had to work hard on calibrating my “okays” these past seven months — especially with Mother, who comes in and immediately scans all twelve square meters of my room to figure out what kind of mood I’m in. She’s perfected her techniques too, and learned that reading my face alone isn’t enough.

Apparently, the inspection goes well, because she sets a pile of clean shirts on the bed, already a little more relaxed. Well, as relaxed as the mother of a girl who hasn’t left the house in seven months, twelve days, and a handful of hours can be. But then her gaze lands on my head. And she has the usual jolt.

I sigh.

At the beginning of summer, I shaved my head myself. Now it’s September, and the brown tufts are starting to take back possession of my skull. Still, every time Mother looks at me, it’s like she gets punched in the heart. Her brain just refuses to accept it — that the wild curls that had always made her “little girl” easy to spot even in a Ferragosto beach crowd are gone. In their place, there’s exactly what she sees: something between cat grass and the moss from a Nativity scene, because it turns out reaching certain parts of your own head isn’t as easy as you’d think — especially when you’re using an electric trimmer from the lira era. No joke — my grandfather is the type who keeps everything in perfect condition, and the box still has the price tag on it: £32,000. So basically, I shaved my head with an antique.

Anyway, since people already called me Eleven because I looked like the girl from *Stranger Things*, now I could actually be her stunt double. For someone who’s locked herself in her room, you might think the nickname doesn’t matter, but it does — a lot. There’s a big difference: Eleven is who I can really be. Emma is who everyone else expects.

There’s not much to say about me — or at least about the old me. Maybe there’s more to say about who I am now, but I doubt anyone cares.

Mother’s gaze lingers one more second on my head. She opens her mouth like she’s about to let something out that’s stuck in her throat — but then closes it again and sighs. I watch her back as she leaves and shuts the door. I swear, her sighs deflate her — like a balloon left in the sun. A little smaller each time. Some sighs more than others. The ones about me, always.

I've also become a pro at reading sighs in these seven months — because no, they're not all the same, and yes, sometimes they tell you way more than you'd like to know.

I know people out there think I'm weird, but since I don't see or hear them, it's like they don't exist. And outside this room, I don't exist either. Emma Costa isn't sitting in the third seat from the left in 2B at Goffredo Mameli High School. She's not at volleyball practice, or at church, or on the beach, or at the burger place, or walking under the porticoes downtown. She's not on TikTok or Instagram either — or at least not anymore, not as @e_basta.

When I was little, I always wanted to dress up as a ghost. I thought they were so cool — being able to walk through walls, travel between worlds, watch life without being seen, weighed, or judged. Now, I guess you could say I'm half a ghost.

That's what deflates Mother. I know it. And even though Father, Grandma, and Grandpa pretend everything's fine — just like my Psycho told them to — you don't need a genius to see it isn't.

I swallow the usual pang of guilt, because it's not like I enjoy making them worry. But me? Being half a ghost actually feels great...

I drop my book and look for my phone. The sound is so far away it might as well be coming from the bottom of a well.

I roll my eyes and reach under Hagrid's belly. He jerks up, deeply offended at being woken from his nap.

"Hey, you're the one who decided to sprawl on my phone," I grumble. "Because of you I missed the call." I wipe the screen on my sleeve.

He tilts his big head, clearly disagreeing with my version of events, then flops back down on the bed, giving me his back — absolutely insulted.

Hagrid was another of Psycho's "brilliant ideas." The whole "get a dog so she'll have to go outside to walk him" plan looks great on paper — too bad I didn't fall for it. My parents did. Completely.

The funny thing? They resisted my begging for years. "It's too much work." "The apartment's too small." "Hair everywhere." "We'll end up taking care of it." Yeah. All that. And now? Poof! They caved instantly — just to try and change things for me. Which should make me happy, because it shows how much they care. Instead, it just pisses me off.

Back then, I would've settled for a hamster. Seriously. And that's relevant because of the whole "size" issue.

Dad was instantly smitten by the look of a small ball of black fur and the "don't worry, he'll stay little" speech from the shelter staff. Maybe he should've questioned those paws the size of rafts. So now they've got a creature the size of a calf in our apartment, and they have to take turns walking it. Because no, unfortunately we don't live in some thousand-square-meter villa with a garden.

Our place is just a normal third-floor apartment in a yellow cube, looking out onto a gray courtyard — surrounded by three more cubes of different colors, but equally ugly.

To be fair, Hagrid seems aware he doesn't quite fit the ideal size. At home, he's almost invisible: he never barks, he walks tight to the walls, slips into corners, vanishes under the couch... How nearly sixty kilos of dog manage to take up less space than a Chihuahua remains a mystery.

Still, I get it. That whole "don't quite fit, so I'll disappear" thing? Yeah. I know what that feels like. That's probably why, in my room, Hagrid finally relaxes — stretching out to take over every last centimeter of space. Right now, he's taking up three-quarters of my bed, paws hanging off far enough to touch the bookshelf.

"You're a bit much, you know that?" A giant tongue the size of a towel swipes across my face before I can dodge, and his tail wipes out the whole stack of freshly folded shirts.

"You better chill, buddy. If Mother sees you've turned her laundry into a tornado again, we're both dead." I start gathering the mess. "And seriously — what's the point of ironing sleeves if no one even sees me?"

Hagrid tilts his head again, like he gets my point but also gets Mother's stubbornness to pretend everything's normal.

The phone rings again, and sixty kilos of cowardly dog go skidding across the bedspread to hide under the desk. Yeah, I live with the most easily scared canine ever — terrified of loud noises, cats, pigeons, squeaky shoes, whispers... even the Ricchi e Poveri song "Mamma Maria."

I swipe to answer before he has a full-blown panic attack. A gray blur fills the screen. Then it comes into focus.

A knife. Wooden handle, long blade. Classic serial killer material. There's something dark smeared on it — thick, wet.

I squint. Crap. Not "looks like." It *is* blood.

Chapter 3 – Knives, Corpses, and Mysteries

“This place always smells like a corpse.” Stringa’s big face fills the screen, replacing the bloody knife.

“Hey, Eleven, where have you been?”

“What kind of question is that for someone who’s locked in her room?” I snort.

“Gimme that.” A hand with black nail polish grabs the phone, and half of Mela’s face appears — this time her lipstick matches the purple streaks in her hair.

“Hey, Eleven, how’s it going with... you know what?”

“All done. You just have to come pick it up. Now tell me about the knife.”

“A masterpiece,” Stringa says proudly, turning the phone to show it again.

“I used my brother’s 3D printer. If he finds out, I’m dead — but totally worth it. Looks super real.”

“Yeah, especially the blood,” I admit.

“That’s the touch of pure realism.”

“As in?”

Mela’s purple fingernail moves toward the blade, but Stringa’s sausage fingers slap her hand away.

“As in, I stopped by my uncle’s shop for supplies. So don’t touch it, or you’ll ruin the effect.”

“Your uncle? Wait, doesn’t he own a butch—” Mela’s eyes go wide.

“Hold on. Are you telling me I almost touched *real animal blood*?!” she shrieks, looking ready to either puke or throw a boot at him. “You’re totally insane.”

“Nah, it’s a classy touch!”

“Hi, Eleven,” Leila waves at me while walking past the camera, her arms full of some dark, shapeless bundle.

Okay, that’s everyone except Vigo — but he’s kind of tonight’s guest star.

“I’m telling you, it smells like corpses in here,” Stringa sniffs the air, straight as a meerkat the size of a hippo.

“Even more reason to clean up,” Leila says, tossing him a broom and dustpan.

“I’m on the phone, actually...” he mutters, which is fair — he’s as allergic to movement as a sloth in a sprint race.

“One thing doesn’t exclude the other,” Mela snaps. “Or are you gonna hide behind that dumb ‘only girls can multitask’ excuse? Move it, dude.”

Stringa flips the phone toward himself and mouths, *HELP*, before Mela drags him off by the sleeve toward the storage room.

“No, not the storage room with the corpses, liben!” he wails. “Eleven, say something, please!”

“Scrrrrr scrrrr — what? Scrrrr, bad connection!” I laugh, pretending the signal’s cutting out. But yeah, I get his pain — I had to clean that room once too, and the smell clung to me for days. So yeah, *liben* fits perfectly.

And in case you’re wondering, *liben* isn’t just random gibberish. It’s the creation of Vigo’s wild brain. He barely tries in class but his imagination runs at full throttle, especially for dumb ideas. Back in elementary school, swearing was totally banned, so he made up *liben* and *damer*. You can probably guess what they sound like if you say them fast. My favorite’s still *damer*.

Before we go deeper into corpses and knives, I should probably explain my friends’ names. No, their parents aren’t crazy. Well, except for Mela, but her name’s actually beautiful.

Lajmora became Leila back in elementary school because of the two big cinnamon-bun braids she used to wear — just like Princess Leia. And honestly, the resemblance doesn’t stop at the hair. She’s got that same fierce loyalty, and behind her angelic face hides a total bulldozer.

Lorenzo, on the other hand, is obsessed with pesto. He lives with his grandparents, and his grandma is an amazing cook — but the *real* pesto master is his grandpa. It’s creamy, bright green, heavenly... but loaded with enough garlic to count as biological warfare. To avoid killing people with his breath, Lorenzo chews Vigorsol gum constantly. So “Vigo” was kind of inevitable.

The only one whose nickname wasn’t born inside our group is Federico. He got *Stringa* (“string”) from some oh-so-funny classmates during gym class. Not as a compliment, obviously.

Gym class — that sacred moment when anyone “off standard” sticks out instantly. And despite it being called *physical education*, the “education” part often disappears fast. Stringa’s always been on the rounder side, not exactly Mr. Agility, but he makes up for it with strength and strategy — now he’s a beastly tackler on his rugby team. Too bad some people’s favorite sport is still being jerks. But he never let it crush him. “Stringa” became his battle name on the field too. If you call him Federico now, he won’t even turn around.

The five of us have always been inseparable. Now they’re my only real connection to the outside world — them, the internet, and my window.

Anyway, back to corpses, closets, and knives.

Tonight, there’s a party at the *Casetta* — the attic of our church youth center. Don Findus (a.k.a. Father Massimo) lets us hang out there whenever we want.

No one calls him Father Massimo anymore, not since *the freezing incident* five years ago. And no, it wasn’t some cryogenic experiment by the Vatican.

He’s just the kind of guy who never backs down from a challenge. That day, he was hiking near a mountain refuge — as usual, wearing totally wrong gear: old corduroy pants, blue windbreaker, sneakers.

Then a snowstorm hit. Someone in his group — perfectly equipped — got into trouble, and Don Findus stayed behind to help. The snow soaked through everything. They ended up dragging him into the refuge half-frozen, hooked up to the ER in Aosta. He nearly died.

After that, we gave him an empty fish-stick box with his face glued over the Captain's. He framed it and hung it over his bed, right next to the crucifix. Maybe as a reminder: *remember, brother, you almost died once.*

So yeah — that's Don Findus.

Back to the party. Any excuse works for us — birthdays, random anniversaries, whatever. Don Findus gives us total freedom, that kind of pure trust that makes you *not* want to mess it up — way more effective than a hundred rules.

Cleaning up, though? That's on us. Which brings us back to the so-called "corpse smell." It's thickest near the storage closets along the attic walls. No one really knows what's in there, and honestly, no one's eager to find out.

The fake knife is part of tonight's surprise — we're celebrating Vigo passing his chemistry makeup exam.

I've got my own contribution ready: a USB stick packed with the best horror movie screams ever. Cinema's my passion — especially old movies — but if you start talking black-and-white classics to people our age, they look at you like you're from another planet. And if, on top of that, you'd rather read, or go walking in the woods with a metal detector, or play Dungeons & Dragons while everyone else's idea of fun is clubbing or vaping by the sea wall... Yeah, you end up feeling like you *are* from another planet.

"Eleven? You still there?" An eye outlined in six kilos of purple eyeliner peers at me through the screen.

"I'm coming to get the USB soon!"

"Yesss, Mela. I'll be waiting."

I put the phone down and bury my face in Hagrid's coarse fur. I can feel his heart beating under my cheek, his warm breath wrapping around me like a hug.

"I love you so much, you know that?"

He grumbles something that sounds suspiciously like "me too" and licks my cheek. I still haven't decided what I really think of Psycho, but I'll give her passing marks just for Hagrid.

A loud crash in the courtyard below makes his heartbeat spike. He hides behind me while I go to the window.

Ah. Just Mr. Salvi's bike, smashed on the ground. I bet Mr. Parodi from unit nine knocked it over — he's walking away all puffed up like he swallowed a broom. Salvi never parks his bike in the rack, just dumps it anywhere. It drives Parodi crazy, so he retaliates — letting his tiny dog pee on the wheels or crushing out cigars on the seat. Then Salvi clogs Parodi's mailbox with grocery flyers. Ah, good old neighborhood harmony.

Across the courtyard, Mr. Balbi has appeared on his little first-floor balcony — not because of the noise, but because it's the time he opens the door for Polyphemus, his scruffy one-eyed orange cat. The poor guy lost his right eye in some epic alley fight that kept the whole neighborhood awake. Now he's got a big scar, makes him look like an old pirate. Mr. Balbi adopted him. Or maybe the other way around — with cats, you never really know who's in charge.

I like standing at my window. It's like watching the world through the holes in a ghost costume.

I've learned so much about the people who live around this courtyard — not to snoop, I swear, just... anthropological interest. People fascinate me. It's like watching a movie from the windowsill.

Take Mr. Balbi. He's quiet — doesn't talk to anyone, not because he's rude, but because he just doesn't seem interested. Every day, he buys a newspaper, gets his groceries delivered, waters his plants — all half-dead rescues from beside the dumpsters that he brings back to life. And he reads. A lot.

I see him on his balcony with a chair he carries out from the kitchen, or inside at night, sunk into his armchair under the warm cone of a lamp.

Once, we made eye contact — both holding books. He lifted his to show me, and even though I couldn't read the title, I recognized the cover colors: *The Princess Bride* by William Goldman. Crap, one of my all-time favorites! I smiled and gave him a thumbs-up to show my approval. That same afternoon, he left a book in my mailbox — *My Family and Other Animals* by Gerald Durrell.

I don't know how, but he nailed it. It's brilliant. I've already read it three times and still crack up every time.

We wave at each other as Polyphemus slinks through his door.

When I turn back, Hagrid's on his side, paws up in the air like he's attempting some kind of yoga pose.

Good thing he didn't see Polyphemus, or he'd be having a meltdown right now. Whenever my parents take him outside, I have to play lookout from the window, just in case the cat's in the courtyard — because Hagrid's got trust issues with dogs and a full-blown phobia of cats, especially *that* cat.

I glance out again — and there's Mr. Balbi, still looking my way. It's weird. He's tense — neck arched, hands gripping the balcony railing — like a drawn bow.

When he notices me watching, he steps back inside, only to reappear in the next room. He opens the window wide and, without breaking eye contact, reaches for a dark cube on the third shelf of his bookcase.

He shows it to me. Then puts it back.

He's waiting — for a signal, I guess.

I nod and give him a thumbs-up to show I saw it, even though I have no idea what it means.

He nods too. Suddenly he looks exhausted. He waves goodbye and closes the window.

I'm left standing there, staring out into the courtyard, with a huge, mysterious *what the heck* expanding in my head.