

The Road Back Isn't Straight

A novel

by

James E. Gottesman

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Prologue - Fear and Fate.

Mid-October, UW Med School, Seattle

Emma Braza loved Dr. Agotini's class. Few things made her forget her demons, but this did.

Emma, the only undergrad in the class, looked out the window of the small second floor lecture hall and quickly looked back again. *It's very dark outside. Too dark. This doesn't make sense. What time is it?* She knew her cell phone was dead and the hands on the classroom clock hadn't moved for three weeks. She leaned over to the grad student next to her and quietly asked, "Excuse, what time is it?"

"4:45."

"Why is it so dark?" Emma asked.

The student, annoyed, whispered, "Daylight savings ended yesterday," and turned back to the lecture. Dr. Agotini had completed only two-thirds of the day's class outline.

A tiny seed of doubt crept into Emma's mind. She had reset her watch that morning but had forgotten the lost hour of daylight. The darkness drew the first bead of sweat on her brow. Her aloneness drew the second. Both triggers that might call back terrors that she couldn't handle. The muscles around her right eye and cheek started twitching.

Can I wait until class is over and plead for someone to drive me home or borrow someone's cell phone to call the sorority to see if someone could pick me up?

Maybe, but that would be defeat and I must try to be strong.

But doubt was now firmly rooted and the battle had

begun. A battle Emma had little chance of winning. But she would try. She always tried her hardest, but winning, no, not in the past year. Her breathing quickened into shallow hiccup-like breaths. The doubt became fear. Emma could see Dr. Agotini's mouth moving, but now the sounds made no sense. Emma looked to the window again.

I can't concentrate. I need to get back to the sorority, now, while there is still a wisp of daylight remaining.

Emma hastily gathered her notebooks, eyed Dr. Agotini and mouthed, "Mi dispiace." She ran through the empty hallway to the elevator and hammered the down button until being rewarded. Exiting the elevator, she walked quickly through and out the main lobby of the medical center onto Pacific Avenue. Her tongue had stuck to the roof of her dry mouth. With some difficulty she wiggled it free.

Two taxis stood at the curb. Emma looked inside both, hoping to see if either had a woman driver, but she had no luck. She hurried to the crosswalk and waited at the stop light with a small group of people. Emma kept pushing the crossing button, knowing full well that the light would turn of its own accord. Nonetheless, she kept pushing.

In the crowd waiting to cross, Emma noticed an unshaven man in a faded parka wearing a threadbare ski cap, pulled down to his eyebrows. His glasses were fogged, so she couldn't make out his eyes.

He's staring at me.

Emma focused on him for a second then turned away. Though he was six or seven feet away, and one of ten people, she could hear only him breathing. She wouldn't look back again. She thought only of those two men of a year earlier, those terrible two men with ropes and plastic bags, taking turns.

Please don't follow me. Please don't follow me.

When the light turned green, she crossed swiftly and headed north into the campus.

I hope everyone at the stoplight turned east to catch the bus. I can make it to the sorority in 25 minutes. I know I can, she thought, *30 minutes tops.*

Emma kept her head down, trying to think good thoughts and breathe normally, as her counselors had recommended when her fears started taking control. Try as she might, sensations of cigarette burns on her chest and breasts quickly overrode conjured calm sunsets and lush vineyards. Emma's jaw clenched.

Away from the clang and clatter of traffic, the almost windless night was quiet, other than the whispering of the few leaves remaining in the trees. As Emma focused on listening, she thought she could hear quiet footsteps behind her. She looked quickly over her shoulder, praying that her senses were playing tricks, only to find the unshaven man ten steps behind.

Emma started to run. Within a few paces, books and papers flew out of her backpack, which in haste she had forgotten to close completely. She turned quickly and removed her backpack at the same time, intending to snatch up her fallen objects. The unshaven man moving out of the darkness at what seemed a very quick pace, walked directly at her.

Emma could feel her heart slam against her chest and she barked, "Leave me alone."

The man continued to close the distance between them.

Oh, please God. He's going to hurt me.

Emma could feel her hands and feet being bound

again, the sheer darkness, and the pain. She panicked and abandoned her backpack, books and papers and started to run. Run anywhere. Hoping to find help, she headed towards the nearest building. She didn't notice the yellow caution tape and the scaffolding as she entered Anderson Hall. Semi-darkness enveloped the building and the construction debris covered the floors. Luckily, with little ambient light left, she found an unlocked door and entered a small room, a men's bathroom. A semi-opaque window gave little light. She bolted the old door then backed up slowly, hitting her leg softly on the edge of the toilet and then pressed herself against the back wall. She hoped that she hadn't been followed. Between quiet sobs, she prayed, "Leave me alone. Leave me alone."

A minute of deathly quiet passed, other than Emma's rapid breathing. Trying to hold her breath to listen, she could hear soft and slow footsteps, then saw tiny bits of intermittent searching light coming under and around the doorframe. "No, please, no. No, please, no. No, please no," she whispered to herself.

Emma could not help seeing and feeling her worst memories. The footsteps ceased and a bright light circled the doorframe and all was quiet.

I think I smell smoke. Is this man smoking a cigarette?
The burning sensations on her chest and breasts intensified.

Emma continued her mantra, "No, please, no. No, please, no. No, please no."

A voice shattered the silence and slammed her head and back against the wall of the darkening bathroom. "I know you are in there. I am not going to hurt you. I did not mean to scare you."

Despite the semi-darkness, she closed her eyes and covered her face with her arms. She peeked and closed her eyes again. Emma could not talk. She tried to inhale

but couldn't.

The voice, feeling like thunder, repeated itself, "I know you're there. I am not going to hurt you."

Finding just a bit of courage, Emma pleaded, "Please go away."

Chapter 1

Three years earlier. September, UW campus

Francine Frost, square-jawed, mid-fortyish housemother of the Gamma Gamma sorority at the University of Washington, shut the door to her study. The sorority's student president, Melissa Cornelius, had entered and taken a seat. With the completion of rush, Francine and Melissa reviewed the rooming requests for the thirty-two girls pledged to join GiGis, the nickname of the Gamma Gamma sorority. Gamma Gamma reserved eleven rooms of three beds each in a separate wing for the incoming pledges. Thirty of the girls had written specifically whom they wanted or, more importantly, whom they didn't want, as roommates.

Francine and Melissa reviewed each of the rooming forms in silence.

Melissa spoke first, "I see that Emma Braza has written nothing other than 'whatever' on her form. And why is the form on Sophia Picone empty? I don't really remember her at all, and Emma barely."

"Sophia Picone hasn't shown up yet," Francine, shaking her head, responded. "Emma and Sophia are both legacies, Emma's mom at Washington State and Sophia's mom back east somewhere. Sophia's mom is on the national board."

Melissa nodded.

"We have to deal with it, like it or not. Emma is a farm girl from eastern Washington and doesn't fit the profile of what we're looking for in a GiGi," Francine said. "She was pleasant enough, and pretty, in a plain way, but she wore no makeup, and is either incredibly shy or aloofly detached. I hope she's just shy. We'll know soon enough."

“Sophia is a total mystery. She couldn't make it to mandatory rush because of 'family commitments', whatever the hell that means. She's broken UW rush codes and Gamma Gamma national rules and shouldn't have been considered. But her mom's national connections apparently put her above rules and codes. Sophia Picone is going to be a GiGi, end of story.”

Francine chuckled to herself. *She is probably in some rehab program and being released the day before school commences.*

“As for Emma Braza,” Francine continued, “her mom had enough recommendation letters written for her daughter that we had no valid reason not to select her. I expect she'll last a quarter, then bail into the dorms or quit and head to Washington State with the rest of the farmers.”

“At least this part is easy,” said Melissa. “Ten groups of three each and the two misfits, Emma and Sophia together in the last room. No downside there.”

Frost typed the room assignments onto a spreadsheet and printed it. Melissa posted the list in the sorority entryway. The pledges would be moving in the next morning.

*_*_*_*

Emma Braza, wearing Wrangler jeans, ankle high work boots, and a 4H T-shirt, moved into her room, alone. Tallish and thin with light auburn hair, Emma's T-shirt revealed a muscular physique, toned from years of outdoor work. Her deep summer tan highlighted brilliant aquamarine blue eyes, but hid the saddle shaped peppering of freckles across the bridge of her nose. Her slightly square jaw had a small chin cleft giving her just an air of authority. Emma was country girl pretty.

Emma's mysterious roommate, Sophia Picone, had yet to arrive. Emma could hear a constant chatter from rooms filled with new girls. She made it a point to introduce herself to each of her pledge sisters, but little was said after "hello" and "where ya from?" Each pledge was busy trying to make a portion of their assigned room a piece of home. Emma smiled, thinking that the quiet would not likely last and she might as well enjoy it while she could. None of the other pledges or sisters knew anything of Sophia Picone and strangely, to all of them, none had seen her during rush.

In the early afternoon, while lounging on her newly made bed, Emma heard a loud "Oh my God" from the hallway, followed by a stampede of feet and then a symphony of "Oh my Gods."

Scrambling out her room door towards the noise, Emma entered a room packed with pledges, stretching, straining, bobbing and weaving, trying to peer out the sole front-facing window in the pledge wing. The pledges parted to let Emma get a front seat to the silent show. Exiting a taxi was a multi-pierced, rainbow hair-colored girl in classic Goth dress with black stockings and lace from head to toe. Francine Frost was there to meet her. Wild gestures and apparent screaming left little doubt that their first meeting was going poorly, or worse. Into the sorority walked the two, from opposite ends of the earth. Sophia Picone had arrived.

Chapter 2

Pledges crowded the doorways with disbelieving stares as Sophia Picone lugged her suitcase and large box up the stairs. Francine Frost, frown glued in place and offering no help, followed.

Between labored breaths, the sweating young girl asked, "So which room in this nuthouse is mine?"

Francine offered coldly, "Last room on the left. Your roommate is a girl named Emma Braza. Be nice."

Sophia, clenched her jaw at the comment, continued down the hall, not bothering to acknowledge the mouth-ajar pledges in each doorway. She arrived at her appointed room, pushed the door open with her foot and backed into the room. After dropping the box noisily to the floor, she confronted Emma on her bed.

Sophia, with an oval expressive face and a smooth, dark olive complexion, stood half a head shorter than Emma. Penetrating large brown eyes diverted Emma's attention from a nose that was just a little too large and hair in a mishmash of luminescent colors in streaks and patches. Sophia was thin-waisted, even petite, but amply endowed. Piercings and rings dotted her nose, ears, brows, and lips. At least, those were the places Emma could see.

"So who'd you piss off to end up rooming with me?" Sophia asked.

Emma gave the statement a bit of thought. *I guess she means to be the alpha.* Emma paused, didn't budge from her bed, and said in a clear, calm, monotone voice, "Actually, no one was pissed. I chose you specifically. Frost said that the last girl in was apparently a flaming

asshole and did anyone want to room with her? I figured after castrating two hundred head of cattle a week before rush, that a flaming asshole would be welcome relief."

Sophia laughed. "Cool. Finally someone with a sense of humor."

Emma stood and smiled. "Hi, I'm Emma."

"I'm Sophia Elena Vittoria Maria Picone, but Sophie or Soph works for me."

"I like Emma, not Em so much. Kids would tease me about Auntie Em from the Wizard of Oz."

Within the first two weeks the other pledges started socially segregating Sophie and Emma and made it painfully obvious. Sophie was clearly the cause. But Emma made no attempt to rid herself of the unusual roommate, as most of the others might have. In front of Sophie and Emma's door and in a hallway full of other girls, one pledge asked Emma if Sophie was as weird as she looked.

"She's amazing. Smart and so interesting. Totally fabulous. I'm so lucky to have her as a roommate," retorted Emma.

The other pledges rolled their eyes. The pledge that asked the question turned to her friends and snickered loud enough for Emma and Sophie to hear, "Emma is either dumber than wood or as whacko as the roommate."

When Emma entered the room Sophie was grinning like a Cheshire cat. "Well, it's you and me against the rest. I like the odds."

"Me too."

Sophia offered a suggestion to Emma "Let's make a promise that we watch each other's backs. We can ask

or tell each other anything without judgment or getting mad. Only way to survive here."

"Fine with me." Emma agreed. A few minutes passed.

Emma, testing the new rules, asked, "What's with the Goth? I think you'd be really pretty if you dressed a little more, I hate to use the word, '*normal*.' Just a simple observation, but at the mixers the guys seemed to ignore you, not to mention the rest of the sorority."

"It started about four years ago," Sophie said. "My parents were driving me up the wall crazy, not trusting me, angry about everything. I had four close friends in high school, three girls and a guy. Pretty much all five of us had the same situation with our parents. Group decision that dressing Goth was the only thing we could use to show our parents that we were in charge of our lives. Mass parental hysteria ensued, which was fine with me, I mean us, at the time. My friends became Gothier than I did. Is Gothier a word?"

"Doubt it."

Sophie continued, "Everyone at school thought we had all gone bonkers, were drugged, or something. We didn't deny it but none of us did squat except smoke a little grass and have a beer or two.

"Anyway, I had to get as far away from my parents as I could. The UW looked the farthest from Jersey and still speak American. My mom was ticked; Dad didn't care. Once Mom realized I was going, she bargained that if I joined GiGis here, she'd go along with it. The reason I didn't show up for rush was that my mom assumed that no matter how important she was nationally in GiGis, they'd never take me. From Frost's comments at the taxi that first day, I have to give points to Mom. Anyway, after a while, I got used to the look and people

left me alone. I'm not changing just to fit the GiGi image. Don't even ask. Got it."

Emma listened.

Sophie continued, "Okay my turn. Why no make-up and hair and clothes that you look like my four-year-old cousin, who's a boy? I assume that you have bib-overalls in your drawers to milk the cows." Sophie laughed at her own humor.

Emma responded quickly, as if she had been thinking about the question herself and already knew the answer. "I've been coming to visit west of the Cascades all my life. I know what goes on around here. It's socially competitive as hell. I grew up in a farming community and most kids don't go to college. Some of the girls from Bellevue, Mercer Island and Laurelhurst are going to typecast me as 'Eastern Washington farm girl' no matter how I act, dress or speak. So why waste the time trying to be cool so they can say, 'look she's trying to be a big city girl.' You and I don't have to prove ourselves to anyone. I thought I'd play dumb-hick, quiet, unsophisticated farm girl to start with. Not sorry, so far."

"Ooooooh, bitchy and sensitive Emma, I like it," said Sophie.

"Sophie, you're in an enviable position because you come from the New York area," said Emma. "You scare the locals because you might still be cooler than them. Same for girls from L.A. or San Francisco. Eastern Washington, I have no chance."

Francine Frost mumbled something of a cautionary warning to Emma about the blatant segregation from the rest of the pledge class.

"Emma, you seem reasonable. Picone is going to drive a wedge between her and the rest of the house. You're going to have to make a decision what side of

that wedge you want to be on. Do you really want to be a GiGi?"

"Thanks, Francine. I'll give it some thought." *NOT!*

The more Emma got to know Sophie, the more she liked her, despite Sophie's dress and facial accouterments, a hindrance in an uber-conservative sorority.

A small contingent of senior sisters had already confronted Sophie. "Have you even considered trying to look and dress like the rest of us. I mean 'normal'"

"Fuck off," Sophie said, immediately. And the conversation was over.

So Emma knew that Sophie wasn't going to change just by asking. Something would need to happen.

Emma hatched Plan A. "I'll make you a deal. I'll dress like you for a week and then you have to dress like me."

Sophie thought a second, "Nah."

"What do you have to lose? I think it'd be a hoot. A week of this, a week of that. We'll have them thinking...What are they going to look like on Monday?" Emma had no Plan B.

Emma's cajoling went on for two days until Sophie caved.

"Jesus, Emma, you're a pain in the ass. Aw, what the hell, why not, but you're going Goth first."

"Cool, Soph, but I'm not piercing anything permanently. I can get some fake piercings."

Sophie nodded assent and spent the next two hours

splitting and coloring Emma's hair into light pink and blue. A quick trip to University Avenue got Emma the accessories she needed.

At dinner that night, Mrs. Frost was so upset she left the dining hall early after asking to see the Emma and Sophie in her office. The meeting went badly. She ranted and raved for forty-five minutes with a three-sentence summation. "I had hoped you two would have tried to fit in. The whole image of the GiGis is in the toilet. Sophie, if you try to change anyone else to crazy, I promise I'll find a way to get you booted from GiGis, no matter who your mom is."

Sophie smiled, "It's a free country, last I looked. Do what you want. Can we go now?"

As they headed upstairs Emma noted the obvious, "Was that steam coming out of her ears?"

Emma returned to Francine's room later in the evening, alone.

"Francine, I know you and Sophie don't see eye to eye on just about anything. But under her crazy looks is a really neat person," Emma said, "who's funny, smart, caring and loyal, at least to me. Her dress is merely a statement that she is in charge of her life. Anyway, I'd like you to give me a little time and a bunch of slack. You are just going to have to trust me a little."

"Why should I trust either of you? Sophie is so disruptive to the house. And now you. There are a lot of very unhappy sisters right now," said Francine.

"Driving Sophie, and possibly me, out of the house isn't going to happen, and you have to realize that it won't make our parents happy if you do. Just give me a little time. That's all I'm asking."

Francine nodded, "Okay, a little slack and a little time, but very little trust."

The next night, a local fraternity, Lambda Chi, arrived at the Gamma Gamma house for formal introductions of the new pledges to the Greek system. The introduction ceremony would repeat itself to many fraternities over the next three weeks.

The Lambda Chis thought Emma and Sophie might be in costume after the first thirty pledges descended from the second floor dressed to kill. The two misfits were largely ignored when the boys found out the look was real.

The following morning Emma received a text message from her mother.

"Driving in 2 see GiGis & meet pledges and roommate."

To this point, Emma had told her mother close to nothing about Sophie.

Emma retweeted, "When do u arrive?"

The news only got worse.

"2 hours. Dad coming 2."

Incredibly bad timing 'to die from.' Francine Frost was manageable; Emma's parents were not.

Emma texted back, "I need 2 talk 2 you ALONE before u and dad arrive. Call me when u can. Please."

Clara Braza called fifteen minutes later. "Talk fast, honey. I'm in a gas station ladies' room an hour away, and I have exactly three minutes before Dad will start banging on this door. What's up?"

"It'll take more than three minutes," Emma spoke rapidly. "My new roommate, Sophie, is nice, but different. She came from New Jersey and dresses and

looks unlike anything you or Dad have ever seen. Ever! The rest of the sorority is not very happy about Sophie. That includes the housemother. It'll be okay in the end but I have made Sophie a deal that I would dress like her for a week, if she'll dress like me for the week afterwards. We're only two days into her week and I can't change back now, even for you guys. Dad is going to go ballistic unless you can explain things to him."

"Wow, slow down. Oh, there's your father. I will try to explain what you just said, although I don't know that I understood all of it. See you in an hour."

"OK, but please call me from the car when you're close. I need to know what state of mind you're in. Love you."

Emma, close to hysterical, found Sophie doing her wash and explained the situation.

Sophie smiled. "I'm cool. Remember, I had to introduce my new self to my parents too."

"Yeah, but you don't know my dad."

"You don't know mine either."

An upbeat Sophie straightened up their room, while Emma, lying on her bed, was paralyzed and awaited Armageddon. An hour later, Emma's cell rang.

"Hi Mom, you here?...Uh, okay, I'll be down. Did you tell Dad not to go ballistic until I can explain?"

"All I told him was that you had a surprise for us."

"Mom, he's going to go crazy. I don't know what.... Oh, Jesus, help me."

"Emma, don't use the Lord's name like that."

"Sorry about that. I'll be down."

Fifteen minutes later Emma and her parents found

themselves in Francine Frost's office with the door closed. Closing the door made little difference. The conversation was audible throughout Sorority Row.

Joe Braza sat grinding his teeth, with his arms folded tightly against his chest. Emma and her mother sat to the side.

"Mrs. Frost, we trusted you, your sorority, and this university with my daughter, our daughter," Joe Braza said, "against my best wishes I might add. In less than a month you have her looking like a drugged out Berkeley hippy. God knows what else she's doing or already done. I want her transferred into a new room, now. No, better yet, yesterday. Am I making myself clear? If not, I will pull my daughter out of this sorority and this school."

Francine Frost hesitated. *I have no other rooms. No one would room with Sophie. If Emma left, then Sophie would likely follow.* Francine decided to do nothing. "Mr. Braza, I understand your concern and I hope you know that I have been as upset as you but....."

Emma jumped in. "Mom, Dad, you know me. You have always said you trust me. Well, I am asking you to trust me now. I am fine, and I have not changed, and I know what I am doing. I am not swapping rooms, or roommates, or schools."

Turning to Mrs. Frost with a glare that would melt steel, Emma continued, "If you try to change Sophie's room, I will leave. I would like this discussion to be over, now!"

Looking back to her parents, Emma said, "Mom, Dad, say goodbye to Mrs. Frost. I'd like you to see my room and meet Sophie."

Emma's bluff worked and the senior Brazas folded.

A minute later, the Joe and Clara Braza entered Emma's room. Sophie was reading on her bed. "Mom and Dad, this is Sophia Elena Vittoria Maria Picone from the great State of New Jersey. Sophie, my mom and dad, Clara and Joe Braza."

As Joe and Clara's eyes widened, Sophie quickly stood, put on her best smile and approached the Brazas quickly and held out her hand. Her shake was confident and firm. She kept eye contact between both Brazas. "It's my pleasure to meet you. I've heard so many wonderful and remarkable things about you two from Emma already. My parents were so worried about the people I would meet and be living with. From what I've told them about Emma, they couldn't be happier. They'll be here in a couple of weeks for the Open House and I'd love to have them meet you."

Clara was not prepared for Sophie's appearance, but equally not prepared for the sincerity, tone and confidence of her introduction. Clara Braza relaxed, smiled and gave Sophie a hug. "It's nice to meet you too, Sophie."

Mr. Braza stared, his jaw clenched so tightly that his head had a slight tremor. He said nothing.

"Dad, this is my bed and my side of the room. We're lucky to have only the two of us in a three-person room, so we have a bit more space. Nice, eh?"

Mr. Braza looked around. "Very nice. We'd like to take you out to dinner." He did not look at Sophie and did not invite her.

Emma was about to ask if Sophie could come, but thought better of it. She knew she was lucky to have made it through the last hour.

As Joe Braza exited he turned back to Emma, who was getting her purse, and announced to the room, the door, the hallway, and the almighty, "If my daughter

puts one hole in her body that God didn't give her or one tattoo anywhere, this experiment is over." He turned and left for his car with Mrs. Braza and Emma following.

Two hours later Emma returned to the room.

Sophie squinted and grimaced, "So?"

Emma plopped on Sophie's bed. "We're cool."

"C'mon, Emma, it can't be that simple. What did you say?" Sophie asked. "I thought your dad was going to explode."

"I told them I've never done anything crazy. I wanted to have some fun and do a little experimenting and where better to do it than at college. I told them I'd be back to myself next weekend. I asked my dad how many things he did in college that weren't straight arrow. My mom backed me up and Dad relented."