

LEA
BEDDIA

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fast-paced."

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OUTTA
HERE

WHEN LIFE WAS YOU TRAPPED, HOW DO YOU FIND A WAY OUT?

Élise's life was upended when her mother became an opioid addict after an accident. Now Élise has to fend for herself while supporting her mother and making sacrifices no one her age should have to.

The situation goes from bad to worse when her mother invites a dangerous man into their home, and his threats become very real. As high school comes to an end, Élise is confronted with an impossible choice: go to college and fulfill her dreams or stay home and protect the mother she loves. Full of secrets, lies and shame, can Elise find a way outta here?

"Sharp, sensitive and honest."

— Liana Cusmano, author of *Catch and Release*

"A gripping, propulsive story."

— Bev Katz Rosenbaum, author of *I'm Good and Other Lies*

LEA BEDDIA is an author, storyteller and educator. Born and raised in Montreal, she now teaches school in Joliette, Quebec where she lives with her husband and three children.

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Outta Here



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For Mom and Dad, with all my love

From the Author...

Addiction can change a person's behaviour and relationships. It can be shocking and traumatic. You may or may not have family and friends that have been affected by it, but if you do, you already know about the ways it can change people. If you don't, this story may help you understand.

Before you read on, I want you to know that the story I'm telling in this book involves abuse, trauma, and violence toward animals. But I would also like you to know that this is really a story about a young woman who succeeds in finding her way out of very tough family circumstances.

This book is also about resilience, which I've learned from the almost two thousand students I've taught so far. But this isn't one particular person's story. This is a piece of fiction and not meant to glamorize or expose anyone's hardships.

I wrote this book out of compassion and empathy. So many kids are struggling. Pre- or post-pandemic, their lives are sometimes secret from what they show. We need to bring that out into the light.

If you or someone you care about is suffering from abuse or drug addiction, please contact social services in your area. Talk to an adult who cares for you. Tell them. And if they don't hear you, tell them again. Or seek out someone else who will hear what you are saying.

My inspiration for this novel came from author and speaker Ash Beckham, who said, “Hard is not relative. Hard is hard.” We need to listen to each other, empathize, and lift each other up as high as our strength will allow.

And you, today’s youth, are all strength.

L.B.

Chapter 1

It's No Secret

It's no secret I hate this shitty town. It's smack between a cement factory on one end and a tire factory on the other, with farmers' fields on the outskirts of it all. So, in summer and fall, it always smells like a delightful mix of cow manure and burnt rubber, with a constant haze of limestone dust in the air. This is Joliette. Home, sweet home.

I stare out the window when I should be writing my history test. The first day of spring has already passed, but a thick layer of slushy muck covers the streets, thanks to last night's snowfall. The overpass outside our classroom window connects Joliette to Montreal. The city is only about an hour away, but there's no way for me to escape. At least not until graduation. If I can convince Mom to let me go to college. She might try to convince me to stay in town, but the only college here is in French. I'd flunk out in the first week. I

can barely keep my marks above a pass in French class. Just enough for me to graduate.

My phone buzzes in my back pocket and drags me out of my daydream. Must be Mom. Crap. I was supposed to put my phone on Mr. Lessard's desk before the test. If he sees me with it, I'll get a zero, and I can't afford another failing grade. I can't stay here another year.

I slide my hand in my pocket and try to turn the phone off, afraid everyone will hear it buzzing. It slips out. Bangs onto the linoleum as Mr. Lessard is circulating around the room. He picks it up, looks at the screen, and carries it to his desk. He doesn't say a word, just sits back down, scratching his well-trimmed beard. I'm dead. I try to focus on my test. Jacques Cartier and his voyages to New France. Champlain and the founding of Quebec City. But the dates and details jumble in my head. I shade in Champlain's moustache and goatee on my doodle instead. Trucks rumble across the overpass.

The dates of Cartier's voyages come back to me: 1534, 1535, 1541. The founding of Quebec City, 1608. I scribble them down. Drawing always helps me clear my mind. It's like once my pen moves to start drawing, my ideas can glide into words. Mr. Lessard is the only teacher who doesn't mind me doodling on my work. He likes my cartoons of historical figures. He even cut one out from one of my essays and stuck it on his bulletin board: John A. Macdonald, the first prime minister of Canada, with droopy eyelids and a groggy look on his face. He has a mug of beer in one hand and a document on the creation of residential schools in the other. Mr. Lessard said it was

more accurate than any other drawing he'd seen of the prime minister. He said I could have a career as a political cartoonist. I found that funny because politics are not my thing, but I'm glad he liked it.

He passes by my desk again and taps a finger on my doodles.

"Nice," he whispers. "We'll talk after class."

Perfect. I look up at him. He has wrinkles like V's around his eyes. He's smiling, but if he thinks I was cheating with my phone, I'm done.

The bell rings and everyone walks out. None of my friends take this class. This is a Grade Ten class and I'm in eleventh, but if I want to graduate, I need to repeat this course. And graduating is my only chance onto the overpass and out of this place. At least in Quebec we finish high school earlier than in other provinces. Otherwise, I'd be stuck here another year. At the same time, leaving and living in the city is more than a little scary.

With everyone gone, Mr. Lessard collects my test and gives back my phone.

"I think you got a message," he says.

"I'm so sorry. I forgot to put it on your desk." He nods, waiting for me to say more. I use the Mom excuse because everyone knows about her accident. The whole class witnessed her car accident last winter when her car slid across the black ice on the overpass. She skidded into the guardrail, fractured a bunch of bones in her leg, and had emergency surgery. It's been over a year, but she still has trouble walking. "It was probably my mom. She didn't realize I had a test today. I'm so sorry."

“Okay,” he says. “But the rules . . .” I deflate. I get it. Everyone heard my phone fall to the floor. Everyone saw him carry it to his desk. And everyone knows the rules.

“I don’t have Wi-Fi access on my phone. So even if I wanted to cheat . . .”

“Okay. Wait while I correct your test.”

“Can I eat while you do?” It’s lunchtime, and I haven’t had a thing to eat since last night.

“Go ahead.” He sits at his desk, his red pen of doom hacking away at my test.

I grabbed a bunch of packaged croissants from the free breakfast bin this morning, but my bus arrives at school just before the final bell, with no time to eat them. I shove the first one into my mouth. There are another four in my bag. I take my time with the second one. I flip over my phone and read the message from Mom, the one Mr. Les-sard probably read before giving it back to me:

Mom

S.O.S. No food in the house. Get some.

Wonderful. A (likely) failed test and an empty fridge to start the week. I open the window next to me. Trucks fly across the overpass, rumbling and vibrating. Thick black smoke blasts into the air. More smoke rises beyond the overpass from the limestone factory. The air outside will smell like dirty dampness and burnt tires. I’m desperate to pass this test.

Chapter 2

In My Dreams

“Not bad, Élise. Eighty-eight percent.”

“Better than *not bad*,” I say, after swallowing my last bite of croissant. I’m saving the other three for later. “What about my phone?”

“I think you have lots to worry about. I think you forgot your phone, and I think you need to answer your mom’s text.”

“Yeah,” I say, reading my screen again.

“This time — *only* this time — I will overlook it. You’ve been working so hard. You’re almost there. I’m not going to be the one to hold you back, but on a final exam, a ministry exam . . .” Mr. Lessard picks up the stack of tests on his desk and shuffles through them.

“I know. If I was caught with my phone, automatic zero.”

“Okay. Consider yourself warned. But this is impressive.” He waves my test paper in front of him, stands, and gives it to me. “Great job.”

“Thanks,” I say, taking the test from him.

“And as always, I love the drawings. Cartier on a speedboat. Hilarious.” He turns the page. “And this one of Champlain with the apron?” He reads the caption under the drawing. “*Father of New French Toast*. It’s very funny.”

“Thanks. I had trouble with Champlain’s face. The goatee isn’t right. Too dark, I think.”

“No one actually knows for sure what he looked like. He never posed for a portrait, and the artists who drew him did so from memory. For all we know, he had no facial hair.” He’s going off into history mode. He does this in class too. Tells stories, goes off on tangents, which is why even though I don’t love the subject, Mr. Lessard is the best teacher. “Okay. You’re free to go. Have a good day.”

“Thanks again, Mr. Lessard. I appreciate it.”

“I know you do. You’re welcome.” I gather my books and head out the door, but he stops me. “Oh, wait, I forgot. I’m supposed to give you this. From the guidance department, I think.”

My arms get tingly and cold. Anytime the guidance counsellor has wanted to see me, it was to talk about Mom, but it’s been a while. Not since last year. Not since her accident. “It’s a permission form,” Mr. Lessard tells me. “For the college open houses.”

“Oh,” I say, more relaxed.

“Any prospects yet?” he asks me. He packs the tests into his bag and zips it closed.

“I don’t know. Depends on my marks, I guess.”

“What’s the dream?”

“I’m not sure I’ll go to college.” I hold my books tighter.

Mr. Lessard looks out the window. At the overpass. Can he read my mind? Does he know that structure is both my way out and my anchor?

“You deserve it.”

“I deserve more school? More torture?” I joke.

“Ha. You deserve every opportunity.”

“Thanks, Mr. Lessard. I’ll think about it.”

“Dream about it.”

I probably could only attend in my dreams. I’m doomed to stay here forever.

I leave the classroom, feeling worse than when I walked in. An hour and fifteen minutes ago, all I had on my mind was a history test and lunch. Now I have my whole future and another meal to worry about.