

An extract from:

***The Drowning Woman* by Robyn Harding - 2023**

**PART ONE: LEE**

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IN SOCIOLOGICAL TERMS, THEY CALL it the fundamental attribution error. Basically, it means that when people see someone in a bad situation, they tend to believe that individual brought it on themselves. Of course, there are always external, situational forces at play, but it's human nature to think it could never happen to you. You'd fight back differently if attacked; crawl your way out of the burning building; wouldn't fall for that online scam. And, of course, you'd never end up sleeping on the streets. Those people have drug problems, mental health issues, no work ethic.

What did I think of the homeless before I became one of them? Not much, is the short answer. Each year, I donated to a local shelter that served Thanksgiving dinners. I occasionally tossed coins into hats or empty coffee cups, but I didn't meet their eyes, I didn't ask their names. Sometimes I'd even cross the street to avoid them. I was not without compassion for the displaced, but they were just so separate, so other. There was no way I'd ever become one of them.

I pull the sleeping bag up to my chin and stretch my legs out under the steering column. The back seat would be more comfortable, but I'm too on edge to sleep there. Instead, I doze in the reclined driver's seat, with the doors locked and the keys in the ignition. If anyone comes—the police, thieves, or worse—I can be on my way in a second. My Toyota sedan is just one in a row of bedrooms on wheels, parked on this quiet street, under a dank underpass. Our vehicles form an unsightly border along the edge of a big box hardware store's parking lot. Will I ever relax enough to sleep soundly, horizontally? Hopefully I won't be here long enough to find out.

In these quiet moments, it still baffles me that I ended up like this. I'm bright, educated; I owned a successful business. I'm not hooked

on any substances... although I drink more now. In the console beside me sits a bottle of whisky. It's for warmth, to dull the edges and settle my nerves enough to allow me to doze off. Picking it up, I take a sip and for a moment, I feel nothing but this... the warmth traveling down my throat, burning in my belly. It's tempting to take another drink. And another. But I can't overdo it. I need to keep my wits about me, and I mustn't develop a dependency. I replace the cap and set it back in the console.

The light goes out in the motor home in front of me. It's a kerosene lantern; the occupants can't afford to drain their battery using the vehicle lights. Margaux and Doug are in their sixties. Margaux has health issues—cancer, though I'm not sure what kind. Doug worked at a hotel but was laid off, another victim of the pandemic, the economy, life in general. They have a large dog, Luna, a pit bull cross that makes it hard to rent a room. I try to park behind them when I can. Their run-down Winnebago never moves, sporting an intricate addition of tarps that keeps out the rain and creates an awning they can sit under. We're not friends, exactly, but we chat sometimes, and their proximity—and Luna's—makes me feel safer, less alone. They look out for me, too. It was Doug who gave me the knife.

I finger the wooden handle pressing against my right hip. The blade is between the seat and the console, a sort of holster. If I need to, I can pull it out in a second, brandish it at my attacker. "Women aren't safe here." Doug stated the obvious. "Be prepared to use this." I had assured him I was, but could I really stab someone? Pierce their flesh with this sharp blade? Plunge it into their chest or neck or belly? I'm capable of lots of things I never thought possible before. Desperate people will commit desperate acts. When my restaurant was failing, my life's dream crumbling before my eyes, I lied, I cheated, and I manipulated. I destroyed people, hurt the ones I loved. So, could I stab someone to save my own life? Of course.

It is late... and a false sense of peace descends. In the distance, someone is shouting angrily—at someone or no one—but eventually, it peters out. A bottle clinks against another, but it is soft and infrequent. The hum of sporadic traffic on the overpass lulls me.

Somehow I don't hear them approaching—either I have drifted off, or they are being stealthy... probably a combination of the two. Suddenly, they're here, on either side of my car, gray, sunken faces peering into my darkened home. Fear twists in my belly. My hand moves to the knife at my side.

"Hey, honey," one man says, and I see missing teeth through the fog of his breath on my window. I meet his eyes for a second and see the blackness, the blankness. He's an addict; I know the look by now. His humanity has been usurped by his need for drugs. Judging by the sores on his face, he's hooked on meth. The chemical can turn humans into wild animals: angry, aggressive, unpredictable.

The man on the other side of the vehicle has his face to the passenger-side glass. His eyes dart around the car and its contents, sizing up anything valuable. In the weeks I've been sleeping here, I've had to speed away once before. I heard them that time; they broke a window in a van farther up the line. That night, I started my car and pulled away before they got to me. Since then, I've practiced this scenario in my mind: pull the lever to return the seat to its upright position, turn the key, stomp on the gas.

"Open up, pretty lady," the toothless man says, and a frisson of disgust shudders through my body. Does he want more than my belongings? I grab the knife and hold it to the window. The blade taps on the glass: a threat. But he doesn't back away, and he doesn't look concerned. In fact, his rotten mouth smiles at me.

My hands feel sweaty and slippery as I fumble to right my seat. I'm not drunk but the whisky has made me slow and dull. And I'm terrified. My seat pops forward and I drop the knife, reach for the key. It's okay, Lee, I assure myself as I turn the ignition. You're safe. You're out of here.

And then the passenger window shatters. I scream as a hand dives into the car, feeling blindly for something, anything to grab. It's not me he's after, at least, but my backpack is right there on the seat, my purse is on the floor. Before I can put the car into gear, the backpack disappears through the broken window. That, I can live without. It's got clothes, toiletries, things I can just afford to replace. I slam the gear shift into drive as the arm dives back inside, reaching for my purse.

No, no, no, not that. While I'm smart enough not to keep all my cash in it, my phone and my ID are in that stylish Coach bag, a remnant of my old life. As the car shoots forward, I lunge for the purse on the floorboard, trying to drag it into my lap. But the arm is still inside, and it grabs my wrist. Dirty fingernails pierce my skin and I gasp with the pain. I lean on the horn, hoping someone—Margaux and Doug—will wake up. If they open the door and release Luna, these men will run. I'll be able to get away. But the motor home stays dark.

I gun the engine, but the hand is still inside the car. He's got my purse in his grasp and he won't let go. Gathering speed, I swerve on the empty road, trying to dislodge him, but he holds on. And he's fast, sprinting along at pace, and he won't let go. He won't fucking let go! Using my right hand with its damaged wrist, I grab for the knife and swipe blindly at his arm. I slice into his skin, but he doesn't flinch. The meth has given him superhuman strength and speed, made him impervious to pain. The purse, with all the documents that make me a person, slips through the window. Gone...

And just like that, I am nobody.