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Novel Excerpt by Sharon Harrigan

I sat on the curb in the hot parking lot of Henry Ford High, with *Chemical Reactions of Lichen* open on my lap, and watched my classmates pass their road tests. When you’re sixteen and live in Detroit, driving is your birthright. Failure doesn’t even occur to you.

One after one they finished the course then high-fived Mr. Littlefield, the driver’s ed/gym teacher, as if they were about to take him to the drive-thru at Taco Bell to celebrate. He wore black Converse sneakers, stars Magic Markered into pentagrams, barely visible unless he inched up his pant leg. A crocodile belt with a dollar-sign buckle trimmed his slim waist, obscuring his age. Did anyone know how old he was?

Marcia Klinger made the test appear effortless, pouffing her feathery hair over her shoulder but not out of her eyes, flirting with Littlefield the way everyone, except me, seemed to know how to do.

“Doesn’t look so hard,” I said to Mark Berger, the cutest boy in our class, whose Darryl Strawberry jersey made him resemble a Detroit Tiger on the bench between home runs.

“Just do what you practiced,” he said.

“You practiced?” Nobody had told me I had to practice. This was 1984, the reckless days before seatbelt and driving log requirements. I’d heard stories about preteens taking their parents to the hospital for emergencies. Nobody ever said they had practiced.
Mark eyed me as if I’d accused him of being stupid just because he was gorgeous. Before I could clarify, he was already folding into a moan. The girl behind me had slipped out of line to massage his bare shoulders.

I couldn’t remember Littlefield ever telling us to drive before the test. Neither had my older sister Terry, who’d had “My Way Is the Highway” tattooed on her arm the day she earned her license. “You live in Detroit,” she’d said, “you know how to drive.” Here, you’re born with a foot that fits the gas pedal.

I seemed to be missing so many of the innate social skills of my peers, like knowing enough not to open a book on my crotch with microscopic pictures remarkably similar to vomit. But driving was in my genes. If I knew anything about myself, it was that.

“Lisa Sharkey!” Littlefield motioned for me to take my turn. All I had to do was edge around twelve cones without knocking them down. In the manual, it had appeared so easy.

I slid forward on the seat of the Crown Victoria, which looked like an unmarked police car. The denuded upholstery was wet with the sweat of previous test-takers, and the air stank of strawberry lip gloss and Irish Spring soap. I blamed my goose bumps on the excessive AC. The key slipped in, the gas pedal eased down with my sole, and we veered forward. It couldn’t be harder than the calculus I was teaching myself at night. It seemed as straightforward as pushing a lawnmower or riding a bike.

The tires cleared the first cone, then I rotated the steering wheel left and glided between the next two. Just a few more slaloms and Littlefield would fawn over me the way he had with all the other girls, might even linger on my palm during the high-five. I
started planning my own celebratory meal, starting with a Red Pop at the Pinto Diner, where my sister Terry worked after school.

I almost touched a cone, so I decided to take the next curve at a more obtuse angle. Angles I understood, so I tried to calculate the number of degrees I should turn to the right to approach close enough but not too close to the next cone. Everything was clear through the windshield.

So why did the car just stop?

Littlefield’s hand pressed the passenger-side emergency brake. “Look behind you,” he said, motioning that I had run over a cone with my back wheel. Either the cones were closer together or the car was longer than I had thought.

“That could have been a child!” he said, after we switched seats and he returned the car to the beginning of the course. “So don’t ask for a second chance.”

But I stayed, watching the others slither easily around every obstacle, trying to imprint on my brain the geometric curves to copy, just in case. No one else killed any orange plastic children, and the students who were still waiting for a turn clustered together, as far from me as possible, probably afraid of catching my ineptitude. They started making dates to drive across the Ambassador Bridge to Canada. Nobody checked IDs over the border. Then they left, one by one, temporary licenses bulging from their pockets.

I stubbornly sat on the curb where I’d started, my book closed, and my gaze drawn to the cone I had run over, leaving tire marks on the fluorescent orange. I must have misunderstood what my sister had said. Maybe you can’t live in Detroit unless you know how to drive.
The Big Three—Chrysler, Ford, and General Motors—were our Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Every one of my classmates had someone in the family who worked on the assembly line or desperately wanted to. Our parents and grandparents told us stories about immigrating from the South or the Old Country to the land of automotive opportunity. Driving was the perfect metaphor for mobility and freedom, for the way we moved up, economically and socially, from our humble beginnings in Appalachia or Croatia. It was how the world saw us and how we saw ourselves.

If I wasn’t a driver in Motor City, then who was I? If my experience had involved practice logs and multiple-day tests at the Department of Motor Vehicles, it wouldn’t have been such a shock not to pass. But we all knew the test was little more than a formality. If you attended class you passed. Unless you were me.

As Littlefield started to pack up his papers and return to the school building, I intercepted him. “Can I try again?”

He stared at my bare, sunburned shoulders, following the sharp curve of my clavicle down to my attempt at cleavage. I felt as if I’d been ineptly assembled at the Ford Rouge factory.

As I took a deep breath, my tiny summer top rose to reveal my sweaty, bare belly, redirecting his attention. I wish I could say I wasn’t aware of thrusting my hips and letting my jeans slip low on my pelvis. But I couldn’t help being flattered, as the object of his gaze.

“You’re not experienced,” Littlefield said.

So that was it. I would just fail a second time. And there was no one to teach me.

My mother worked two jobs. My big sister, Terry, had no time—after waitressing,
partying, and trying to squeak out a high school diploma from a transcript of barely passing grades in everything but auto mechanics—to explain something that came to her so naturally. And my father? I barely remembered him.

According to our family mythology, my father had taught my mother to drive when she was my age, and that was how he romanced her. Littlefield looked like him, or at least the way my mother must have seen him in their courtship, both men wrestlers and Army veterans. Unlike Littlefield’s counterpart in middle school, who seemed like he was trying to get an exemption from gym by being the gym teacher, wearing stretchy track suits to cover his paunch, the man standing next to me was svelte and suave. His bachelorhood gave him an air of mystery, offset by the solidity of his community service. He headed programs like “Girls Run,” promoting coed athletics before Title IX even existed. If I had possessed the slightest bit of dexterity, I might have joined myself, just to wear their adorably sexy uniforms.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be gentle,” Littlefield said, as I was about to give up hope. Did he mean he wouldn’t charge me for the damaged cone? Wouldn’t use it to blemish my perfect academic record? Only when he beckoned me to follow him did I realize he was actually offering a free private lesson.

Or at least private. I was reckless enough to trade, for another chance at passing the test, some of the “fresh meat” aura that made men salivate around girls my age. Or maybe he was just taking me on as a charity case. He could start a second foundation called Girls Drive, though maybe I was the only one who didn’t know how.
Marcia would be so jealous when she found out the next day, she might even regret that she hadn’t failed, too. He would teach me all his tricks and, for once, someone would envy me.

I hadn’t thought I was even on his radar, eclipsed by the big-haired, long legged, navel-exposing girls who towered over me in his class. I wasn’t homely, but I didn’t flatter myself that I was especially pretty, either, my pale skin and hair inspiring the nickname “Ghost Girl” or “Lab Rat.” But I was young, and men often found that enough.

My spaghetti strap slipped down my shoulder. Those were the days before the scandals with priests and football coaches, so I didn’t lift it back up. I was used to being cat-called while riding the bus or walking past construction sites. I’d even been followed a few times returning from a school play and had to sprint. But Littlefield would never risk losing his job, with unemployment so high, and the way he scanned my body seemed more clinical than personal. I was both relieved and offended by his indifference. Was I that unattractive?

When he saw me walk toward the Crown Vic, he said, “We don’t have to use the official car.” Then he pointed to a red Corvette stashed in the back lot like a secret. “This one’s my personal vehicle.”

He explained something about the school’s car not being covered by insurance, which was why we never drove it out of the parking lot. His car, he said, was insured against everything. This last word hung in the air.

My mother drove a beat-up powder-blue Chevy Chevette, my sister had a brown hand-me-down Ford pick-up, but the Chevy Corvette was the iconic Boyfriend Car. Not that I knew anyone who owned such a machine, but we all fantasized.
I’d never seen such big speakers, crowding the steering wheel, making the cozy two-seater an even tighter squeeze. I slid into the driver’s seat, and my tiny tank top rose above my navel when I reached for the wheel. Beads of sweat made my shirt cling to my strapless bra. I didn’t know if I was more afraid of crashing or revealing how inexperienced I really was.

His breath was hot. “This car is easier because it’s smaller and low to the ground. If you can’t drive this, you can’t drive.”

“What if I can’t?” I hadn’t intended to say the words aloud.

“Just do exactly what I say,” he said. “I’m a pro.”

“I don’t know,” I said, opening the door and starting to step out. Were you supposed to ride in the Boyfriend Car of someone who wasn’t your boyfriend?

“You can’t be afraid,” he said. “You’re Emmett’s daughter.”

I leaned back in to hear better. Suddenly, my father was everywhere, or maybe I was only noticing him now that I was almost as old as he was when he died. “You knew him?”

Littlefield nodded. “We went to school together.”

I sat back down. What was I worried about? Littlefield was a family friend.

But he couldn’t be my father’s age. He couldn’t be in his thirties. His hair was too black and glossy, his skin too smooth. Not that age mattered. People often mistook my mother for my sister, and I’d diagnosed the boys in my class as terminally immature. I liked Littlefield’s clean, antiseptic, phys ed smell. Like sports drinks and rubber. Shoes and mats. Speed and strength.
He showed me how to start the car, explained the ignition, pedals, and gears, his gentle patience swaddling me, focusing my mind and parsing each step in minute detail.

I pulled out onto the street, remembering how he had told us in class that as soon as a new car leaves the lot, its value plummets.

“Don’t worry,” he said, when I noticed the missing passenger-side brake. “I have other ways to keep control.” And it was true. His precise directions were driving the car, though I was making the motions.

“I’m cold,” I said, at a red light. I had an intense desire to put on a sweater, even though the AC wasn’t as high as it had been in the Crown Vic.

“I thought you were hot,” he said, then chuckled. But he lowered the thermostat anyway.

I followed his orders. I was a soldier in the army, a robot, a piece of machinery, a part of the car. But I was also there in the flesh, my sitting bones planted on the commander’s seat, controlling the engine and steering and brakes, compelling a monumental hunk of metal to do my bidding. It could have been a tank, fueled solely on my adrenaline.

“Put on the turn signal.” Littlefield pointed and said, “It’s here. Down is for left. I have to tell you everything, don’t I?” His tone was affectionate, not condescending. But the way he looked at me, I could tell he was also relishing my ignorance. I wasn’t used to feeling incompetent around teachers. I’d never flunked a test before today.

We turned south onto Keppen Street, passing the bowling alley, which seemed like the only non-drive-thru in town. A between-lunch-and-dinner limbo hung over the fast-food parking lots, but the bank clogged with cars. As we passed the drive-thru
drugstore and cleaners, I no longer recognized the stores and streets. “Looking good!” he said, repeatedly, then “Smooth!” when I changed lanes without eliciting a honk. Then: “Nice moves,” even when I was holding the wheel straight. “You’re doing it.” We were doing it. This dance.

“Shouldn’t we head back?” I finally asked. My shoulders and forearms ached.

The farther we ventured out of town, the less traffic we’d have to hassle with, he explained. We drove a mile, and another, listening to Charlie Rich, John Denver, and Johnny Paycheck, until I lost track and the signs became scarce.

I tried to forget the innuendo about him smelling used towels from the girls’ locker room, supposedly to prove they were practicing good hygiene. People had spread rumors about me, too, claiming I’d cheated to win the Intel science prize three years in a row. If I believed half the whispers at school I’d have thought I couldn’t become pregnant without a simultaneous orgasm and that I could contract HIV from a sneeze.

His monologue of directions left no room for me to talk. The repetitive scenery was like static on TV, almost buzzing me brain-dead.

I wasn’t really driving, though, not like a native, because I took the local roads. The farther we traveled from the city, the taller the grass, so overgrown you could bury bodies in it. The drive-in movie theaters sprung up, the space vast and the sky a blank screen. The paved road turned to dirt, and the bumps from gravel jostled my seat.

At first I was too absorbed with finding the gas pedal and brakes, trying not to swerve off the road, to notice we’d left civilization. The familiar strips of fast-food restaurants and check-cashing storefronts vanished from the rearview mirror. The blue-collar suburbs at the border of the city—my whole world, everything I knew, with their
familiar, reassuring bundles of one-story houses—were subsumed by trailer parks and empty fields.

My palms started to sweat so much my hands had trouble gripping the wheel. I said, “I want to go back.”

Littlefield jived to the music, his shoulders and hips thrust forward. “But we’re not there yet.”

“Not where?”

His voice dropped to deadpan, no longer jokey or gentle. “Just do what I say.”

The minutiae of instructions changed from soothing to menacing. Littlefield chuckled, and this time he didn’t try to soften it, the way he must have softened his skin and smoothed his hair with miracle creams.

The buzz of the engine under my thighs, first warm and comforting, started to burn. The luxurious fit of the seat to the curve of my spine and the lift of my behind became too intimate. “I’m turning around,” I said.

“Not. Yet.”

I don’t know how, but those staccato words became a code I had to obey, like my own DNA. If I stopped following every instruction precisely, I’d crash, this time into an actual child. So I let him direct me into a gaping, deserted field absent any stores, humans, or phones. This was 1984, and when people used the word “cell” they meant something viewed under a microscope.

“Stop,” he finally said, and I hit the brakes.

“Let me go home. Leave me alone.” The radio whined.

“What about the test? You haven’t passed yet.”
“I don’t care anymore.”

“So you’re a tease?”

I never should have let my belly button show when I reached up for the wheel.

What was I doing wearing this teenage-hottie costume, anyway? I liked being stared at, letting my clothes slip. Was that asking for it?