

THE MAP SHE DREW HERSELF

Lila had spent most of her life being good.

Good daughter, good student, good at not making too much noise. She was polite to the point of erasure—smoothing out her opinions, her passions, even her laugh, until it all felt paper-thin. When people asked who she wanted to be, she repeated whatever answer they seemed to be hoping for.

But the truth was, she didn't know. And the not-knowing felt like a stain she couldn't scrub out.

So the summer she turned nineteen, with no dramatic incident or explosion—just a slow, gathering ache—Lila decided to leave.

Not forever. Just for now.

She packed a duffel bag with practical things: worn sneakers, a first-aid kit, a notebook she hadn't dared touch in over a year. She told her mother she was going to stay with a friend from school in a mountain town. There was no friend. Just a stranger on a travel blog who'd once posted a picture of a lake so still it looked like glass.

Lila bought a bus ticket and didn't tell anyone else.

The town was small, nestled in the arms of the hills like something out of a quiet dream. There were trees everywhere—leaning in close like they were trying to tell her secrets. There was no Wi-Fi in half the buildings. The library was one room and smelled like mildew and cinnamon. The air was crisp even in July, and she woke up to birdcalls instead of car horns.

For the first week, she did nothing. Just... existed.

She sat by the lake and watched the water. She listened to herself breathe. She cried once, and it felt like exhaling something she'd been holding in for years.

The woman who ran the bakery—Lena—offered her a room above the shop in exchange for sweeping the floors and helping with dishes. She never asked why Lila was here or what she was running from. She just slid a key across the counter and said, “Breakfast’s at six. Don’t be late unless you want stale croissants.”

There was something comforting about having small jobs to do. It gave her hands purpose while her heart quietly rearranged itself.

In the afternoons, Lila walked. Sometimes for miles. Sometimes nowhere at all. She brought her sketchbook and started drawing again—not pretty pictures, not things to post or perfect—just messes. Scribbles. Things that looked like feelings more than shapes.

One page was just thick blue strokes, heavy and tangled.

Another had a tree, but its roots went up instead of down.

She wrote tiny notes in the corners:

- “I think I’ve always been afraid of taking up space.”
- “What if I’m not broken, just unfinished?”
- “I don’t want to be impressive. I want to be real.”

On her twenty-second day in town, she got lost on a hiking trail. She had followed the wrong fork, too deep in thought to notice, and found herself surrounded by forest with no signal. For a brief, sharp second, panic

bloomed. But then she sat on a rock, sipped water, and waited. She remembered a trick from an old nature book: find the river, follow it downhill.

She found it.

She made it back before sunset.

That night, she drew a new page in her sketchbook. Not a landscape, but a map—of mistakes, of turns taken, of places where she'd panicked and then calmed herself down.

And beneath it, she wrote:

"I don't always need rescuing. I just need time."

Weeks passed.

She learned how to cook lentils. How to light a fire with damp kindling. How to say no without guilt. She met people and didn't become smaller to fit into their expectations. She read poetry again, even the weird, confusing kind. She memorized the feeling of her own name said with certainty.

One morning, while kneading dough, Lena asked casually, "You staying for fall?"

Lila paused. Then smiled.

"I don't know yet. But I'm not in a rush to leave."

That answer—*I don't know*—had once filled her with dread. Now, it felt like freedom. It meant she wasn't boxed in anymore.

By September, she had written fifty pages of thoughts and drawings. Not a journal, not a story. Just a collection of her own becoming.

She didn't feel like a new person. She felt like *herself*, finally, without all the costumes.

And when she eventually returned home—tan, freckled, and walking like someone who trusted the ground—she didn't apologize for being different. She didn't feel the need to explain where she'd been or who she'd become.

Because now, when she looked in the mirror, she didn't flinch.

She just smiled.

And picked up her pen.