

CHAPTER ONE

The phone rang on a Friday morning as I was lying in bed, feeling sorry for myself and trying to figure out what I was going to do with the rest of my life.

"You're wallowing, aren't you?" Brian Mayer, who'd been my managing editor until last week, said when I picked up.

"You fired me." I pulled the covers over my head, blocking out the morning sun. "Wallowing is my right."

"Emily, you and I both knew this was coming. And you weren't fired; your column was canceled for budgetary reasons." He sighed, and I could hear him shuffling papers. "Besides, it was just a part-time thing. You have plenty of other freelance work to keep you afloat."

"Yes, magazines and newspapers across the world are just throwing money at journalists these days." I'd been a freelance magazine writer since my early twenties. Publications were flourishing then, and freelancing was an easy way to make a living if you were willing to work hard. But over the last decade,

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the market had become flooded with laid-off staff writers and editors, and now there were more journalists than jobs.

"Anyhow, I'm not calling to talk about the current state of journalism," Brian continued after a moment. "I'm calling because I have something for you."

I kicked the covers back and sat up. "Another writing gig?"

"Right, because our budget suddenly opened up for no particular reason." He chuckled. "No, I mean, I have a package for you. It arrived today."

"Is it from a PR firm?" I was constantly getting random mailings-jars of peanut butter to taste, CDs to review, clothing samples that never seemed to be my size-despite the fact that I'd made a career out of writing personality profiles in addition to my now-defunct column about relationships. It wasn't like I was suddenly going to write a glowing piece on peanut butter choices. "You can just throw it out or pass it along to an intern."

"No, I think this is something different." I could hear more paper shuffling. "It's a big, flat cardboard box, a poster or something. And it's hand-addressed to you. Doesn't look like it comes from a PR company."

"What's the return address?"

"It's from an art gallery in Munich, Germany."

"Germany?" I was perplexed; my column was only circulated to U.S. papers. Who would want to reach me from Germany?

"TH FedEx it over to you, okay? Just wanted to give you the heads-up. And listen, hang in there, okay? Things are going to tum around for you. You're very talented."

"Sure," I said. I hung up before I could tell him what I really thought, which was that "very talented" people didn't get fired from jobs they'd held for the last three years. Granted, I'd never been a full-time employee of the Craig Newspaper Group, but

they'd syndicated my column, *Relating*, to twenty-three newspapers across the country, where it had a readership in the millions. I'd been paid relatively well, enough that I was comfortable with my income as long as I supplemented it with a couple additional assignments each month. I'd thought I was surviving the collapse of the freelance marketplace, but apparently I'd only been treading water until the sinking began.

I supposed it was about time for me to lose my column anyhow. After all, there's only so much blind-leading-the-blind that one person can do before someone calls foul. And although I always put a lot of work into whatever I was writing, citing scientific studies or providing quotes from well-adjusted friends and colleagues, the idea of the endlessly single woman with the dysfunctional family history writing authoritatively about relationships was, to some people, laughable. In fact, I secretly kept a file of e-mails and letters from readers who accused me of being a washed-up, bitter old maid. Maybe they were right. Of course there were also plenty of complimentary letters from readers telling me I'd helped them through a divorce or encouraged them to reconcile with an estranged family member, but I'd found that people tended to write more when they were peeved at you than when they were thrilled. Also, they used more four-letter words.

The package from Germany was probably a sarcastic how-to-get-a-man poster from a snarky reader who'd seen my column online. It wouldn't be the first-or even the fifth-I'd received. However, it might be the first insult I'd gotten in German.

I pulled the covers back over my head and tried to retreat back to sleep. Today was the day my very last piece would run, and I didn't particularly want to be awake to witness my column's funeral.

Four hours later, despite my best intentions, I was sitting across the table from my best friend, Myra, at a restaurant overlooking downtown Orlando's Lake Eola as she dramatically waved the current *Orlando Sentinel* at me.

"You should be proud," she said firmly. "Seriously, Emily, you did a lot of good work with this column, and your good-bye was totally classy."

"I told you I didn't want to talk about this today." I took a sip of sauvignon blanc. Wine at two in the afternoon was perfectly acceptable when you no longer had a job. So was the fact that I was already on my second glass.

"Too bad. We're going to talk about it, because denial never did anyone any good. In fact, I'm pretty sure that's a direct quote from one of your columns."

"I'm not denying anything." I raised my glass in a mock toast. "I'm just pointing out that my whole career so far has been pointless."

"Self-pity is not attractive on you." She gestured to the waiter and ordered another Diet Coke. Unlike me, she had a job to get back to. She worked in community outreach for Easter Seals Florida, which meant that she was actually helping people all day long. "Fortunately, you manage to keep all that self-doubt out of your columns."

I shrugged. She was right; I was much more well adjusted in print than in the real world. If only I could live my whole life behind the protection of a computer screen.

"As I was saying," she continued after her soda arrived, "this last column was great. And you're going to land on your feet."

"I know I will. I just wasn't planning to be basically unemployed at thirty-six."

"But look at it this way. You have no obligations, nothing holding you back. No husband, no kids. You can literally do anything. Total freedom."

I forced a smile. "Yes, lucky me. Perennially single and childless. Every woman's dream."

Myra's brow creased in concern. "That is *so* not what I meant."

"I know." Still, the words stung, especially since Myra knew the statement wasn't exactly true. I *did* have a child-but I'd given her up for adoption half a lifetime ago. Now that she had just turned eighteen, an adult herself, the futility of my own life was really hitting home. What had I done with all the supposed freedom that giving a baby up had granted me? A whole lot of nothing, while my child had presumably blossomed under someone else's roof into a full-grown woman.

Myra's expression changed, and I could tell that she was now thinking about Catherine-that's what I'd named my daughter before a nurse whisked her away-too. I'd confided in her four years ago, and it had felt good to finally unburden myself. I'd been carrying the story of my daughter's existence in some subterranean spot in my heart, in a place where I stored those pieces of my life I wanted to remember and forget at the same time.

"I didn't mean to say you didn't have a child," Myra said quietly. "That was really thoughtless of me."

I shook my head and tried to look unfazed. "No worries. I mean, hey, you're right. I gave her up, didn't I? She's someone else's child now, not mine."

But although I hadn't seen Catherine since the day I gave

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birth to her-and although I knew that her new parents had undoubtedly given her a different name-she was still mine in some basic, cellular way. I would always love her; I would always wonder about her; I would always fear that I'd hurt her rather than helped her by giving her away. She was in my blood, in my bones, and even all these years later, she was almost always my first thought when I awoke in the mornings. I had posted queries on an embarrassing number of adoption search sites and chat rooms online in the hopes of finding her one day, just to know she was all right. But she hadn't surfaced yet.

"So did you mean the things you said here?" Myra asked. She was waving my column around again. "About forgiveness?"

I blinked, drawing myself back from the edge of the self-pity cliff. "I always mean what I write." It was a glib answer, not exactly untrue, but not the whole truth either. My farewell column had been about moving forward and moving on, and I had written that the key to doing so in a healthy manner was to release past grievances. *Grudges stand in the way of building and repairing relationships*, I'd said. It was just that letting go wasn't always as easy as it sounded.

"Then maybe it's time to take your own advice and forgive yourself," Myra said. "Maybe you're feeling stuck in place because you're still feeling guilty over giving your daughter up."

"No, I'm not." My answer was instant, and I knew that my lack of eye contact told Myra everything she needed to know about the veracity of my words.

"Emily." Myra sighed and shook her head. "Look, we've been through this. You made the best decision you could at the time. It wasn't a selfish act; it was a selfless one. You weren't equipped for a child at eighteen, especially right after your mom had died. You made a choice to give her a better life."

I looked down at my wineglass, which was somehow empty. "I know." And I *did* know. I'd made the decision for the right reasons. But that didn't mean I didn't question it all the time. Besides, there was more to the story than what I'd told Myra. No one in the world--except for my grandma Margaret, who had died earlier this year--knew the whole truth. "In retrospect, it turns out that writing a relationship column might not have been the best choice in the world for a person who wants to bury her head in the sand," I said when I looked up to find Myra still staring knowingly at me.

She smiled. "Or maybe it was the best thing you could have done, because it forced you to start confronting some of your own demons. But now the hard work begins."

"The hard work?"

She laughed and glanced down at the column. "I'm going to quote the very wise Emily Emerson here, so get ready: '*You may have been wronged in the past, but if you don't find a way to let those grievances go, you're responsible for dragging yourself down. So find a way to forgive, even if it's hard.*'" She paused and smiled at me. "So I'll ask again. Did you mean the things you said here?"

I looked at my lap and nodded.

"Good. Then put your money where your mouth is, my friend. Start forgiving yourself."

"Aye-aye, Captain," I said weakly as I gestured to the waiter for another glass of wine. "I'll get right on that."

But the truth was, I didn't know where to begin.

Two days later, the doorbell rang just as I was finishing up a profile of a local triathlete for *Runner's World* magazine. The publication was one of my semiregular clients, and I especially

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enjoyed assignments like this one, in which the subject of the piece was doing something good for the world. In this case, the woman I was writing about was a three-time breast cancer survivor who ran to raise awareness, and I had thoroughly enjoyed interviewing her over lunch in the Orlando suburb of Winter Park last week

"Coming!" I called, but by the time I got to the door, a FedEx truck was pulling away and there was a flat cardboard box on my front porch. It took me a moment to remember that Brian had promised to forward the package from Germany. I picked it up and carried it inside, still convinced it was just another joke from an unkind reader. But my curiosity got the best of me, so I peeled the tape back and slid the contents out.

Even before I finished taking off the protective wrapping, I knew that what I was holding wasn't a poster. The paper was thick and textured, and as I peeled back the thin piece of parchment covering it, a small, sealed envelope tumbled out. I grabbed it from the floor and then propped what was actually a small painting against the wall, atop my kitchen table.

And then, frozen in place, I simply stared.

It was a richly textured watercolor of a woman standing in the middle of what looked like a cornfield, her face clearly visible as she stared into the distance. She was wearing a red dress, tattered at the edges and ripped on the right sleeve, and her expression was resolute and wistful at the same time. In the background, the sky was a strikingly deep violet. "What the . . . ?" I murmured as my fingers traced the woman's face.

She looked exactly like a younger version of my grandma Margaret. I'd written about her death in my Relating column just two months ago, and in the old family photo that had run with the piece—a shot of my grandmother holding my dad's hand when he

was a little boy-she couldn't have been more than a few years older than the woman in the image before me now.

Feeling strangely breathless and shaken, I reached for the envelope that had accompanied the painting, tore it open along the seam, and removed the small note card inside.

I read your column, and you're wrong, it read in elegant cursive. *Your grandfather never stopped loving her. Margaret was the love **Of** his life.*

The note was unsigned, and its weighty, expensive-looking cardstock was nondescript. There was no clue to who had written it, though it was obviously someone who wanted me to believe that he or she knew my grandfather. But that was impossible. The man had vanished before my father was even born. Grandma Margaret had gone silent each time I asked about him, but I knew he had abandoned her, just like my father abandoned my mother and me.

That's what my column two months ago had been about: the way the decisions of a parent trickle down through the generations. I had written about how my grandmother was a loving person, but how there'd always been a piece of her missing, a part that felt removed. I speculated that my father-who'd been raised without knowing who his own father was-felt both the absence of the man and the absence of his mother's full attention. Grandma Margaret always seemed to be on the verge of drifting away, and even her death left things feeling somehow unfinished. In fact, it was only after she died that I'd received a final voice mail from her. *I need to see you, Emily,* she'd said, her voice weak and rasping. *Please come as soon as you can, dear.* She'd left it before dawn on Valentine's Day, only hours before she took her last breath, and I'd slept right through it.

I'd ended the column without mentioning my own following

of the family footsteps, but in the depths of my own heart, that was really what the piece was about: my fear that, unwittingly, I was walking the same path as my father and grandmother. After all, I hadn't been in a real relationship for years, and I'd walked away from my own daughter, hadn't I? Was I fated to become just like them? Was it in my blood? I'd concluded by encouraging readers to think through their own family histories and to confront the things that affected their own relationships before it was too late. I hadn't escaped my notice that the column was yet one more example of me neglecting to practice what I preached.

I tried to think logically as I stared at the painting. Perhaps it had been painted *after* my column had run, by someone who used our family photo as a model? But I knew that wasn't true; the thick paper was slightly yellowed at the edges, suggesting that it was many years old, and the expression on the woman's face was exactly like my grandmother's when she was deep in thought, though in the photo that had run with the column, she'd been softly smiling. I was almost certain that it had been painted by someone who knew her. But was the note implying that my long-lost grandfather had been the artist?

I had to figure out where this painting had come from. Walking over to my computer, I googled the name of the gallery, then dialed the phone number posted on its website.

But as the phone rang several times I quickly did the math and realized that it was already nearly 9 p.m. in Munich. I wasn't surprised when an answering machine picked up. I didn't understand a word of German, so I had no idea what the outgoing message said, but after it beeped, I began to speak, hoping that someone there spoke English.

"Hi. My name is Emily Emerson, and I just received a painting from your gallery with no indication of who the sender is. It's a

portrait of a woman standing in a field with a beautiful sky behind her. Could you please call me at your earliest convenience?" I left my number, hung up, and spent the next ten minutes in my kitchen, simply staring at the familiar face of my grandmother. Finally, I picked up the phone again, took a deep breath, and called the last person I wanted to talk to.

"Hi," I said when my father answered. His deep voice was achingly familiar, though I hadn't spoken with him in nearly eight months. "It's Emily. I need to show you something."

"Emily?" I hated how hopeful he sounded. It was as if he thought I was finally opening the door to a relationship. But that wasn't what this was. "Of course. I'll be right over."

CHAPTER TWO

My father arrived thirty minutes later, dressed in crisp charcoal pants, a pale blue shirt, and a gray tie. It appeared he'd just come from the office. He looked thinner than he had the last time I'd seen him, at my grandmother's funeral in February, and I was struck by how much he'd aged. His hair had gone almost completely white, and the creases on his face were deeper than ever.

"Hi, sweetheart," he said, gazing at me hopefully from the doorstep.

"Come in," I said, turning away and walking toward the kitchen before he could try anything embarrassing like a hug.

My father lived in Orlando now too; he'd come here from Miami seven years ago, apparently in hopes of reestablishing a relationship with me. He'd even opened a branch of his firm, Emerson Capital Investments, on Orange Avenue downtown so that he'd have a reason to be close by. *I wanted to be in Orlando more often so that we could have a shot at getting to know each other*, he'd told me when he first called out of the blue. Since then he had telephoned dutifully every two weeks, but I almost always let his

calls roll over to voice mail and deleted most of his messages without listening. After all, what was there to say?

He'd left my mother and me when I was eleven to marry a twenty-four-year-old assistant at his firm. Her name was Monica, and the first time I'd met her, I'd told her I hated her and that she had no right to break up my parents' marriage. She, in turn, had told my father that she wanted nothing to do with a little brat like me, a sentiment he'd repeated to me apologetically a few weeks later when he explained why I wouldn't be hearing from him much in the future. He'd moved to Miami before I finished seventh grade, and for the next decade-as long as Monica was in the picture-I had almost no contact with him. It was like he'd forgotten he had a child in the first place.

He tried to reconcile with me after their divorce, but as far as I was concerned, it was too late. Walking away from your child like that was unforgivable. It was made worse by the fact that he hadn't come back in the wake of my mother's death. I'd just turned eighteen when she died, so there was no custody issue involved, but he must have realized how alone I felt. Evidently, it hadn't mattered. He'd called once, to tersely express his sympathy, and that had been it. Later, I'd felt like a fool for spending the next month hoping every time the doorbell rang that he'd be the one standing outside my house, waiting to make me his daughter again.

By the time he resurfaced, showing up outside the journalism building at the University of Florida during my senior year of college to beg for a second chance, my walls were already up. I'd learned by then that I couldn't rely on anyone but myself. I'd never forgiven him for teaching me that lesson at such a young age. And although he'd spent the last several years apologizing profusely on my voice mail, explaining that walking away had

been the biggest mistake of his life, the damage couldn't be undone.

"I was so glad to get your call, Emily," my father said now, closing the front door gently behind him and following me down the hall. "I know I have a lot to explain to you and a lot to make up for, but-

I cut him off. "This isn't a social visit," I told him. "I received something that I need to ask you about."

He looked crestfallen, but he nodded and ducked into the kitchen behind me. I gestured to the kitchen table, and when he saw the painting propped up there, he stopped short and stared. "Emily, what is this?"

"I think it's Grandma Margaret." I hesitated. "Isn't it?"

Silently, he reached for the painting the same way I had an hour earlier. He traced the lines of his mother's face, and when he looked up again, I was startled to see tears in his eyes. "Where did you get this?"

"It came from a gallery in Munich, Germany." I handed him the note. "There's no signature. I don't know who sent it."

His eyes widened as he scanned the small card. "I read your column, and you're wrong," he read aloud. "Your grandfather never stopped loving her. Margaret was the love of his life." He looked up to meet my eye. "This is about your column from a couple months ago, the one where you talked about damage that trickles down through the generations."

I turned away, suddenly guilty. "Yes." I cleared my throat. "I guess I owe you an apology. I didn't know you read my column."

"Of course I do." His tone was gentle and didn't carry any of the blame I expected. "Every single one. And no apology needed. You were right about everything. I behaved abominably."

"Right. Well, anyway." I bit my lip and turned back to the

painting, changing the subject. "How sure are you that this is actually Grandma Margaret?"

He looked at the painting for a moment. "I'm positive, actually. At the end of her life, she kept telling the same story over and over again. She kept saying that the day she met my father, she was wearing a red dress, and the sky was turning violet as the sun came up. Just like in this painting. It's the exact scene she was describing." He closed his eyes for a moment. "I always felt so sad that the person who'd hurt her the most was the person she was thinking about at the end, as her mind got foggier. It was the only time in my life I ever heard her voluntarily mention him."

"She missed him," I said softly, feeling a surge of guilt that I hadn't spent much time with my grandmother in those final months. I'd been so busy with my career that I hadn't made the time, and now I'd regret that forever. I looked back at the painting now, my eyes tracing the familiar lines of my grandmother's face. "But what about the person who sent the painting? Do you think they know who your father is?"

"I don't know how that could even be possible. My mother couldn't explain what happened to him, but some stranger in Germany mysteriously knows our family secrets? It just doesn't add up."

"I know. But what if it's true, though? What if Grandma Margaret really was the love of your father's life?"

My father looked away. "And he just vanished? Never looked back? And now someone's sending random, cryptic messages saying that he never stopped loving her?" He shook his head. "I'm afraid it's unlikely."

Something dark was simmering inside of me all of a sudden. "What's unlikely? That he loved her but still managed to leave her behind?"

"Well, yeah. You don't just walk away from the people you love like that." He glanced at me, and suddenly, he seemed to realize what he'd just said. "Emily, I didn't mean me and you. It's not the same situation."

I blinked a few times, any rapport between us gone in a flash. "Sure. Like father, like son, I guess."

He waited until I met his gaze. "Emily, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. There's nothing I can ever say or do to change what I did."

"Then why do you keep trying?" I hated the coldness in my voice, but it's what I reverted to every time I talked with my father. It was just easier that way.

"Look, I left because of my own baggage, my own shortcomings. And I need to try to explain that to you. I need to make it up to you."

"Please stop." I felt suddenly exhausted. "I hear what you're saying. But it doesn't change anything." I paused and looked down at my grandmother's face.

"I know." After a moment of silence, my father cleared his throat. "So what do you plan to do about the painting, Emily? What are you thinking?"

I took a deep breath. "I need to find out who sent it and what they know. I want to understand what happened."

"I do too. And I'll help you in any way I can."

I turned away. "Thanks, but I can do this on my own."

"Then why did you call me?" My father's tone was gentle, but I felt defensive all the same.

"I don't know. I thought you might know something that could help. But I guess I was wrong."

My father turned to stare at the painting. "All I know," he said after a while, "is that I grew up without a father. And then I turned around and did the exact same thing to you." He looked

up and gave me a sad smile, and then, after giving my arm a quick squeeze, he headed for the door. "Believe me, I want to get to the bottom of this too.

"Emily," he said, pausing at the threshold. "I'm glad you called."

The phone rang the next morning just past six, jarring me out of a nightmare about my father and Monica standing at my mother's grave, taunting me.

"This is Nicola Schubert of the Galerie Schubert-Balck in Munich," said the heavily accented voice on the other end as soon as I picked up. "I am returning a call from Emily Emerson. You are Miss Emerson?"

"Yes, that's right." I was instantly awake as I reached for a notepad and pen.

"I do hope I am not calling too early. But I wanted to get back to you as soon as possible."

"No problem," I said quickly. "I was trying to reach you because I received a painting from your gallery and"

"Yes, yes," Nicola interrupted. "I am aware. But I am afraid there is not much I can tell you. Of course *The Girl in the Field with the Violet Sky* is a beautiful painting."

"The painting has a name?"

"No, no, it is just what we are calling it. It arrived with very few details."

"But who sent it to you?" I asked. "And why?"

"That's what I am trying to tell you. I truly do not know. It arrived by courier with a typewritten note."

"Do you still have it?"

She snorted. "Surely not. I recycle. But I can tell you what it

said. It said that money had already been wired to the gallery, and that it should be more than enough to pay for the restoration and the shipping-which it was. The letter said that the painting had been kept for many years in a room that was too damp, and the sender was concerned that before the painting was sent on, it should be restored to perfect condition. The sender also included a sealed envelope and asked me to include it with the painting. Perhaps the sender included some information there."

"No," I said with a sigh, thinking of the cryptic note. "Do you know where the painting was sent from? Another gallery in Munich?"

To be honest, one of my assistants processed the paperwork. So I have no knowledge of the painting's origin."

"Could I speak with the assistant?"

"Bettina? I'm afraid she quit a month ago."

"Is there any way to get in touch with her?" I could hear the desperation in my own voice. "I'd just like to ask if she remembers anything about where the painting came from."

Nicola sighed. "I'm afraid that's not possible. She didn't leave us on good terms."

I could almost feel each possible lead slipping away, one by one. "Do you have any idea why the painting was sent to your gallery specifically?"

"Because I am one of the foremost restoration specialists in the world for this type of art, obviously." I could tell by her clipped tone that I'd offended her. "And clearly the sender was aware of my gallery's reputation."

"And you don't know who the painter is?"

She hesitated. "No. I do not." There was something in her voice that told me she knew more than she was saying, but before I could ask anything else, she continued, "Now, Miss Emerson, it

is imperative that I return to my customers. I just wanted to give you the courtesy of a return call. I hope you enjoy the painting. It is very beautiful. I was struck by the skill of the artist's brushwork, and I must say, I enjoyed the restoration."

"Is there anything else you can tell me?"

"Do you know a lot about art?"

"No. Not really."

"Then I'm afraid my technical explanations would be wasted. Things can't really be explained properly over the phone anyhow. Please, enjoy the painting. Good day." She hung up without another word, and I was left holding the phone and feeling even more confused than I'd felt the night before.