

CHAPTER 1

Sunday, February 8, 2015

Emily

The warm air of the home envelops Emily in a long overdue embrace as she and her boyfriend step inside. The appealing aromas coming from the kitchen lift the corners of her mouth as she slides her coat from her shoulders. Inhaling deeply, her stomach growls in anticipation. Anxious or hungry? Emily contemplates the question for a fleeting moment as she places a hand over her stomach to quell the gurgling sound. An unsettling feeling has followed her since she flipped the calendar to February eight days ago.

“We’re here,” Emily calls out, looping her purse strap over the bannister railing.

“In the kitchen,” Veronica calls back over the hum of the oven fan. “Dinner is almost ready.”

Ryan, Emily’s boyfriend of two years, is a short step behind her as they enter the recently renovated, farmhouse-style kitchen. A knowing glance over her shoulder tussles

her brunette waves while confirming Ryan's delight as the sight of Sunday dinner comes into view. He licks his lips as he watches Veronica pull an extra-large casserole dish of bubbling lasagna from the wall oven.

"Smells good." Ryan steps forward to close the oven door behind Veronica before placing a peck on her cheek.

"I know it is your favorite." Veronica beams at Ryan as she fans the air with her oven mitt then turns her attention toward Emily. "Hey, Em. It's good to see you."

Veronica steps forward and folds Emily into a warm embrace, both of them leaning into one another momentarily before Emily grabs the salad tongs and begins tossing the greens in Caesar dressing.

"Anything I can do?" Ryan asks, stepping out of the way. Veronica and Emily move about the kitchen, both of them in time with the familiar dance of preparing a meal together.

"Hey, Ryan." Colin enters the room, a bottle of red wine in one hand. Though his button-down collared shirt is missing its weekday jacket and tie tonight, Colin's erect posture oozes the confidence of a man at ease in front of a crowded courtroom. His athletic build tells tales about his age, and only his broad smile causing crinkles near the edges of his eyes gives away his fifty years of life experience.

Ryan extends his hand for a friendly shake before Colin crosses the hardwood floor, wrapping Emily in a fierce hug. "Hey, kiddo. How are you doing?"

Emily's face lights up as she returns his hug.

"Em, you've got the salad?" Veronica pivots, surveying the granite kitchen island. The shimmering silk of her navy blouse ripples as she moves, its hem tucked in to her dark skinny jeans. "Okay, I think we are all set. Let's eat."

The four of them settle into the dining-room chairs. The new plush chairs add an elegant contrast to the antique dining table, Emily thinks as she takes her place beside Ryan. Veronica, with the seasoned hand of a woman who entertains frequently, dishes lasagna onto the men's plates while Emily reaches for a piece of crusty garlic bread before filling her own plate with the cheesy casserole.

Fork in hand, Emily chases a rogue noodle around her plate. She fills the air with chatter about her upcoming work project. "Mr. Holt says the archives haven't been touched in decades. He says he'd be amazed if I am able to make heads or tails of them by the end of the summer."

From across the table, Colin's gray eyes beam at Emily as she pauses to take a bite of bread. "I'm sure you are just the person for the job, Em."

"I hope so. I know it will be an insane amount of work, but I am really looking forward to the challenge. I've never worked with church records before, and I certainly don't have any experience with documents as old as these. I guess I always imagined records of this age would be displayed behind glass, safely under lock and key in a library or a museum. I definitely didn't think they would be sitting in a basement storage room, gathering dust." Emily's eyes search the ceiling as she thinks over the research projects she undertook as a law student at the University of Washington, trying to ascertain the most historical items she's studied.

Veronica, seizing the lull in the conversation, places her knife and fork on either side of her plate. She takes a deep breath as she sweeps her thick ebony hair over one shoulder, any silver strands covered by frequent salon visits. "Emily, I was thinking of heading over to the cemetery next week. Flowers are always a nice addition when the sky is so dreary, and with the anniversary coming up, I thought—"

Emily's shoulders stiffen slightly.

"I wondered." Veronica tries again, a hesitation in her delivery. "Well, I thought you might like to join me. I could pick you up, make a day of it. Grab some lunch in one of those trendy cafes." Veronica's eyes shift quickly toward Colin, who is seated beside her, before settling once more on Emily. "We can go whichever day fits best with your schedule. I know how busy you are. Maybe Ryan would like to join us. I don't think he has ever visited the grave sites. Have you, Ryan?" Veronica inclines her head toward Ryan as he looks up, a panicked expression settling over his boyish features.

Looking somewhere between a deer caught in the headlights and an unsuspecting party guest who has stumbled into the middle of an awkward conversation, a subtle shake of his head is Ryan's only response. Busying himself while dropping his eyes away from Veronica's, he scoops a heaping forkful of lasagna into his mouth and begins to chew slowly.

Clearing her throat, Emily buys herself some time to tuck her reaction safely beneath the surface, out of sight from those around her. Her mind whirs, desperate to switch gears in the conversation, and she kicks herself. She'd believed she could avoid this type of conversation tonight, but that had been wishful thinking. She considers the topic of the drab Seattle winter but shakes her head almost imperceptibly. The thought of such mundane conversation with those whose lives are deeply tangled with her own is disappointing at best. She hunts for words suitable to satisfy the questions behind the inquiring eyes of the couple across from her.

Colin bridges the gap with a disarming smile. "I can't believe how fast the time has gone. Seems like only yesterday we were celebrating you passing the bar exam."

Meeting his eyes, relief spreads across her face. Grateful for the life raft, Emily

forces a smile. “The months are moving fast, but then again I don’t mind if winter speeds by us.” She cringes as the words leave her lips. *Couldn’t leave the weather out of it*, she scolds herself. They deserve more from her, and her inability to give them more only adds to her discomfort.

Taking a bite of lasagna, Colin nods in agreement. The gray peppered about his temples shimmers in the light of the dining room as his head bobs up and down. “We are in the thick of it now. I’ve always found February challenges my love for this city. The rain and dark. The sleet and wind.” He glances toward Veronica, an amused expression softening his features. “You’d think we would wise up and plan a sunny vacation for this time of year.”

“Where would you go?” Emily jumps at the opportunity to steer the conversation away from the cemetery, herself, and Seattle in February.

“The white-sand beaches of the Caribbean seem to call out to me when the gray sky dips low enough to kiss the ground.” Colin swirls his glass of red wine before taking a thoughtful sip.

“That sounds lovely.” Emily stabs a piece of lasagna with her fork.

“I could certainly get on board with a trip to the Caribbean.” Ryan adds, raising his own wine glass to Colin’s in a toast.

“You should know.” Veronica’s words are soft, but her message is straight as an arrow. “We would never leave Seattle in February, Em. Just in case.” The pause sends a shiver of nervousness down the length of Emily’s spine. “Just in case you needed us. You know?”

Emily shifts in her seat. Sipping from her water glass, Emily averts her eyes. Unable to respond verbally, she only nods in acknowledgement of Veronica’s concern.

“Your parents would be so proud of you.” Colin’s words, though ushered in a demure and reminiscent tone, assault her as if they’ve been fired out of a cannon.

With another subtle movement of her head, Emily ignores the silence that has settled at the dinner table like an uninvited guest. She turns her attention back toward her dinner plate.

Emily’s overwhelming work schedule has meant missing Sunday dinner with Colin and Veronica since Christmas. She hates that her absence may have made her appear unappreciative. Colin and Veronica became her legal guardians after her parents’ accident left her orphaned and alone a decade ago. Guilt creeps up the back of Emily’s neck, spreading like a heat rash, yet her need to remain stoic wins out over a polite response.

Ever since the ball dropped on 2015, though she has kept her disquiet to herself, Emily’s trepidation over something she is unable to put her finger on has been nudging her from the furthest corner of her mind.

The tenth anniversary of her parents’ death is like a beacon, blinking with more intensity as the calendar draws near to that fateful February day. Entirely ignoring the significance of the month seemed achievable, at least within the confines of her mind. But being here with Colin and Veronica, the thought of ignoring the anniversary feels inappropriate and nearly impossible.

Suspecting the root of her wariness has more to do with shadows from the past, Emily has done what she always has. She squared her shoulders and plowed ahead. Moving forward is the only path worthy of her time and attention. This mantra has guided her thoughts and her actions for years. But her mantra has been required more often these past few weeks, and the strength it so readily provided has waned.

Feeling Veronica's eyes watching her, Emily lifts her head, pasting what she hopes is a pleasant and convincing smile upon her face. "Thanks again for having us. This is delicious." Scooping another forkful of lasagna into her mouth, Emily smiles again before reaching for her glass of water, shifting her gaze away from Veronica's penetrating brown eyes.

"We would love to see you more often, Em." Veronica pauses as her long lashes blink, matching the cadence of her words, handed out with cautious sincerity. "This is your home. You are always welcome here." Veronica's shoulders rise and fall in what Emily interprets as resignation. "You don't even need to call ahead. You can pop over anytime you like." Veronica smiles as Colin places his hand over hers and they exchange a look.

Perhaps sensing the rising tension, Colin clears his throat and returns his attention to his own plate. "So, Emily, back to your first research assignment as a lawyer."

The conversation shifts and Emily breathes a sigh of relief as the familiar smile plays about Colin's lips. "I remember those days." A soft chuckle vibrates deep within his throat. "First-year lawyers, us old servants of the court know all too well. The grunt workers of every firm, am I right?"

Emily inclines her head in agreement, but a soft shrug of her shoulders tells him she isn't worried about the workload.

"Anyway, which church basement will you be lurking in for the next several months?" Colin teases Emily about her upcoming project.

"First Church." Emily sips from her water glass, having nearly finished her lasagna. "On Marion and Fifth." Her tone is light and conversational once more, relieved

to have found herself on safer ground with the return to work-related conversation.

Colin leans back against the solid frame of his dining room chair with a light thud. “Really?” His smile broadens as his eyes squint, a question seemingly burning behind them. His fork hovers in midair, its trajectory lost between his mouth and the dinner plate. “Your parents married there. In June 1983. I was the best man. Did you remember that?”

Emily inhales sharply at the mention of her parents. She hadn’t known about their connection to the church in which, until this moment, she was excited about beginning work. Colin’s question sucks the air from the room like a high-powered vacuum. Her inability to speak of her parents or their deaths grips her. Emily’s heart feels as if it has become lodged in her throat, blocking both her breathing and her voice. The realization of what this new information will mean for her shakes the resolve she barely had a grasp on. Out of reflex she stands, wrenching herself from the table. A glass topples, and cutlery clatters against a plate. Colin’s and Veronica’s faces deflate as Emily excuses herself to seek refuge in the bathroom down the hall.

“Em, please.” Ryan’s plea is laced in a whisper as she bolts from the room, determination to control her emotions fueling her steps.

Several minutes pass as Emily hides away from what is surely to be an uncomfortable conversation in the dining room. After pacing about the compact room, she turns on both the hot and cold taps, opening them to full force. The sound of the water drowns out the frantic whispers coming from the three remaining in the dining room in addition to the silent but distraught words pushing from inside her throbbing brain.

Splashing her face with water, Emily peers into the large oval mirror. Her cheeks

are mottling pink and pale, though no tears have dared to disobey her and fall. “Crying is of little use,” she reminds herself in a controlled whisper. She stares at her reflection, challenging her weakened state of mind with narrowed eyes and a determined expression. She will win this emotional battle, just as she has all the others.

Calming herself with a few deep breaths, Emily grasps for a shred of dignity. She pats her cheeks with both palms, encouraging her composure to reinstate itself. With a last look in the mirror, she tucks her hair neatly behind her ears, ready to face Colin, Veronica, and the rest of Sunday dinner. Unlocking the bathroom door, Emily steps into the hall to find Veronica leaning against the wall, an anxious expression painted across her face.

“Colin didn’t mean to upset you. Neither did I for that matter.” Veronica bursts forward. Her voice is quiet and soothing despite the nervous twitching of her arms. Emily assumes she wants nothing more than to reach out and embrace her in a firm hug.

“It’s fine. I’m fine.” Emily’s voice, clipped and guarded, rushes from her lips.

“If you were fine, as you say you are, you wouldn’t run out of the room every time someone mentions your mom and dad.” Veronica takes a tentative step forward.

Emily stiffens, her feigned composure dissolving like sugar in water.

“The offer is still open.” Veronica inclines her head, trying to draw Emily’s eyes upward. “Colin and I are happy to cover the cost of counseling. It’s been ten years, Emily. Don’t you think it is time?”

“There is nothing I can do to bring them back.” Emily’s voice quavers, contradicting the strength of her words.

Veronica nods. “True. But does their death have to be a life sentence for you?”

Veronica's words are gentle, but her point hits home. "Don't you think the time has come, Em? It's okay for you to be happy, you know." Veronica steps forward, her arms reaching to wrap Emily in an embrace.

Emily steps back, her movements stiff and controlled. "Happy?" She scoffs. "You can't possibly understand." Throwing her hands in the air, Emily moves past Veronica, brushing against her shoulders in the narrow hallway. Emily pivots in an abrupt movement. "Don't you get it? There is no happily ever after. Not for me at least. Not anymore."

"Em, please." Veronica's voice bounces off the walls, rising with her mounting frustration.

Colin and Ryan step into the hallway from the dining room. Seeing Ryan firmly holding his cloth napkin, Emily lets out a long sigh. "Let's just finish dinner. Okay?"

"We aren't done discussing this, Emily. You can't go through the rest of your life pretending everything is fine. You had parents, Em. And they loved you."

"Thank you for pointing out the obvious, Veronica." Emily's voice trembles, evidence of the thoughts held tightly in her clenched fists. "I am well aware of everything I had."

"I can only imagine how hard this is for you. But you are not alone, Em. You have us. You have Colin and me." Veronica looks past Emily with a weak smile. "And Ryan. We can help you. We want to help you. You just have to open the door a little and let us in."

Emily squares her shoulders and raises an eyebrow. A rare condescending demeanor takes over her usually polite features. "What exactly do you think I need help with? Haven't I gotten a degree? Haven't I managed to live on my own, afford my own

life, start my own career?”

Not waiting for an answer, Emily tugs her winter coat from the hall closet before shooting Ryan a pointed time-to-go look. Shoving her feet into her low-heeled boots, Emily grabs her purse off the railing and opens the front door. “I think I am doing pretty well actually. I mean no disrespect, to either of you.” Emily inclines her head in Veronica and then Colin’s direction. “But, I think I’ve got it covered. Thank you for dinner.” Emily steps out the door and walks away, leaving Ryan to utter a flurry of apologies as he hurries to slide on his own jacket and shoes before following her out the door.

CHAPTER 2

Sunday, February 15, 2015

Emily

A week later, Emily is sitting in a cozy corner of Murph's bar and restaurant, still thinking about the disastrous dinner at Colin and Veronica's while she waits for Ryan to arrive. Though she spoke with Colin the following day, in an attempt to calm the air between them, she can't help but revisit his announcement about her parents. They married in the church where she is beginning work first thing tomorrow morning. Rattled by the revelation, Emily feels like she's lost at sea with the unforgiving rains of a hurricane tossing her about.

"Hey, you." Ryan's boundless energy and ever-present smile pulls her from her worrisome thoughts. He hangs his rain-soaked jacket on the hook beside the table and slides into the booth, beside her. Leaning over, he pecks her cheek and squeezes her hand before flipping through the bar's booklet-sized menu of drinks and appetizers.

"Are you eating?" A smile tugs on Emily's lips. "I thought you were going to your

mom's for lunch."

Ryan shrugs, his eyes widening at a photo of a towering plate of onion rings. "I can always eat." Gesturing toward the photo, Ryan reads out loud. "*Famous onion rings*. Now who could pass those up?" He closes the menu, clearly pleased with his selection.

After ordering, they sip wine while waiting for the food to arrive. Cautiously, Ryan broaches the subject on Emily's mind. "Have you talked to Colin or Veronica today?"

"Was I supposed to?" Emily sips her wine and lets her eyes wander around the bar, purposely avoiding Ryan's gaze.

"Em, come on. You said you would call them later in the week. You can't get much later than Sunday afternoon. Avoiding them won't solve anything, you know."

Emily sighs. "I'd really rather not. I talked to Colin earlier in the week and he seemed fine. Besides, I have enough to think about. I'm starting the project at the church tomorrow."

The food arrives and Emily toys with her salad. Plucking a cherry tomato from beneath a layer of iceberg lettuce, she fiddles with the white cloth napkin as she pops the ripened morsel into her mouth and bites down. Her lips pucker, one hand going to her mouth, while the other presses against her stomach. Her body's response to the burst of acidity forced upon her already-churning digestive system lingers for a few moments before she pushes away the side plate. Emily grasps her glass of pinot gris with both hands, trying to hide the slight tremble in her fingers.

"It's okay to be nervous, Em. New projects can be exciting, but they also have a mountain of unknowns attached to them." Ryan grasps her hand and squeezes reassurance into her fingers.

While Ryan digs into his plate of perfectly browned onion rings, Emily scrutinizes her emotions. Her nervousness about the church project was well under control until Colin shed light on her parents' connection to the place. The anxiety lying just beneath her ribcage has grown this week, transforming into something much more than first-day jitters. Colin didn't mean any harm, Emily is certain. The man is too good-hearted to consider hurting another, even by accident. With Emily, though, the little girl of his deceased best friend, Colin's desire to cause no ill is magnified by a thousand. She knows that he and Veronica love her like she is their own. After a torrential rainstorm caused an out of control vehicle to collide with her parents' car, sending them careening over an embankment, Colin and Veronica took her in without hesitation.

Emily watches Ryan lick his fingers as he finishes the last onion ring. She swirls the wine in her glass, deciding Colin likely intended his remark to be a jovial addition to the conversation. Perhaps he meant it as a nugget for her to treasure, a fond memory of her parents' lives.

Wiping his hands on a napkin before draining the wine from his glass, Ryan tugs on Emily's sleeve and pulls her from her thoughts. "I better get going." He slides out from the plush booth and stands. "I still think you should call Colin tonight. Like I told you on the way home last week, we should have stayed and finished the conversation. Running away seldom solves anything, Em."

"And like I told you, I'm not running away. I am simply tired of rehashing the same things we've been talking about for ten years." Emily's posture straightens as she makes her point.

"Well, I guess that is where you and Colin differ. According to him, you haven't been talking about anything. It has been a one-sided conversation, Em, and they are

worried about you.”

Emily checks the time on her phone. “Don’t you have to go? You know how hard your mom works to get lunch on the table for everyone.”

Ryan leans across the table and brushes Emily’s lips with his own. “Don’t think I didn’t notice how you changed the subject.” He shakes his head lightly. “See you tomorrow night?”

“See you tomorrow night.”

Emily offers him a little wave when he smiles back at her from the restaurant’s door. She shakes away the memory of their hasty departure and Ryan’s disgruntled words last Sunday.

Spreading *The Seattle Times* across the table, Emily slides her wineglass to the side. She turns pages, making her way to the middle of the paper.

While she is scanning the pages, activity beyond the window of Murph’s draws Emily’s attention. Aware of her own still slightly damp skin, she watches the downpour sloshing beyond the pane. All week, her thoughts have been repeatedly tugged back to her parents’ connection to the church, and Emily feels far from settled.

A nervous hand runs through her rain-misted brunette waves as she attempts to pull herself together. Returning her grasp to the glass, she takes a gulp of wine and feels it rush down her throat. The chilled liquid elicits a full-body shiver. Setting the wineglass on the polished mahogany table, Emily glances up as a waitress hurries by. She considers asking for something warmer than her wine, perhaps something stronger. Before Emily can utter her request, the waitress disappears into the hall and behind the swinging doors that lead to the kitchen.

Less than an hour ago, Emily sequestered herself into the plush, velvety green

corner booth at the back of Murph's. With another glance out the window, she contemplates the drab weather and how it mirrors her own unsettled mood. She distracts her thoughts by watching the wet feet of hurried Seattleites as they rush by the half window, dodging raindrops and each other this dark, drizzling, and altogether unpleasant afternoon.

The unusual vantage point from the almost below-ground restaurant windows is prevalent throughout Seattle's downtown historic buildings. Given the city's steeply sloped streets and the decision to build on top of the existing footprint after the Great Fire of 1889, what began as the city's original street-level business district now sits several feet below the modern sidewalks. Thus, only feet and the occasional glimpse of a passing canine nose are visible beyond the windows of Emily's secluded table in the farthest reaches of the historic and landmark-protected building.

The reserved table, along with any tab accumulated at it, belongs to Patterson and Holt, a large but family-friendly law firm. Emily signed on as a result of the firm's persistent headhunting during her final semester of law school last year. The table at Murph's is a company perk that, given the restaurant's proximity to the church, Emily is likely to use often.

Glancing around the bar, Emily takes in the upscale décor that perfectly matches the above-average address. With a secluded restaurant on one side and the bar situated street side, Murph's bustles with activity on this rainy Sunday afternoon. An upgrade from her usual burger and beer joint during law school, Murph's is refined, Emily decides as her eyes wash over the dark wood tables, the early 1900s banker-style lighting, and the glass shelves of liquor with labels a first-year lawyer wouldn't consider ordering due to the price tag that accompanies them.

Emily came to Murph's hoping to calm her nerves before she begins her position at the church tomorrow. So far, a sense of calm has been elusive. All she has to show for an afternoon spent sipping wine in a corner booth is a dull ache in her overthinking brain.

"It's Emily, isn't it?" A tall, slender, blond server brushes up beside the booth. "Your server is on her break. I can help you with anything you need."

"Hi, yes. I'm Emily. I'm sorry, do we know each other?"

"We haven't met before, but I added your name to the table last week. Between you and me, yours and Mr. Holt's are the only names on the list. I was eager to meet the mysterious Emily who is worthy of such an honor." The waitress hides a giggle behind her hand. "Mr. Holt mentioned I could expect to see you soon. I'm Allison, and I hear we will be seeing a lot of each other. Mr. Holt tells me you are working on the case for the church. Starting tomorrow, I think he said."

Emily places both palms against her swirling midsection. "Yes. They have tasked me with archiving their collection."

"No Supreme Court appearances for you, then?" Allison shifts a tray in her hands and leans over the table toward the open newspaper. "I read the article on my break. Tough spot for sure. I imagine you aren't allowed to have an opinion on the matter, but it would be hard to see that beautiful building torn down."

"Well in all honesty, my opinion is the same as our client's. They own the land and building after all." Emily pauses a moment to measure her thoughts. "Beautiful or not, I do not believe the city is in the right to force an owner of a privately owned property into the regulations of a landmark building. Especially given that the designation comes with a hefty price tag for historical upkeep, not to mention the

limitations that landmark status places on renovations. The church might not be able to serve the changing needs of its congregation if they are forced into the historic status.” As the words leave Emily’s lips, it occurs to her that if not for this lawsuit, she would never have known about her parents’ ties to the church. If only she could go back in time and choose a different law firm to sign on with, a firm with no connection to the case currently sitting with the Supreme Court of Washington State. *If only.*

“I can see that side too.” Allison lowers her voice another octave. “Is the salad okay, Emily? It doesn’t look like you’ve touched it.”

Emily offers a polite smile. Politeness was the cornerstone of her upbringing, and some habits stay with you, even after the teachers have departed. “I’m just not hungry, I guess.”

“Rainy weather makes me think soup is an excellent idea.” Allison nods toward the rain-soaked windowpane. Her blond ponytail swings side to side. It’s tied back with a thin black ribbon matching her formal black-and-white uniform, crisp apron, and starched bow tie. “Roasted tomato with parmesan croutons is on the menu. Are you sure you don’t want to try it?”

Emily shakes her head swiftly and decisively, feeling the bile from the recently consumed tomato racing to rise. “Another glass of wine though. That would be great.” A tight-lipped smile stretches across her lips before she drains the glass, begging the churning in her stomach to release its grip.

“Look at you. You certainly know how to spend a rainy Sunday afternoon.” Allison winks with a playful smile before clearing Emily’s salad plate and turning on her heel toward the kitchen. Glancing back over her shoulder, she gives Emily a knowing look. “How about some soda crackers to go with that wine?” Emily nods, feeling a tinge

of embarrassment at being found out by the friendly waitress, who seems to recognize nervous energy. With a swing in her step, Allison disappears into the hallway that leads toward the kitchen doors.

Emily turns her attention back to the newspaper, reading one reporter's opinion on the case that has spanned the better part of two decades and now resides on the docket of the Supreme Court of Washington State. With Emily having read the case's brief several times over, the article offers no new information, save for the reporter's opinion of the Friends of the First Church. The community organization has come together to persuade city hall that the church must remain, not always considering what the owners of the church can afford.

Emily's gaze settles on the rain-beaten window. The smooth jazz playing in the background soothes the sharp corners of her analytical mind, and her vision softens, blurring the raindrops on the glass. The wine works its magic, warming her through. She reclines deeper into the plush green cushion with a soft sigh. The hushed environment of Murph's takes the edge off the day, along with her worries about what tomorrow may hold.

Emily is sinking further into a state of relaxation when the connection between her parents and the church sneaks into her periphery. Without warning, a tear escapes and trickles down her cheek. She has allowed herself to be lulled across a dangerous line. Letting her guard down is far from acceptable. Blinking her eyes in frustration, she attempts to hold back the waterfall that, after years of being dammed up, is determined to escape. Emily curses under her breath at this sudden lack of control. Not a single emotionally charged tear has left her eyes in years, a feat Emily remains intent to uphold. *How could I have let myself be blindsided by these emotions?* Arguments filter

through her mind. She takes a deep breath and tries to allow space for a sliver of grace to find her. But disdain pushes past, an overbearing warden that refuses to back down.

Grabbing her rain jacket strewn across the curved seat, Emily searches for the opening to her jacket pocket and pulls out her phone. Turning over the phone to illuminate the screen, she places it on the table, willing a message from Ryan to appear. No message, no voicemail. Shaking her head, Emily realizes too late that she should have gone with Ryan to his family gathering, rather than feigning a desire to prepare for the week ahead. He may not be aware, given Emily's strong silence on all things emotional, but Ryan is the grounding force that keeps her distracted and happy. She doesn't let herself dwell too long on whether the distraction or the happiness is her true saving grace.

"Haven't enough years passed yet?" Emily asks herself, in a whisper fit for a frightened child. Until learning of the church and its significance in her parents' lives, she had succeeded in keeping her emotions in check. She certainly hasn't spent the past ten years distraught and wrung out by emotion, like she has been since learning where her parents were married.

A muffled squeak passes through her closed lips as a memory flits across her mind. She was sixteen years old. She was curled up on the sofa, reading a book for English class, when the doorbell rang. Emily drops her head into her hands as she remembers the two uniformed police officers standing in the entryway of their family home. "They only went out for dinner." She pleaded with the officers to understand, her ears and heart unwilling to comprehend the devastating news. Her parents were gone. Just like that. A car crash had, in an instant, turned her life upside down.

Everything Emily knew was wiped out, leaving nothing but barren landscape.

Looking up, she glances around the crowded restaurant before wrapping her arms around herself, trying to still the trembling inside her. She yearns for her mother's hug with a desire so deep it could swallow her from the inside out. If only she had known that day would be the last, she would have held her mother tighter. She would have insisted her parents order dinner in. She would have tossed her book report aside and joined them for dinner out instead. So many ways she could have changed the outcome. Even after all these years, the things she should have done haunt her the most.

Wrapping her jacket around her shoulders, determined to pull together her unwilling emotions, Emily thinks about how things used to be. Even before that fateful day, she couldn't wait to grow up and be just like them, lawyers with a homey family law practice and lives full of grand adventures. Emily swipes at the tears now streaming down her cheeks as her mom's smile flashes through her memory. Her radiant smile could coax Emily into being brave if she was nervous, happy if she was feeling sad. Her smile was even strong enough to tease out a laugh at the corny jokes that only her mom thought were funny.

Until the nightmare of that dark evening, Emily believed there was good in the world around her. She believed all things were possible. After a childhood filled with princess films and fairy tales, believing wholeheartedly that dreams really did come true was natural. She had faith as big as mountains and enough love in her heart to power the entire downtown core of Seattle. But none of it was enough to bring them back.

On that fateful night, she lost not only her family, but the innocence of believing in happily ever after. That was the first time she became aware that nothing lasts forever.

Placing a wineglass on the table, Allison startles Emily from her thoughts.

Allison's concerned eyes take in Emily's grief-stricken expression. "You okay, love?"

The sharp awareness of her surroundings snaps her back to the present. "Fine. Thank you." She whispers the words as she shoves her phone into her jacket pocket. "I'm not going to need that. Sorry for the trouble." Emily attempts to shuffle her body out of the booth, her eyes narrowed toward the door. The velvet cushion tugs at Emily's skirt, holding it hostage as she tries to break free. Wrapping her raincoat around her with flailing arms, Emily offers another feeble apology and dashes out the door, under the darkened and rain-heavy sky.