

## PROLOGUE

There used to be a photograph of the day my parents were married on our mantel. The frame was white abalone, the picture a close-up of them pressed together in an orange booth of a doughnut shop. In it, they hand-fed each other maple bars in lieu of wedding cake, their ring fingers newly anointed with plain silver bands purchased at a pawn shop.

Money was tight. Dad was writing his first book; Mom was cleaning houses. A big wedding wasn't in the budget, so they headed to the courthouse. A judge married them between speeding ticket hearings. Afterward they skipped hand in hand to Bavarian Bliss and asked the baker to snap their photograph.

When I was little, I'd hold the picture, rub their faces with my thumbs, and ask them to tell me the story again. "How did you two meet?"

Clearly, they adored each other.

So it was a mystery to me when it all fell apart, why the love went away.

There were probably signs. But at age eleven, I had failed to catalog them. I didn't see the bridges catch fire and start burning—"whiplash" is the right word for the morning my

parents sat me down and said they were separating. Dad moved out the same day.

Months passed by. The rain started in Seattle. Dad didn't come home. In fact, he signed a new lease, moving from his temporary executive apartment to a more permanent residence—the Glenn. That day Mom was in the kitchen, trying hard not to cry. I don't think she wanted me to see her sad. Our brokenness settled in.

I wanted to fix her, fix our family, and I believed I could. I slipped out the back door and biked across town, tears spilling and mixing with the rain while I pumped my legs all the way to the Glenn. To apartment 27.

It was nearly evening when I knocked.

Dad answered, surprise flashing in his expression. Leaves swirled, blowing into the entryway and settling as he let me in.

I sat on his new couch, something velvet and hard that still smelled like factory chemicals. It wasn't at all like our cozy furniture at home that had absorbed the smells of made-from-scratch meals and the weight of our bodies after Friday-night movie marathons.

I felt so out of place. And Dad looked so out of place. It was like nothing in this apartment could ever hold the imprint of me or us.

"Please," I begged on a rough gasp. "Come home."

I made messy promises. To always brush my teeth, to go to bed on time, to clear my plate after dinner, to remember to empty my lunch box. I promised to be good, to be better.

I cried, and Dad cried too. He held my hands, wiped my tears, and gently told me, "No. I'm sorry, honey. I can't."

And I understood then what it was like to love and lose.

This was the landscape of heartbreak, and from that day forward I vowed never to step foot into it again.

A door slammed shut then, only to be pried open my senior year of high school.

Everything would change that year.

The year of the notes.



# CHAPTER ONE

It began with a wish.

Wait.

Not exactly. I take that back. It began with granny panties. Yeah, that's more like it.

Looking back, I, Emma Nakamura-Thatcher, would say my love story began with a set of full-back underwear.

It was summer, a random weekday afternoon, and I had landed in the place I'd spent most of my teenage years avoiding: the lingerie department with my mother. Suffice it to say a part of me did not want to be there. And that part was all of me.

Chin tucked down, I hummed along with the Muzak, skirt-ing the outer aisle, checking out bralettes with matching lace panties. Deeper in, my mom dug through a bargain bin. I did my best to project a not-with-her vibe.

"How about these?" Mom clutched a pack of generic-brand undies. Strands of black hair clung to her forehead. She was working up a sweat. Outstanding. "They're on sale. Half off."

Blood rushed to my face. I zipped to my mom's side, cataloging the humiliation fallout. There were two other people in the lingerie department: a golden-ager in thick glasses examining

undershirts, and the girl behind the register, who exuded cool—magenta bangs, tiny nose ring, thick winged eyeliner.

Luckily, neither of them noticed Mom's excitement, which wasn't in her smile but in her eyes, intense and damn near rabid.

"Well?" Mom asked at my approach.

I studied the pack of underwear in Mom's hands, then shifted to the bin. "I dunno," I murmured, picking through the piles and considering other options. My hand closed around an alternative—red, lacy, dead sexy.

What kind of girl wore this type of underwear? A pretty, adventurous girl.

Was I that girl? Nope. Not even close.

I was seventeen years old, ate the same thing for lunch every day, and had been kissed two times.

The first kiss was in middle school. In eighth grade, with Liam Huxley on a playground. I was in a swing, he bent down, and our noses bumped. He tried some tongue, and honestly, not impressed. I darted away and avoided him the rest of the year, easy since we were in different halls, he in A and I in B—practically worlds apart. The fates continued to smile down on me when we went to different high schools.

The second kiss was at the beach. With Brandon. No last names. He was a local, lived in town, and I was on vacation with my mom. We spent the whole weekend sneaking off into the sand dunes. Hidden in the blades of the high grass, I learned a lot. Five out of five stars. I was someone else there—a different Emma, inhibitions eroded away by the roar of the tide and the salt in the air. Insert wistful sigh here.

Liam and Brandon were easy to leave. Each relationship had

a limited shelf life. And as a classic risk-averse kind of girl, I didn't drink after the sell-by date.

"Emma?"

I blinked. "Sorry. What?"

Mom shook her head. "I said not those." Her face was makeup-free, her hands chapped from the chemicals she used to clean houses. "They look synthetic." She plucked the red scrap of lace from my hands, rubbed her thumbs over the crotch, *over the crotch*, and inspected the label. A tongue cluck followed. "One hundred percent polyester. You need cotton underwear. It's breathable." Mom tossed the panties back into the bin and fisted the full-backs. "We'll get these."

Well. That settled that. I trailed her to the cash register.

"Find everything okay?" The checkout girl scanned the pack of underwear, eyes flitting to Mom. A gold pin applied to her crop top stated her name: Camille.

"Yes." Mom dug around in her purse, the leather aged and worn away at the handles and bottom. "We don't need a bag. I brought my own." She produced a crinkled plastic sack and placed it on the counter.

A few years back the State of Washington had passed an eight-cent charge to curb the single use of plastic and paper bags. Ever since, a whole cupboard in our kitchen had been dedicated to one large plastic bag filled with a bunch of rolled-up smaller plastic bags, the size of a watermelon and the density of a tumor.

A corner of Camille's mouth tugged up, and I dropped my gaze in a quick burst of embarrassment.

All set, Mom handed me the plastic bag, and I folded it against my body.

As we left, I was careful not to make eye contact with anyone. Part of my high-level degree in blending in.

This was my life: safe, predictable, easily forgotten.

The parking garage was packed when we got to Mom's car, an old Volvo with crank windows and fabric seats whose glory days were circa 1999.

I unlocked the doors and climbed into the driver's side. Mom followed, settling into the passenger seat. The interior smelled of coffee and old cereal.

I was backing out when Mom announced, "I registered you for the Sherwood Institute last night."

"What?" I braked hard.

The van waiting behind us honked.

Mom frowned at me. "Pay attention."

I eased my foot off the brake and drove ahead. "How do you even know about Sherwood?"

Mom crossed her arms. "Mr. Lebanon emailed me. He was wondering why you hadn't finished your paperwork. I said you hadn't mentioned any paperwork. We hopped on a phone call. The Sherwood Institute is an excellent opportunity, Emma."

I couldn't argue with that. Sherwood was a performing arts college-prep program and hosted after-school intensives every fall. Space was limited, the spots competitively vied for. At the end of the program, there was a performance where each student played a solo. Scouts from major music institutions and universities were invited to watch and sip warm punch at a mixer afterward.

I should have been thrilled when Mr. Lebanon, my music teacher, mentioned Sherwood in the spring. He'd recommended



me and sent in a video of my last recital. The admissions committee had replied with an avid yes, but my pragmatic self couldn't mirror their enthusiasm. I was bound for community college or the University of Washington. Somewhere close to home where I'd study business or education—a solid track to a future job.

"You love to play the violin," Mom rolled on.

Again, I could not argue. The first song I ever played was "Hot Cross Buns" on the recorder in kindergarten. I was obsessed. It was "Hot Cross Buns" in the living room. "Hot Cross Buns" under my covers at night. "Hot Cross Buns" in the empty bathtub, because even then I could sense where the best acoustics were in the house.

Under duress and marveling at my sudden obsession, my folks took me to the Music Factory. Dad placed his hands on my shoulders and said, "Choose." I ran my fingers over the flutes, plucked the strings of guitars, beat drums, and stopped in front of the violin. My world went still and quiet, as if I'd been summoned.

I've been playing the violin ever since.

"Mr. Lebanon believes you may be able to get a scholarship to music school."

I watched Mom sift through her purse to find a tube of Voltaren, and my decision to stay home firmly settled. She needed me.

The last few months her hands had gotten worse. I'd had to help out more around the house, sub in for cleaning jobs when her fingers wouldn't straighten. There was no way I'd leave her in order to chase some impossible dream of playing the violin in college, only to submit to the constant grind afterward. Full-time professional violinist gigs were as scarce as toilet paper during the pandemic.

I kept my eyes on the road, my mind on deflection. “I can’t believe you talked to him.”

“He’s a nice man, and he has a nice voice. Is he a singer? I bet he can sing.”

I did not care for her dreamy tone. “Ew.”

She went on, emboldened. “I bet he has kind eyes, too.”

I opened my mouth and shut it abruptly, slapped into awareness. Mom’s smile died too. The mood in the car plummeted to zero degrees. Coming up on our right was the Glenn, an apartment complex built around an old park with a burn-your-skin-off-in-the-summer metal slide. It was also where my dad had lived during the divorce.

Damn it.

I’d forgotten to take the detour.

In my peripheral vision I could see Mom, her jaw locked tight. A silent memory passed between us . . .

Me riding my bike in the rain, begging Dad to come home. Mom was frantic when she finally found me, drenched and sobbing on Dad’s new couch, yellow price tag still attached. The three of us huddled in that apartment, trapped in a deep crater of misery.

Mom waited until the Glenn was in the rearview mirror before speaking. “You’re going to Sherwood.”

Spine rigid, I flicked on the blinker to turn left and started to try to convince her that Sherwood was not in our best interest. “Mom—”

She sliced her hand through the air, not a fan of my attitude or of being challenged. “End of discussion.” She stared out the side window. “Trust me. I’m doing you a favor.”

Life is a series of choices. Unless the choice is made for you.