

Chapter 1

Have you ever woken up in a cold sweat, thinking that you've taken a wrong turn and are stuck in a life you don't want? Did you ever consider hitting the brakes, backing up, and heading elsewhere?

How about disappearing - leaving family, friends, even a spouse - ditching everything you've known and starting over again. Reinventing yourself. Rediscovering yourself. Maybe, just maybe returning to an old lover. Have you ever dreamed about this?

No. Me, neither. No dream, no plan.

It was just another Friday. I awoke at 6:10 to the blare of the radio, and hit the button to silence it. I didn't need talk of politics to knot up my stomach, when thought of going to work did that all on its own. It didn't help that my husband, already long gone, texted me at 6:15, knowing I'd have my BlackBerry with me in the bathroom.

Can't make dinner tonight. Sorry.

I was stunned. The dinner in question, which had been on our calendar for weeks, involved senior partners at my firm. It was important that James be there with me.

OMG, I typed. Why not?

I received his reply seconds before stepping into the shower. *Gotta work late*, he said, and how could I argue? We were both lawyers, seven years out of law school. We had talked about working our tails off now to pay our dues, and I had been in total agreement at first. Lately, though, we saw little of each other, and it was getting worse. When I pointed this out to James, he got a helpless look in his eyes, like, *what could he do?*

I tried to relax under the hot spray, but I kept arguing aloud that there were things we could do if we wanted to be together - that love should trump work - that we had to make changes before we had kids, or what was the point - that my coyote dreams had begun when I started getting letters from Jude Bell, and though I stuffed those letters under the bed and out of sight, a tiny part of me knew they were there.

I had barely left the shower when my BlackBerry dinged again. No surprise. My boss, Walter Burbridge, always emailed at 6:30.

Client wants an update, he wrote. Can you do it by ten?

Here's a little background. I used to be an idealist. Starting law school, I had dreamed of defending innocent people against corporate wrongdoing, and, by graduation, was itching to be involved in an honest-to-goodness class action lawsuit. Now I am. Only I'm the bad guy. The case on which I work involves a company that produces bottled water that was tainted enough to cause irreparable harm to a frightening number of people. The company has agreed to

compensate the victims. My job is to determine how many, how sick, and how little we can get away with doling out, and I don't work alone. We are fifty lawyers, each with a cubicle, computer, and headset. I'm one of five supervisors, any of whom could have compiled an update, but because Walter likes women, he comes to me.

I'm thirty-two, stand five-six, weigh one-twenty. I spin sometimes, but mostly power walk and do yoga, so I'm in shape. My hair is auburn and long, my eyes brown, my skin clear.

We gave them an update Monday, I typed with my thumbs.

Get it to me by ten, he shot back.

Could I refuse? Of course not. I was grateful to have a job at a time when many of my law school friends were wandering the streets looking for work. I was looking, too, but there was nothing to be had, which meant that arguing with the partner-in-charge of a job I *did* have was not a wise thing to do.

Besides, I mused as I slipped on my watch, if I was to put together an update by ten, I had to make tracks.

My BlackBerry didn't cooperate. I was hurrying to finish my makeup when it began making noise. The wife of one of James's partners wanted the name of a pet sitter. I didn't have a pet, but could certainly ask a friend who did. Thinking that I would have had a dog or cat in a minute if our lifestyle allowed it, I was zipping on a pair of black slacks when another email arrived. *Why won't sharks attack lawyers?* said the subject line, and I instantly clicked DELETE. Lynn Fallon had been in my study group our first year in law school. She now worked with a small firm in Kansas, surely having a kinder, gentler experience than those of us in New York, and she loved lawyer jokes. I did not. I was feeling bad enough about what I did. Besides, when Lynn sent a joke, it went to dozens of people, and I didn't do group email.

Nor did I do anything but blue blouses, I realized in dismay as I stood at the closet. Blue blouses were professional, my lawyer side argued, but I was bored looking at them. Closing my eyes, I chose a blouse - any blouse - and was doing buttons when the BB dinged again.

Okay, Emily, wrote my sister. You booked the restaurant, but you haven't done music, photography, or flowers. Why are you dragging your heels?

Kelly, it is 7 am, I wrote back and tossed the BlackBerry on the bed. I turned on the radio, heard the word 'terrorism,' and turned it back off. I was brushing my hair back into a wide barrette when my sister's reply arrived.

Right, and in two minutes I have to get the kids dressed and fed, then do the same for me so I can get to work, which is why I'm counting on you for this. What's the problem?

This party is over the top, I typed back.

We agreed. You do the work, I pay.

Mom doesn't want this, I argued, but my sister was relentless.

Mom will love it. She only turns 60 once. I need help with this, Emily. I can't hear myself think when I get home from work. If you had kids you'd know.

It was a low blow. Kelly knew we were trying. She knew we had undergone tests and were doing the intensive-sex-at-ovulation routine. She didn't know that I'd gotten my period again this month, but I couldn't bear to write the words, and then - *ding, ding, ding* - my inbox began filling. It was 7:10. I had to get to work. Burying the BlackBerry in the depths of my purse so that I wouldn't hear the noise, I grabbed my coat and took off.

We lived in Gramercy Park in a condo we could barely afford, and though we didn't have a key to the park itself, we had passed Julia Roberts on the street a time or two. I saw nothing today - no Julia, no pretty brownstones, no promising June day - as I hurried to Fifth Avenue, sprinting the last half block to catch the bus as it pulled up at the curb.

I was at my desk at 7:45, and I wasn't the first. A low drone of voices already hovered over the cubicles. I awoke my computer and logged in, then logged in twice more at different levels of database security. Waiting for the final one, I checked my BlackBerry.

Are you going to yoga? asked the paralegal who worked two floors below me and hated going to yoga alone. I would be happy going alone, since it meant less chatter and more relaxation, which was the whole point of yoga. But if I had to go home to change before the firm dinner, yoga was out. *Not tonight*, I typed.

Colly wants Vegas, wrote a book group friend. Colleen Parker was getting married in September and, though I had only known her for the two years I'd been in the group, she had asked me to be a bridesmaid. I would be one of a dozen, paying three hundred dollars each to wear matching dresses. And now a batchlorette party in Vegas? I was thinking the whole thing was tacky, when I spotted the next note.

Hey, Emily, wrote Ryan Mcfee. Ryan worked one cubicle down, two over. *Won't be in today. Have the flu. Don't want to spread it around.*

This should have been important. It meant one man-day of lost work. But what was one more or less in a huge cubicle room?

Logged in now, I set to gathering Walter's information. It was 7:50. By 8:25, I had a tally of the calls we'd received from last weekend's newspaper ads - and I could understand why our client was worried. The number of claimants was mounting fast. Each had been rated on a ten-point scale by the lawyer taking the call, with tens being the most severely affected and ones being the least. There were also zeroes; these were the easiest to handle. When callers tried to cash in on a settlement with proof neither of harm nor of having ever purchased the product, they stood out.

The others were the ones over which I agonized.

But statistics were impersonal and, in that, relatively painless. I updated the figures on how many followups we had done since Monday, with a numerical breakdown and brief summaries of the claims. At 8:55, I emailed the spreadsheet to Walter, logged in the time I'd spent making it, shot a look at my watch and dashed downstairs for breakfast. Though I passed colleagues in the elevator, being competitors in the game of billable hours, we did little more than nod.

Going from the 35th floor to the ground and up again took time, so it wasn't until 9:10 that I was back at my desk with a donut and coffee. By then, the cubicles were filled, the tap of computer keys louder and the drone of voices more dense. I had barely washed down a bite of donut when the phone began to blink. Hooking the earpiece over my head, I logged in on my time sheet, pulled up a clear screen on my computer and clicked into the call.

'Lane Lavash,' I answered as was protocol with calls coming in on the toll-free lines listed in our ads. 'May I help you?'

There was silence, then a timid, 'I don't know. I got this number from the paper.'

Frauds were confident. This woman sounded young and unsure. 'Which paper?' I asked gently.

'The, uh, the Telegram. In Portland. Maine.'

'Do you live in Portland?' I readied my fingers to enter this information.

'No. I was there with my brother last weekend and saw the ad. I live in Massachusetts.'

I dropped my hands. Massachusetts was prime Eagle River distribution area. We'd received calls from as far away as Oregon, from people who had been vacationing in New England during the time the tainted water was on sale. Strict documentation of travel was required for these claims, well before we looked at documentation of physical harm.

I cupped my hands in my lap. 'Do you have cause for a claim against Eagle River?'

Her voice remained hesitant. 'My husband says no. He says that these things just happen.'

'What things?'

'Miscarriages.'

I hung my head. This was not what I wanted to hear, but the din of voices around me said that if not this woman, someone else would be getting pieces of the Eagle River settlement. Miscarriage was definitely one of the 'harms' on our list.

'Have you had one?' I asked.

'Two.'

I entered that in the form on my screen, and, when the words didn't appear, retyped them, but the form remained blank. Knowing that I wouldn't forget this, and not wanting to lose the momentum of the call, I asked, 'Recently?'

'The first one was a year-and-a-half ago.'

My heart sank. 'Had you been drinking Eagle River water?' Of course, she had.

'Yes.'

'Can you document that?' I asked in a kind voice, though I felt cold and mean.

'Y'mean, like, do I have a receipt? See, that's one of the reasons my husband didn't want me to call. I pay cash, and I don't *have* receipts. My husband says I should've made a connection between the water and the miscarriage back then, but, like, bottled water is always safe, right? Besides, we were just married and there was other stuff going on, and I figured I was miscarrying because it wasn't the right time for me to be pregnant.' Her voice shrank. 'Now it is, only they say there's something wrong with the baby.'

My mind filled with static. I tried to remember the company line. 'The Eagle River recall was eighteen months ago. The water has been clean since then. It wouldn't harm your baby.'

I heard a meek half-cry. 'The thing is, we try to buy in bulk because it's cheaper that way. So we had a couple of twenty-fours in the basement and kind of forgot about them. Then I got pregnant, and my husband lost his job, and money was really tight, so I saw the water and thought I was doing good by using what we had instead of buying fresh. I didn't know about the recall.'

'It was in all the newspapers.'

I don't read newspapers, the ensuing silence said. 'Newspapers cost money.'

'So does bottled water.'

'But the water from the tap tastes so *bad*. We thought of putting a filter on, but that costs more than the bottled water, and it's not like we own this place.'

'Maybe your tap water is tainted,' I said, playing to script. 'Have you asked your landlord to test it?'

'No, because my husband drinks it, and he's healthy. I'm the only one with the problem, and I only drink bottled water. I noticed your newspaper ad, because I always drink Eagle River.' Her voice was a whispered wail. 'They say the baby won't be right, and my husband wants to get rid of it, and I have to make a decision, and I don't know what to do. This *sucks*.'

It did suck. *All* of it.

'I don't know what to do,' she repeated, and I realized she wanted my advice, but how could I give that? I was the enemy, an agent for the company whose product had caused a deformity in her child. She should have been yelling at me, calling me the most cold-hearted person in the world. Some of them did. There had been the man whose seamstress wife had developed tremors in her hands and was permanently disabled. Or the woman whose husband had died - and yes, he had a pre-existing medical condition, but he would have lived longer if he hadn't drunk tainted water.

The names they called me weren't pretty, and though I told myself not to take it personally, I did. Thinking that this job *definitely* sucked, I swiveled sideways and lowered my eyes. 'I'm Emily. What's your name?'

'Layla,' she said. I didn't try to enter it on my form. Nor did I ask for a last name. This had become a personal discussion.

'Have you talked with your doctor about options?'

'There are only two,' she said, sounding frightened. I guessed her to be in her early twenties. 'My mother says I shouldn't kill my baby. She says God chose me to protect an imperfect child, but she isn't the one who'll be paying medical bills or maybe losing a husband because of it.' *Losing a husband* ... not on the formal list of 'harms' but a plausible side effect, one that had to resonate with any married woman in this room.

Or maybe not. We didn't talk about this - didn't talk about much of anything, because we were being paid by the hour to do our work, and time sheets would only allow for a lapse or two. What I was doing now was against the rules. I was supposed to stick to business and limit the time of each call. But Layla was talking quickly, going on about the bills that were piling up, and I couldn't cut her off. Somewhere in the middle of it, she said, 'You're a good person, I can tell by your voice, so my husband was wrong when he said I'd be talking to a robot. He also said we'd have to sign away our lives if we got money for this. Would we?'

I was stuck on *good person*, echoing so loudly through my fraudulent soul that I had to consciously refocus at the end. 'No, Layla. You'd have to sign a release saying that you won't further sue Eagle River, its parent company or distributors, but that's it.'

She was silent for a beat. 'Are you married?'

'Yes.'

'With kids?'

'Some day.' I was on the clock, but I couldn't return to the claim form.

'I'm desperate for them,' Layla said in her very young voice. 'I mean, you work for a law firm. I work in a hardware store. Kids would give my life meaning, y'know?'

'Absolutely,' I replied just as a sharp voice broke in.

'What's happening here, Emily,' Walter asked. 'No one's working.'

I swiveled toward him, then rose from my chair enough to see over the cubicle tops. Sure enough, our team stood in scattered clusters, most looking now at Walter and me.

'Computers are down,' called one. 'Forms are frozen.'

Walter eyed me. 'Did you report this?'

I pushed my mouthpiece away. 'I hadn't realized there was a problem. I'm working with a claimant.' Adjusting the mouthpiece, I returned to Layla. 'There's a technical glitch here. Can I call you back in a few?'

'You won't,' she said defeatedly. 'And anyway, I don't know if I should do this.'

'You should,' I advised, confident that Walter wouldn't know what I was saying.

She gave me her number. I wrote it on a Post-It and ended the call.

'He should what?' Walter asked.

'Wait half an hour before going out, so that I can call her back.' I buzzed our technology department.

'Are you *encouraging* people to file claims?' Walter asked.

'No. I'm listening. She's in pain. She needs someone to hear what she's saying.'

'Your job is to document everyone who calls and tell them what medical forms we'll need if they want a piece of the pie. That's it, Emily. You're not being paid to be a shrink.'

'I'm trying to sort through claims so that we know which are legit and which aren't. This is one way to do it.' When I heard a familiar voice in my headset, I said, 'Hey, Todd, it's Emily. We're having trouble up here.'

'Already on it.' He clicked off.

I relayed the message to Walter, who wasn't mollified. 'How long 'til we're running again?'

It was 9:40. I figured we'd lost ten minutes, fifteen max. 'Todd is fast.'

Walter leaned closer. A natty dresser, he never looked ruffled. The only things that ever gave him away were his gray eyes and his voice. Those eyes were rocky now, the voice low and taut. 'I'm under pressure, Emily. We were named to manage this settlement only after I personally assured the judge that we could do it quickly and economically. I can't afford to have my lawyers wasting time holding hands. I'm counting on you to set an example; this is important for your career. Get the facts. That's it.' With a warning look, he left.

I should have been chastised, but all I could think was that if anyone was wasting time, it was the people who called us hoping for help. They wouldn't get what they deserved; the system was designed to minimize reward. Besides, how did you price out a damaged baby, a ruined life?

I was telling myself not to be discouraged - to keep avoiding wine and caffeine and always wash my prenatal vitamins down with *good* water - when a crescendoing hum came, spreading from cubicle to cubicle as the computers returned to life. I should have been relieved, but, to my horror, my eyes filled with tears. Needing a distraction, even something as frivolous as Vegas talk from Colly's friends, I turned when my BlackBerry dinged. It was James. Maybe coming tonight? I wondered with a quick burst of hope.

Just got a brilliant idea, he wrote and, for a final minute, still, I believed. *The dinner Sunday night? That was his firm dinner. I want you to do it up big - new dress, hair, nails, the works. I have to work tomorrow anyway. That would be Saturday, the one day we usually managed a few hours together. A couple of favors? Pick up my navy suit and my shirts. And my prescription. And get cash for the week. Thanks, babe. You're the best.*

I scrolled on, thinking there had to be more, because if that was all, I would be livid.

But that was it. *Thanks, babe. You're the best.*

Keyboards clicked, voices hummed, electronics dinged, jangled, and chimed, and still, as I stared at the words, I heard James's voice. *I want you to do it up big - new dress, hair, nails, the works.* Like I needed his permission for this?

Suddenly it all backed up in my throat like too much bad food - bad marriage, bad work, bad family, friends, feelings - and I couldn't swallow. Needing air, I grabbed my purse and, as an afterthought, the Post-It with Layla's name and number.

Tessa Reid was as close as I came to having a friend in the firm, which was as sad a statement as any. We never socialized outside work. I did know that she had two kids and two school loans, and that she shared my revulsion for what we did. I saw it in her eyes when she arrived at work, the same look of dread reflected in my own mirror each day.

She lived three cubicles to the right of mine. Ducking in there now, I touched her shoulder. Her earpiece was active, her hands typing. One look at my face, and she put her caller on hold.

'Do me a huge favor, Tessa?' I whispered, not for privacy because, Lord knew, my voice wouldn't carry over the background din, but because that was all the air I could find. I pressed

the Post-It to her desk. 'Call this claimant for me? We were talking when the system went down. She's valid.' I was banking on that, perhaps with a last gasp of idealism. For sure, though, Tessa was the only one in the room whom I could trust to find out.

She was studying me in concern. 'What's wrong?'

'I need air. Do this for me?'

'Of course. Where are you going?'

'Out,' I whispered and left.

A gaggle of clicks, dings, and murmurs followed me, lingering like smog even when the elevator closed. I made the descent in a back corner, eyes downcast, arms hugging my waist. Given the noise in my head, if anyone had spoken, I mightn't have heard, which was just as well. What could I have said if, say, Walter Burbridge had stepped in? *Where are you going?* I don't know. *When'll you be back?* I don't know. *What's wrong with you?* I don't know.

The last would have been a lie, but how to explain what I was feeling when the tentacles were all tangled up? I might have said that it went beyond work, that it covered my entire life, that it had been building for months and had nothing to do with impulse. Only it did. Survival was an impulse. I had repressed it for so long that it was weak, but it must have been beating somewhere in me, because when the elevator opened, I walked out.

Even at 9:57, Fifth Avenue buzzed. Though I had never minded before, now the sound grated. I turned right for the bus and stood for an excruciating minute in traffic exhaust, before giving up and fleeing on foot, but pedestrian traffic was heavy, too. I walked quickly, dodging others, dashing to make it over the cross street before a light changed. When I accidentally jostled a woman, I turned with an apology, but she had continued on without looking back.

I had loved the crowds when I first came here. They made me feel part of something big and important. Now I felt part of nothing. If I wasn't at work, others would be. If I bumped into people, they walked on.

So that's what I did myself, just walked on, block after block. I passed a hot dog stand but smelled only exhaust fumes from a bus. My watch read 10:21, then 10:34, then 10:50. If my legs grew tired, I didn't notice. The choking feeling had passed, but I felt little relief. My thoughts were in turmoil, barely touched by the blare of a horn or the rattle of the tailgate of a truck at the curb.

Nearing our neighborhood, I stopped for my husband's suit and shirts, and picked up his prescription, then entered the tiny branch office of our bank. The teller knew me. But this was New York. If she wondered why I cashed more money than usual, she didn't ask.

The bank clock stood at 11:02 when I hit the air again. Three minutes later, I turned down the street where we lived and, for a hysterical second, wondered which brownstone was

ours. Through my disenchanted eyes, they all looked the same. But no; one had a brown door, another a gray one; and there was my windowbox, in which primrose and sweetpea were struggling to survive.

Running up the steps, I let myself in, emptied my arms just inside, and dashed straight up the next flight and into the bedroom. I pulled my bag from the closet floor, but paused only when I set it on the bed. What to bring? That depended on where I was going, and I didn't have a clue.

Chapter 2

Where I was going depended on what I wanted, and that part was easy. I wanted to have fun.

Picturing the beach, I pulled out a bathing suit. And a sundress.

But I also liked antiquing. I used to tag along with a high school friend and her mom, and though I knew little about antiques, I remembered the smell of history and the quiet. Both appealed to me now. So I pulled out a peasant blouse and shorts, jeans and tee shirts, sandals.

But I also liked hiking. At least, I had liked it that one college summer. Jude had known the forests - every tree, every stream, every creature - and had taught me well. Mountain tops were cold. I added a sweater and a fleece to the pile. Having tossed out my hiking boots long ago, I added sneakers. And heavy socks. And underwear, nightshirt, and hairbrush.

Did I want my laptop? Kindle? iPod? No. I didn't even want my BlackBerry, but it was my phone, which, in an emergency, was a good thing to have.

Makeup? I didn't want it, but didn't have the courage to leave it at home. That said, I didn't need purple eye shadow, navy liner, or two spare blushers. Leaving these on the bathroom counter, I put the makeup case on top of the pile.

It was a big pile. No way would everything fit in my bag. I thought of taking a second one, but vetoed the idea. A second bag meant clutter. If I was running away from a tangled life, simplicity was key.

I changed my blue shirt and black slacks for one of those tee shirts and jeans, switched diamond studs for gold ones, and glanced at my watch. It was 11:23.

I turned away, then back. This was no digital watch. Yet I knew it was 11:23 - now 11:24 - because in this life that I'd made for myself, every minute had to be accounted for.

Defiant, I removed the watch and left it with the earrings, then packed what I could and returned the excess to a drawer. Only when I lifted the closed bag did I notice the unmade bed beneath - beige sheets rumped on a black platform bed, all sleek and minimalistic, like the rest of the place.

The bed went unmade often, a concession to the rush of our lives, but I made it now as a small gesture to James. Quickly done, I ran down a flight to our beige-and-black front hall, dropped my bag there, ran down another flight to our beige-and-black kitchen. Grabbing granola bars (colorfully wrapped) and bottled water (not Eagle River), I ran back up to the front door.

The mail had just arrived and was strewn under the slot in a way that previewed its contents. Resigned, I singled out my credit card bill. The company had notified me that I was maxxed out, and I knew the offending charge wasn't mine. Seeing it on the bill, though, rubbed salt on the wound.

I was returning it to the fanned-out mail, feeling discouraged, when another letter caught my eye. It was from Jude.

I didn't have time to read it. I had to leave.

But I couldn't *not* read it.

Like its predecessors, it was postmarked Alaska. Jude was fishing for crab on the Beiring Sea, and he wrote remarkably well for a man who had thumbed his nose at every teacher he'd ever had in school. His lengthy descriptions of his boat, the sea, the nets spilling their jumble of bodies and legs on the deck, even the other men aboard, were riveting.

This letter was a single sheet.

Hey, Em, life does funny things. I'm forty and have been away from Bell Valley for ten years, fishing crab for six of those. But a good buddy of mine just died. Swept overboard, just like that. Death never bothered me before. But I'm thinking big picture thoughts now, and I see a load of unfinished business at home.

So I'm going back to Bell Valley. I haven't told anyone. They'll make plans, and I hate plans. But I should get there at the end of the month. Who knows. I may not last the summer. I always felt strangled in Bell Valley.

I don't know why I'm telling you this. You never answered any of my letters. Maybe you tear them up and toss them without reading them, in which case you won't read this. But I still think of you as my conscience. I want to think you'll be pleased. JBB

Pleased? Jude had nearly killed me once. *Pleased?*

I was in the middle of my own personal crisis. I couldn't process this now.

Tucking the letter in my back pocket, I called the garage where we kept our car. I would be there in five minutes, I said and, yes, I would like the tank filled with gas, put the charge on our tab, please. That was poetic.

Another poetic thought? If I had kids, I wouldn't have been able to do this. No way could I leave kids. But then, if I was a mom, I wouldn't want to leave. So maybe it was good I hadn't conceived. Maybe there was a reason.

Shouldering the bag, I was halfway out the door when I had a last thought. James would hardly miss me; he was too busy. But he was my husband.

Returning to the hall console, I pulled paper and pen from the drawer. *I'm fine*, I wrote. *Need a break. Will be in touch.*

Leaving the note in clear view on top of the bills, I grabbed the car keys and was through the door without a backward glance. The rising humidity worsened my mood, making my need to escape stronger than ever.

Escape. The word was perfect. I didn't want to arrange a party that my mother would hate. Didn't want to be a bridesmaid at the wedding of a woman I barely knew. Didn't want to tell a client that her deformed fetus was worth \$21,530. Didn't want to smile through one minute of my firm dinner, with my husband or without.

An ambulance sped through the intersection ahead, its siren just one more everyday hum. Crossing the street, I hurried to the end of the next block, where the nose of my car edged out. As getaway cars went, it was high end - and largely responsible for my maxxed-out credit card - but James loved this car. Me, I wanted reliability, so his high end car would do.

Stowing my bag in the trunk, I slipped behind the wheel, blasted the AC, and headed for FDR Drive, but crosstown traffic was thick. A single truck, stopped for a delivery, was enough to slow everything down. As I watched the light ahead turn green, then red, then green again, I tried to relax, but I was out of practice. When I consciously slackened my limbs, it worked. As soon as my mind wandered, though, my muscles tightened right up.

Tension was my body's default, and it did follow, in a sense. A trial lawyer had to be alert to hear every nuance of every argument, so that on a second's notice she could argue in defense of her client's rights.

Only I wasn't in a courtroom. I hadn't been in one since being a summer associate at Lane Lavash, when I'd been wined and dined and shown what it would be like if I joined the firm. No one had mentioned a cubicle. The tension in a cubicle was bad, but for different reasons.

Relax, Emily. Do not think about this.

What to think about then? Handsome, irrepressable, unattainable Jude?

Not a good idea. This was my escape - from *everything*.

On the Bruckner now, I turned the radio on, then off. I needed silence, but I also needed food, since I was starting to shake. The console said it was 1:08. What had breakfast been? A donut. Had I eaten it? I couldn't recall.

Driving one-handed, I scarfed down a granola bar and crumbled the empty wrapper. Then I uncrumbled it and held it up beside the wheel. Chocolate peanut butter. That sounded good. Had it tasted good? I had no idea. I had eaten it too quickly to know.

At least I was making progress. Hitting the Hutchinson heading north, I followed the signs for New England. The route was familiar; I had driven it dozens of times to visit my mother in Maine.

Thinking of Mom, I reached for my BlackBerry, then thought twice. Turning it on meant hearing the *ding* of messages that were waiting, but I didn't want to talk, didn't want to text. Besides, no one would worry. Walter Burbridge would be annoyed when I wasn't at the firm dinner, but James and I were maybe two of eighty. My sister would be annoyed when I didn't call her back with a party update, but I was used to her scolding. No one would miss me at yoga, what with different classes at different times. And book group wasn't meeting for another two weeks.

My mother would be fine. She was the most undemanding of the people in my world. We had talked on Thursday. If she didn't hear from me over the weekend, she would wait.

My father might not. Once, when I was in college and he couldn't reach me, he had called a cop friend, who had called the campus police, who had personally tracked me down at a weekend retreat for my sorority. Talk about embarrassing? But Mom knew how to handle him now. She had wised up after the divorce, coming into her own enough to tell him when she thought he was wrong. They actually had a great relationship. I've often thought they should remarry, but Mom insists that the key to their friendship is distance.

And my husband? Would James worry when he got my note? Probably. I had never before been even remotely flighty. But he would be busy at work, surrounded by associates with whom he spent far more time than he did with me. One of those associates was a new hire whom I had met at James's last firm dinner. She was single and strikingly attractive, and she had been cool and disinterested in me to the point of rudeness. When I told James that she had her eye on him, he had given me a quick hug and laughed.

I didn't find it funny. Jude had cheated on me, so I knew what it felt like to have the bottom drop out of your world. I didn't think I could bear it with James. But we rarely saw each other. Rarely talked the way we used to. Rarely shared dreams as we had once.

Feeling the impact of something tragic, I cracked open the window and let the fresh air brush my face. If this trip was my escape, I had to relax.

Thankfully, the farther I got from New York, the easier it was. Out of sight, out of mind? Partly. The rest was pure denial. Had I not been so good at it, I might have left the Big

Apple months ago. Was that ironic or what? Denial had kept me in a bad place. Now it would help me escape.

Once I passed the haze of Bridgeport, my shoulders began to unknot. With fewer trucks after New Haven, I grew light-headed. Approaching Providence, I actually felt wisps of euphoria. I was free! No work, no family, no demands. I was on my own, and I was headed for the beach.

Unfortunately, so was everyone else, to judge from the traffic in Massachusetts. As I shot toward Cape Cod, there were slowdowns with no cause other than the sheer volume of cars. As I inched over the Sagamore Bridge, I looked at my watch. The bare spot on my wrist was a reminder that I was in no rush.

I headed for Chatham because I had heard it was charming, and once I reached trees, shingled houses weathered by sea salt, and June gardens, it was. I found a vacancy at a modest motel not far from the beach, two levels of rooms shaped in a U around a pool. Leaving my bag, I walked into town. The air off the Atlantic was salty and cool, and moving felt good. In time, growing hungry, I sat on the outside deck of a restaurant and ordered a cod salad. It looked amazing, I was famished, and it was gone in minutes.

Determining to work on actually tasting my food, I glanced at the watch that wasn't there, then at the low-slung sun. Guessing it was eight, I bought several magazines, and, back at the motel, stretched out by the pool with *Women's Health*. I was just getting into an article on Vitamin D when a couple arrived with two cranky toddlers. They were followed by a pair of families with eight kids between them, splashing and shrieking as they played in the pool.

No reading here. Closing the magazine, I went back to my room and undressed. And there was Jude's letter, stuffed in my back pocket.

Coming home? What was I supposed to do with *that*?

I tried to read and failed. I dozed off, only to bolted up moments later, disoriented. The bedside clock read 11:04. It was another minute before I got my bearings.

Wondering if James had come home and seen my note yet, I watched the clock until, I couldn't bear the suspense a minute longer. I turned on my BlackBerry. It was midnight.

What do you mean, you need a break? he had texted. *Where are you?* He had left an identical voice message, then a second text. *This isn't funny, Emily. Where the hell are you?* All three had come in the last half hour, which meant he had worked pretty late.

He hadn't said he was worried. What I heard, in my vulnerable frame of mind, was *Cut it out, Em, I don't have time for this.*

Disappointed, I turn off the BlackBerry.

Only then, knowing that James knew I was gone, did I feel the shock of what I'd done. But not regret. His response clinched it. I needed a break.

The sounds outside now were adult - drunken whoops and hollers, the shudder of a diving board, the explosion of water. For a split second, I wished I'd brought my iPod. But covering one noise with another wasn't the answer.

Wondering what was, I drifted into a fitful sleep, but I was up before dawn, waiting for the sun. Dressing warmly then, I walked into town for a newspaper and breakfast. The newspaper was a mistake - not much happy news - but by the time I realized that, my eggs and toast had disappeared, inhaled like so much else of what I ate.

Vowing *again* to work on that, I returned to the motel to change and, a short time later, hit the beach. The ocean air gradually warmed, but along with the strengthening sun came families, boomboxes, and volleyball. Seeking peace, I walked far enough off to be able to hear the gulls and the tide, but when sand gave way to rocks, I had to turn. I stretched out on my towel again and ate a hot dog at the beach bar for lunch, but by mid-afternoon, I was antsy.

This wasn't fun. It wasn't where I wanted to be. I had traded one noise for another - city sounds for pounding waves, shrieking kids, blaring boomboxes.

Returning to the motel, I packed and checked out. Then I sat in my car trying to decide where to go. I thought of continuing east to Provincetown, which was the practical choice, since I was already on the Cape.

Rejecting practical, I considered heading north to Ogunquit. My mother lived an hour from there, making it the safe choice.

The safest choice, of course, would be to head south to New York. If I did it now, I could be back with no one but James the wiser. Much longer, and the consequences would grow.

Oh yeah, New York was definitely the safest choice, but safe choices were what had done me in. Right now, I was a rebel, and this was still my escape.

Aiming west, I breezed back over the Sagamore Bridge toward the Mass Pike. Traffic was light; weekenders were already where they wanted to be. The farther I went, the more the land opened, the meadows greened, the wood thickened. Daring the radio, I found a classical station that soothed, and set the volume only high enough to feel the effect.

By the time I reached the Berkshires, the shadows were long. Wanting quiet, I avoided Stockbridge and Lenox, instead following signs to a lesser town whose name I knew. There was only one place to stay, an inn that would likely cost a lot, but for this night, that was fine. There was no sign indicating a vacancy, and the parking lot was full, but I was here, and it was worth a shot. Finding a sliver of space at the back, I eased the car in and shouldered my bag.

The inn was a rambling affair whose main attraction was a wraparound porch with rocking chairs, but the people in those chairs and the ones walking inside for dinner looked to be young professionals like James and me. Most had kids.

Letting a party of six pass, I followed them in. The clerk at the front desk was older, more starched than the guests, and reluctantly - *well, we do usually have a two-night minimum* - gave me a room. It was over the kitchen, but the noise of pots and pans was mild, and the smell of sizzling tenderloin so tempting that I ordered it for dinner. I ate at the bar, which was quiet and dark. No one bothered me, and I actually tasted the beef.

My senses were returning, which was nice. Along with it, though, came my conscience. I was starting to feel guilty. And sad. This was the first Saturday night I'd been without James.

I figured it had to be ten. I wondered if I should call just to say I was okay.

But what if he was working? He often did on Saturday nights. If he didn't answer his phone, I might worry that he was with *her* - and if he did pick up, he would want to know where I was and when I'd be back. But I couldn't go back yet. I had barely begun to relax.

Bent on doing that, I settled on the porch and rocked for a while, then borrowed a book from the little library in the living room and headed upstairs. But I couldn't concentrate. I kept thinking of James. Wondering if he was thinking of me, I turned on my BlackBerry.

You took my car! Where ARE you? Please call, he had typed earlier that afternoon, and barely an hour later, *Why did you take so much money?*

You maxxed out my credit card, I typed, *so I'm using cash.*

That's a lot of cash for the weekend, he replied. *My firm dinner is tomorrow night. You'll be back by then, won't you?*

He was worried. I considered giving in. I truly might have, if he had asked how I was or what was wrong. I surely *would* have, if he'd said that he loved me or missed me. But I saw none of those words on the screen.

I'll let you know, I replied and, feeling a profound sadness, turned off the BlackBerry before James could text back. I might hate electronic wizardry, but it was my ally now. I could use it or not, could respond to James or not, and with my calls simply showing New York on his Caller ID, he had no idea where I was.

That knowledge didn't help me sleep. I kept waking to the strangeness of what I'd done and a disconcerting sense that I was treading water. And then came the coyote dream, which had to have some sort of message, I knew, though I couldn't figure out what it was. I brooded for most of the night.

Respite came with the sun in the form of the smell of fresh-baked bread, wafting up through the old oak floorboards from the kitchen below. I hadn't smelled fresh-baked bread in months - and bread was only the start. By the time I reached the dining room, the cook was adding breakfast meats and waffles. I filled my plate with eggs, a scoop of hash, thick slices of bacon and banana bread, and ate slowly, chewing deliberately between sips of joe. The coffee was dark and rich, its mug warm in my hands.

Other families had drifted in by now, leaving tennis rackets and golf gloves by their chairs as they went to the buffet. There was no talk between tables, but I was used to this. People weren't unfriendly, simply minding their own business, which was what we urbanites generally did, and these folks were from the city, no doubt about that. They might have been my neighbors, attending a week of tennis or golf camp now that their kids had finished school for the year.

Wondering why I was sitting in a room with the same people I wanted to escape, I swallowed the last of my coffee and, skirting Mountain Buggies on the porch, went off to see the town. For a sophisticated place, it was little more than a crossroads, a modest mix of small Colonials and cottages, private homes and shops. I did my antiques, browsed through a closet-size art gallery, even stood at the window of a yarn store and watched the women inside. A latecomer invited me to join them as she opened the cranberry door, and though I envied them their friendship, I didn't knit.

Consoling myself with the quiet, I walked on. I was free, but I couldn't feel the rush of it. I sat for a while on a bench where the road forked. But euphoria didn't come.

Discouraged, I returned to the inn, took newspaper and pen from the front desk, and sank into an overstuffed chair in the library. Crossword puzzles were a distraction, though I had never been terribly good at them. After an hour, I gave up and went out to the gazebo to think about freedom. But thinking about freedom made me think about Jude, and I didn't want to do that.

So I followed the other guests when they headed in for lunch. After waiting in line, I fixed a sandwich from the make-your-own at the buffet table, and settled in a rocker on the front porch, but the families around me made me think of my own. Taking the BlackBerry from my pocket, I checked for messages from my parents. There were none. My sister made up for it. She had sent multiple notes and wanted to know why I wasn't answering.

Fearing she would make trouble if I didn't act, I shot her a quick reply. *No time now. I'll write later in the week.*

Walter Burbridge had sent a slew of email. I didn't read Friday's batch but, rather, allowing him time to cool off, read the one he had sent late yesterday. *Tessa said you were sick, but it isn't like you not to respond. What's going on?* And then, earlier this morning, *Are you all right? Let me know if I can help.*

He actually sounded concerned, but I wasn't fooled. Working weekends at Lane Lavash was optional, but there was nothing optional about Mondays. If I didn't head back soon, I wouldn't

be at my desk in the morning. Walter would be pissed. Word would spread. My job would be at risk.

First, though, came James. There were lots of missed calls from him, with no message left, and his texts were brief.

This dinner is important, babe.

Then, *Please answer me. I know you're seeing this.*

Then, *If you're having a nervous breakdown we can deal but you have to call. I'm starting to worry.*

Then, *WHERE ARE YOU?*

He sounded frantic, and I almost did call. But I knew how persuasive he could be. What was it they said about the difference between a lawyer and a bucket of crap being the bucket? James was a brilliant negotiator and, though barely 35, had already made a name for himself.

I didn't trust myself to talk with him. He would have me back there in two minutes flat. But when I pictured driving south, everything inside me backed up again.

I pulled in a slow, painful breath that must have opened a window of thought because, sitting on that porch with the remains of a half-eaten sandwich and a once-promising life, I realized that this wasn't about James. It wasn't about work or Manhattan or my sister Kelly, and it wasn't about having fun. It wasn't even about Jude. It was about me. Where I was headed. Who I wanted to be.

But I did owe James, and texting wouldn't do. So I steeled myself and called his cell.

He answered with a worried, 'Where are you?'

'I won't be back in time, James. I'm sorry. Just tell them I'm sick.'

'Where *are* you?'

'It doesn't matter. I need to think, and I can't do it there.'

'Think about what? You're my wife.'

'I need time.'

'For *what*? You're giving me a heart attack here, Emily. What happened? You were fine Thursday night.'

'Was I?' I asked, thinking of all the times I'd floated the idea that I wasn't fine at all. 'I'll call once I know where I'm at. I'm sorry about tonight, James, I really am.' I disconnected before he could say anything else, and turned off the BlackBerry with a sense of relief. I was glad I'd called. With all the wrong things I'd done, this was right.

Returning to my room, I restowed the few things I'd taken from my bag. The Berkshires were an improvement over the Cape, but both were waystations. If the point was to figure out who I was, I had to go back to the place that had set me on this course. That place wasn't New York.

I started the car. With each mile, the consequences loomed, but they were in my rearview mirror. I was headed north.