

CHAPTER 1

My divorce will be finalized today. I cringe thinking about all the times I ignored my Spidey-sense. My imagination is replaying random instances from my marriage like film clips. I stop myself from recounting every little red flag, like cruel, looping mental memes.

The sun blazes through the uncovered cracks of my window, burning through my eyelids. The sun is bold, sparkling on every object in my room. It illuminates the quiet, dark areas awake, including myself.

The aesthetics outside do not emulate my internal feelings. After forcing myself to leave the comfort of my bed, I enter my bathroom. It was time to assess the damage to another sleepless night. My gaze fixates down to my circular vanity mirror. The unforgiving vibrant light flicks on as it senses me. It has no mercy on my reflection. I mumble, “When did I get old?” I look like someone who just had their mugshot taken after an all-night bender.

My green eyes are bleary from fatigue and stress. The area around my eyes retains hefty, emotional baggage. I examine the lines mapping my face. Each flaw signifies gained wisdom. Am I aging like an expensive bottle of scotch? Or an over-ripened avocado? When your husband runs off with a younger woman, you analyze imperfections.

I gather my hair up into a bun, then examine my body in the long bathroom mirror. I hold my breath, sucking in my stomach. This is what my thirty-year-old body resembled. I exhale. My stomach returned to its normal girth. This is my forty-three-year-old body. Evaluating my physical mileage, I wonder if I wasted all my pretty years. Leaning in closer to my reflection, I can see a few strands of gray hair. With my natural espresso-colored hair spiraling around my oval face, I see a ghost of a once-vibrant woman.

My self-deprecation ends with the ringing of my cell phone. Startled, I answer quickly to hear, “Mom...are you okay?” The voice of my eighteen-year-old daughter, Harley, is full of concern.

When you have a child, all your best features are infused into one person. They appear to be your “mini me” but with their own personality. She has an emotional fire that I wish I never lost.

“I didn’t overdose on antidepressants...but I sure as hell look like I did.” I clear my throat to sound more upbeat and positive. “Yes, I am alive. It’s nothing concealer and Xanax can’t fix.” I begin stroking my mascara wand onto the roots of my head to cover my gray.

Harley’s voice is soothing. “I just wanted to make sure you were okay.” As a way to make me laugh, she turns into a lively caricature of happiness: “Today is the day...my parents will be officially divorced.” She pauses, then shouts with glee.

I close my eyes when I hear the word, “divorced.” I spent half my life being identified with this man. He was a huge part of my existence. He left so unapologetically. I was disposable after all. I felt like an epic failure with no way of understanding how it even happened.

“Yes...today should be a celebration. Christmas is coming twice this year! Happy Divorce Day to me!”

I let out a nervous laugh. How do women celebrate divorce? I didn’t date or have gratuitous sex. My desire to be alone had me holed up watching John Hughes movies. Reliving the innocence of teen love, from the ’80s, was addictive. These movies helped me realize that I wasn’t unlovable in fact, it was the opposite. I was just in love with the wrong person. Repeatedly watching the movie *Sixteen Candles* made the love story between Samantha and Jake enviable. Love is a series of unfortunate events, layered on top of determination to make it work.

Feeling foolish for thinking of *Sixteen Candles*, I state the obvious, “I never thought your father and I would get back together, but I never thought we would be divorced either. How stupid does that sound?”

Harley is quick to respond. “That’s not stupid. You were married to a koala.”

I’m puzzled. “Koala?”

She giggles, “You know, super cute and cuddly but probably has chlamydia.”

Her silly comment changes my mood with laughter. “Don’t forget the sharp claws to stab my heart.”

“Dad was actively dating while he was still married, so this isn’t hard for him. Your replacement was on hand. Some people are afraid of being alone. Maybe you aren’t having a divorce party, but I bet he is.” Harley goes from being sarcastic to sounding hurt. “I can’t even remember the last time I saw him. At one time, I had this super dad. Now I have no dad.”

I process her statement. “One day, you will have to forgive him, because he’s your dad. Forgiveness from me is something that isn’t owed to him. It will be a process...of the utmost longevity.”

She quickly corrects me. “Just because I have his DNA doesn’t mean he’s entitled to my love.”

I look at the clock and panic at the time. “Harley, we will talk more after court. I have to officially make myself single again.” My name will now be known as Miss Emerson Vaughn, and not Mrs. Emerson Vaughn.

After hanging up, I digest our conversation. He probably would celebrate today. And we would still be married if he didn't have someone waiting in the wings. He was probably miserable for years and stayed out of commitment to his daughter. I always thought the adultery was about me, but it wasn't. It was about him. It's funny how the person who retains the most pain thinks they brought it on themselves.

Time can dismantle what we hold dear. My body trembles walking into the courthouse. It's that roller-coaster-induced nervousness that sparks adrenaline. Your stomach clenches in preparation for the drop-off. You scream to release the sensation of free-falling. My anxiety isn't from the divorce hearing but the fear of seeing my soon-to-be ex-husband, Dylan Vaughn. I cringe knowing he may be lurking around the halls. Dylan now has the ability to make me feel full-blown PMS, just from the sight of him. I consider this his X-Men superpower: cramps.

My divorce attorney, Olivia Henry, waves at me to come over. Olivia is a spunky, young mocha-skinned beauty, with a weave that can rival Beyoncé's at Coachella. Her pristine, fabulously styled whip-smart confidence quiets my fears. She is pumped about getting "what is owed to the wife." This means my husband is about to get fucked by another woman who charges \$500/hour. Divorce becomes a game of who has the biggest dick, and Olivia makes me feel like Ron Jeremy.

Every divorce is unique like a snowflake. It isn't just the variations in design but also how it lands before dissolving. My brain recounts the past year in a split second. Olivia puts her hand on my arm. I instantly snap back to reality. She guides me into the courtroom and explains the procedure. I look around the courtroom as she speaks. She says, "Don't worry. It's just us. Dylan's presence is not required. Only one of you needs to appear in court."

I say, "Well, that sums up the last two years of my marriage. His presence wasn't required."

My clenched jaws absorb an internal wildfire, raging, swirling with emotions. I'm relieved not to see him with his smiling younger girlfriend. But I'm angry at how he couldn't show up to his own divorce. After twenty years together, there is some expectation to see it to the end.

When the judge enters the courtroom, we stand up. Olivia introduces my petition for divorce. After reviewing the case out loud for ten minutes, the judge directs a question to me. "Is this marriage irrevocably broken and unable to be fixed?"

My reaction to such a preposterous question is to burst into laughter. Olivia and the judge are not amused waiting for my response. I must appear deranged. Pulling myself together, I answer, "Yes, this marriage is beyond repair."

At the crack of the gavel, I become single. I am no longer married. I wasn't a Missus, but now a Miss.

Olivia pats my hand and cheers, "Well, that's it. Let's go downstairs and get a certified copy of your divorce papers...and then you can celebrate!" It's only 11 a.m., and I've heard the words *divorce* and *celebrate* twice. I never associated those words together until today.

Before leaving the courthouse parking garage, I sit idle in my car. I look down at the notarized copies of my divorce papers. I can now call myself "certifiable." I have a certificate of divorce. Crying would be expected, but there's nothing left but emptiness. My situation isn't unique, but I feel alone. I turn on the car, and the song "Everything Is Everything" by Lauryn Hill is playing. It is a moment of clarity.