

Chapter One

I never told anyone my thoughts that day. No one would listen anyway. Not really. The musings that afternoon were ones that often ran through my mind walking along the train tracks behind our house. It rained earlier in the day, the late spring ground soft and muddy. Not a bother to me, though. I had my elder brother's work boots on. If they tracked clumped-up mud into the house it would be his fault. Not mine.

I liked to walk on the lonely tracks. Scraggly woods blocked out the run-down houses and trailers that made up my neighborhood. On the other side was an open field just starting to break out in early spring wildflowers. In the distance stood the Millers' old white farmhouse and their peeling, red-painted barn in desperate need of repair.

The train usually went through once a day. When we first moved here I'd sit for hours waiting for it. Why? Who knows? Once it went past, nothing happened. Last summer I remember writing the time of day each train came through. Again, no idea why, but I did. Probably because there wasn't anything else to do. We arrived in this town in August, and I didn't know anyone. After living here almost a year, I still hung out alone.

This day wasn't unusual. I'd gone to school, came home on the bus, and looked for something to eat when I got home. I spied a box of granola bars, pushed back deep in the kitchen cabinet, my brother hadn't discovered. If he had, they would be gone. I grabbed two and munched on them, oatmeal-raisin, as I walked through the trash-filled woods. Most people would imagine woods as a dense forest of green. Lush, tall trees and soft moss covering the ground. Wildlife, like graceful deer and squirrels with bushy tails, scurrying around inside the canopy of leaves. Not me. I saw my woods. There were trees, no lushness. Some scabby. Some rotten and deformed. I'd never seen any moss on the ground. Just empty beer bottles and condom wrappers from the teenagers who had sex here at night. As of last week, I was now a teenager, too. However, I'd never had sex in the woods. Nor would I want to do so.

The days were getting longer now. I could stay out later. I never went to the tracks at night. Or even stayed here until dark. Mainly because I hated to go out at night by myself. Anywhere. I loathed to admit this, but the dark scared me, for reasons that may surprise you. So, because of this fact, I only came to the tracks in the daylight. Always by myself. I liked it that way.

I walked along the cold steel of the track, as always, and let my mind wander. Not to things most thirteen-year-old girls might think about. Not clothes, nail polish, or boys. I did think about those things from time to time. But mostly I thought about death.

I'd never admit this to anyone, but I'd thought about standing on those tracks until the train started to rumble through. My body, stiff and unmoving, until the train would

overcome me. Gone. Then, I wondered who would miss me. Could my absence cause a sharp ache in their heart? Where would I go? To Heaven? Would I see my father again?

I wasn't suicidal. I just liked to imagine things. My imagination often took over my logical thoughts. I liked to think about possibilities. Like what would happen if I followed these tracks as far as I could? Where would I end up? Maybe it would be a better place than here. Maybe I wouldn't feel so lonely there.

I didn't share my thoughts with others because I didn't have anyone to tell. I was on my own here. We couldn't afford the house we used to live in. The house my brother, Sam, and I grew up in. The house we celebrated Thanksgiving and Christmas. The house I had sleepover parties with friends. The house I loved so much. We lost it because of something about no life insurance and Mom couldn't pay the mortgage.

Mom was never home. Another weird change for me. In the past, she'd worked part time. She was always around when we got home from school. Now she worked all day as a secretary in an insurance office. Then, as a waitress some nights and most weekends. I missed her. Sometimes I thought I missed her as much as Dad, even though she was still here.

Our old place was a lot nicer than the dump we lived in now. We didn't even live in a house. It was a trailer, or a mobile home some called it, on a semi-grassy patch of land with a leaky roof and a hole in the brown linoleum floor in the kitchen. It had three bedrooms. So, Mom, Sam, and I each had our own rooms. My room was the smallest. About half the size of my previous bedroom. It wasn't that bad, I guessed. Except when it was windy. I hated the rattling against the metal walls of the trailer. If the wind was too strong, the place even shook. I felt like I was in a soda can ready to burst open.

Who was I kidding? The place was a dump. We were trailer trash now, and every one of us knew it. Sam and I knew it by our clothes from the thrift store and the end of going to the movies every Saturday. Mom knew by repairing her pantyhose with clear nail polish to get more wear out of them. And we all knew when Mom made a pot of spaghetti on Sunday what we'd be eating every night for dinner that week.

Not that we were ever rich. But Dad worked and Mom worked, so we had some extra money. When Dad got sick the money dwindled. He couldn't work. Mom always seemed to be on the phone arguing about hospital bills that should have been paid by insurance. Then he'd died. On a hot July day, July 12th to be exact, at 7:37 in the morning. He had been in his hospital bed, set up in our living room, where he'd taken up residence the last two months. He lay quietly on the adjustable bed when I walked downstairs. Usually, the TV was on by this time, but the screen was dark.

Mom stood beside him, tears running down her solemn face. She turned to me and said, "He's gone, Emily."

Anger consumed me because I hadn't said goodbye at the end. I wasn't there in the final moments, but instead I'd peacefully slept upstairs under my pink Hello Kitty comforter. I had said goodbye weeks earlier. I could still hear his voice telling me he loved

me and how he didn't want to leave us. I snuggled next to him on his hospital bed, inhaling his scent of Old Spice and peppermint shampoo. The hospice nurse had come that morning to help him wash and shave. He'd held my hand, much weaker each day, and somehow I'd known this would be the last time I spoke to my father. The real him. I was right. The strong medications he was on altered his mind those final few weeks. Sometimes he didn't even know us.

The sweet smell of spring broke into my thoughts as I continued to travel on the track. I sniffed, recognizing the scent. Honeysuckle. I looked ahead, scanning each side for the plant. I was surprised to see where I was standing. I didn't realize I'd walked that far, much farther than I've ever gone on the tracks. I spun around, the row of scraggly woods behind our trailer now a substantial distance away. And when I turned back, I saw him.

That was the day I met Tommy.