

Chapter One

A New Chapter

“He looks so natural,” the old blue-haired woman muttered as she patted Erin’s hand.

Natural would be laughing or cursing, criticizing, or barking orders. Natural would have been asking Erin when she’d go back to school or marry someone with a real future.

Her father didn’t look natural. He looked dead.

The chairs surrounding the room appeared to be a haven of safety, so Erin moved from her father’s side and found a quiet place to process the ridiculousness of this night.

Guests walked up to the casket with bowed heads like in church. They viewed the corpse of a man they never bothered to visit when he was alive, made a banal comment about how wonderful he looked, and spent the rest of the time laughing with their friends and spreading the latest gossip. Georgia funerals were big social events, at least they were in this town.

Maybe the well-wishers would forget Erin existed. Why wouldn’t they? For twenty-four years, no one realized Big Fred Douglas had a daughter.

Even lying in the casket, her father seemed to call, “Come on, Erin. Hold your shoulders back. How will you ever succeed if you can’t stand up straight? At least you’ve got Greg.”

The room shrank, and Erin’s breath came in short gasps. She didn’t have Greg and never would.

He saw nothing in me, so he left, Daddy. I didn’t have the guts to tell you.

Two weeks earlier, Erin had pulled into the hospital parking lot and planned to go to her dad’s room to tell him the news. The wedding was off. She’d rehearsed her lines on the way to the hospital. “Greg left, Dad. You said I was lucky to have gotten a husband. Well, I wasn’t so lucky.”

The two-timer had been seeing Julie Harwood for a month or two. Why had Erin cried for a solid hour for a loser like Greg Sessions? Or was she the loser? Telling her father about the breakup would have been the most logical thing to do.

Erin glanced at her father’s lifeless body, dressed for a wedding that wouldn’t happen. It was best he never knew. She didn’t have to listen to his rants and see his familiar headshake. Another tear rolled down her cheek, but she knew this tear was for herself.

“Hey, Buttercup.”

Erin didn’t have to look up to know Ryan Jeffries had decided to grace her with his presence for the second time that day. She knew he would come because he always showed up. He was like the refinancing emails she kept getting even though she didn’t own a house.

Ignoring him seemed like the best option, but could Ryan ever be ignored? “My name’s not Buttercup.”

“I like Buttercup.”

“I don’t.” Erin picked at her nails. “You were here earlier. You didn’t have to come back.”

“Just checking on you and your mom. How’s she holding up?”

Erin peered across the room at her mother’s pale, pinched face. Francine Douglas had aged ten years in two days. At least the Xanax had kicked in.

“She’s okay. It’s not like we didn’t know this was about to happen.” Erin looked back at the casket before closing her eyes. “We still weren’t ready for it.”

“You can’t ever be ready.”

“Guess not,” Erin agreed. “Mom’s so drugged up she won’t remember Dad died. She’s going to have a hard time. He was always in charge. She’s never paid a single bill.”

“Have you?”

Erin snorted and reached for a tissue. "My dad didn't trust me with money or anything else. When I got paid, I always gave him most of my paycheck, and he took care of everything. I don't even know how to...to do whatever you're supposed to do with a checking account."

"You mean write checks or balance the account?"

"Both, though I don't guess people write checks anymore. Mom and I are pathetic. I've never paid the rent. Greg did it. He thought I would let him move in with me before the wedding, so he always paid it."

"What a jerk. He was sleeping with Julie and wanted to move in with you."

Erin's eyes roamed to her lap, heat rising up her neck. Small pieces of tissue fell to the floor like snowflakes as Erin worked through a box of Kleenex. Hot tears dripped from her face as she reached for a fresh tissue.

"Erin, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

"It's okay." Erin dabbed her cheeks. "It's best. I wouldn't have made him happy."

"Give yourself a break, Erin. Greg's a jerk. You're too good for him."

Erin sighed. "I don't think that was the problem. It's over, and it's for the best. Moving back in with Mom is looking more inevitable every day. It's time we learn how to be grown-ups for a change."

"Don't do anything yet, Erin. Better to let things settle a bit. In the meantime, I'll teach you how to balance your checking account and pay your bills. We'll figure out your next steps when the funeral's behind us."

The day of the funeral was exhausting and surprising. If Erin hadn't known better, she would have thought she was at the wrong service.

The eulogy proved Pastor Brant didn't know her father. Saying kind things at a funeral was normal, but in this case, they weren't true. Brant was *her* minister. She supposed someone told him positive things about her dad and forgot the rest. Her father was a good man in his own way, but she'd always heard that even being good wasn't good enough when it came to eternity.

Why were her memories of her father always of him correcting her or pointing out one of her many mistakes?

"Erin, you've got to quit snorting when you laugh. No wonder you don't have a boyfriend."

"Clean your glasses. It's a wonder you're not bumping into things."

"Erin, if you slump your shoulders any more, they're going to be dragging the ground."

No wonder Greg left. Why had he been interested in her in the first place?

Family and a few friends gathered at her mother's house that evening for a meal. The ladies from the Baptist church she attended had provided a feast, and Erin wondered what she and her mom would do with the extra food. Maybe she could take it to the fire station. She sat at her mom's kitchen table and tried to eat, but all she could do was move the food around on her plate.

Ryan sat beside her. "You better eat, Butter...uh, Erin."

"I'm not hungry. Where's Stacy? I didn't see her with you at the funeral. Or is it Megan? Aren't you two permanent fixtures?"

"They're both old news."

"No way. Stacy and Megan are gorgeous."

"They may be hot, but they were high maintenance. The cost of taking care of them was breaking the bank. Lying low for a while is a better option. You going back to work tomorrow? The women's department at Regis is not the same without you."

Erin nearly choked. "I'm sure they're getting along just fine without me. Besides, what do you know about the women's department?"

"You'd be surprised."

"Never mind. Let's change the subject."

"How about the subject of your job? Why don't you apply for another one? You hate working at Regis."

Erin thought about her hours putting out clothing and dealing with irate customers. Convincing plus-sized women they couldn't squeeze into a size ten or twelve had become so commonplace that HR should have included the task in the job description. She hated dealing with grumpy people all the time. Nothing she said or did made them happy. Then, there was the store manager, who always had an attitude.

"So, Regis isn't my favorite place in town, but I won't be able to get a job anywhere else. The fact is I was lucky to get that job."

Ryan reached for her roll and took a bite. "You're signing your own death certificate. Oh, sorry. I'm being insensitive. That's what my mom used to say."

"Signing my death certificate?"

"Planning your own demise. It's a dumb saying. I tell you what you ought to do!" He returned the roll to her plate and crossed his arms.

"This ought to be rich. What?"

"You sure are becoming snappy in your old age."

"I'm not snappy. What were you about to say?"

"You should go back to school. Really, Erin, a college degree would open many opportunities for you."

"Do you know how ridiculous that idea is, Ryan?" Erin realized her loud volume when she noticed her mom's next-door neighbor gaping at her from the other side of the dining room.

"To start with," Erin lowered her voice, "no college in the world would accept me. The last time I tried was a disaster. Besides, I can't afford it."

"Don't sell yourself short. You're smarter than you realize."

"Reality to Ryan. Hello. Are you forgetting I've already tried the college path once?"

Erin's Aunt Martha sat beside her and began prattling on about the funeral service and the wonderful eulogy. Without stopping to breathe, she moved from the service to Erin's botched wedding to the reading of her brother's will. Erin hadn't given much thought to the will, though she knew her father had one. Fred Douglas never had many material things.

Aunt Martha thought Erin's mother would be okay, and Erin knew her father's insurance would cover the funeral cost but probably not much else. When she didn't eat the rest of her food, her aunt pulled the plate across the table and stuffed her mouth as she mumbled something about children in Africa.

At 10:00, Erin left her childhood home and drove across town to the three-bedroom ranch she rented from Mr. Bosely. She kicked off her shoes at the door and tossed her socks into the laundry room. The green shag carpet slipped through her toes, and she focused on the mauve-colored walls. The colors were horrendous. Would her landlord install new carpet or let her paint?

Her real dream was to buy her own house, but that would never happen. What she wanted now more than anything was to be in bed, but she had to shower first.

A black blur darted through the kitchen, and Erin marveled at how such a huge cat could move so fast. She glanced toward Daphne's bowls and decided she'd have to quit feeding her so much.

"Time to put you on a diet, girl."

Thirty minutes later, Erin stepped from the bathroom and dressed for bed. She crawled under her sheets and fluffed her pillow. She replayed the funeral through her mind and couldn't believe her father was gone.

Reaching for the other pillow, Erin pulled it close to her chest. Was she going to spend the rest of her life hugging a pillow? So pitiful. Pillows were always faithful, however. Men, not so much.

Her conversation with Ryan came to mind. He was insane. Going back to school was not an option, but getting a new job was something worth considering.

Erin had the next day off, but the thoughts of job hunting made her head spin. Regis Department Store wasn't so bad, and her routine had become familiar. She was fortunate to have a job, so she should be content. Besides, what choice did she have?

A loud yawn escaped as her mind drifted back to her father. She couldn't believe he was gone. He'd been hard on her, but he loved her. Right? Somehow, she had to quit thinking and go to sleep.

Ryan's stupid, quirky grin flashed through her mind. Go back to school. He was nuts.