

Chapter One

I'm the only one home when the UPS guy delivers the package that blows up my life. No, it isn't a letter bomb sent to my mother by a disgruntled client, but it might as well be. A hand grenade with the pin already pulled would do less damage than what is in the plain cardboard box addressed to my mother, Ms. Sandra Bell. I'm home alone because I have strep throat. My mom has taken a break from slaving over other

people's tax returns to go and get me some Ben & Jerry's Jamaican Me Crazy sorbet to soothe my throat.

Mom has been acting pretty weird ever since her younger sister Donna died. Lots of crying and long solitary walks on the beach. I can't even get her to play Scrabble, which is her all-time favorite game. Aunt Donna was my mom's only living relative, so Mom was pretty choked when Donna's sponsor called from Toronto to say that Donna was dead. By her own hand, as they say. She had gobbled a bottle of Valium and chased it with an entire bottle of Johnnie Walker. Very effective. Clearly not a cry for help, although there had been plenty of those over the years. My mom was always flying to Toronto to bail Donna out of one mess or another. She's just come back from her final trip. She brought Donna's ashes back in a Baggie. Apparently the plan is to scatter them over English Bay. That'll be fun.

I didn't really know Aunt Donna. She came to Victoria to see us once when I was

about six. Since I never went to Toronto with my mom, I have no idea what my aunt was like. Other than messed up, I mean. It sounded to me like Donna's death was the most organized thing she ever did.

I get so bored waiting for Mom to come back that I consider opening the package. I could have a peek inside and seal it up again before she gets home. In the end, I'm too lazy to get up and find the box cutter. Besides, I'm my mother's daughter: neat, hardworking, well-organized, thoughtful. When she finally comes back from the store, I'm sitting at the kitchen table, staring into space, chewing on a hangnail.

"Feeling better, honey?" she says. "Ready for some sorbet?" She places the back of her hand against my forehead for a moment. She smiles. "Temperature's down. That's good."

"A package came for you. It's in the living room," I say.

"A package?"

"Yeah. You know, like a box. Maybe

someone forgot to file his taxes for, like, ten years.”

Usually my mom laughs at my feeble accountant jokes. Not this time. She puts the sorbet on the counter and walks into the living room without a word. When she comes back to the kitchen, she’s carrying the box and her hands are shaking. She puts the box on the table in front of me and backs away from it. Maybe it really is a bomb.

“Open it, Emily,” she says. “It’s for you.” Her voice is shaking too, and her normally rosy cheeks are ashen. Beads of sweat form along her upper lip. When she has a hot flash, her face gets really red, so this is something else.

“But it’s addressed to you,” I say.

“I know,” she replies. “But it’s for you. From Donna. In her note...”

She swipes at her tears and continues.

“The note Donna left—her suicide note—she wanted you to have this. I addressed it to myself so you wouldn’t open it without me.”

“Okay,” I say. It feels all kinds of creepy, but let’s face it: Aunt Donna had been a bit

of a wack job. “Can I have a knife—and some sorbet? Before it melts? My throat’s killing me.”

Mom hands me the box cutter from the junk drawer. While she scoops sorbet into my favorite blue bowl, I slit the tape on the box. I don’t know what I’m expecting to find—vintage clothes, cool shoes, funky jewelry? No such luck. The first thing I see is a high school annual from the school Mom and Donna went to in Vancouver. I set it aside and dig a little deeper. Underneath the annual are three large brown envelopes. The first has my mom’s name written on it in green felt pen. The second is decorated with a curly letter *K*. The third says *Emily*. Emily? That’s so weird. My heart flutter-kicks. Maybe Aunt Donna has left me a bunch of money. I break the seal on the envelope with my name on it and dump the contents on the table. It’s not money. It’s letters. A lot of letters.

I move on to the envelope marked *Sandra*. More letters. I hand them to my

mom, but she shakes her head and says, “They’re for you.” In the envelope marked *K* are even more letters. I dig a little further. In the bottom of the box is a small, pink, crocheted blanket. As I pull it out and hang it over the back of a chair, I hear my mom inhale sharply, but she says nothing.

I pick up one of the letters from the *Emily* envelope and start reading. It’s a birthday card. *Now you are Two!* There are sixteen others, all from Aunt Donna, all telling me how wonderful I am and how much she misses me. I wonder why she never sent any of them, but that was Aunt Donna. Letters unsent. Phone calls unreturned. Brain unused. The Sandra letters are from my mom to Donna, telling her how wonderful I am and how lucky she is to have me. The letters from *K* tell Donna how wonderful *she* is and how lucky he (or she) is to have her. It’s a whole world of wonderfulness. I feel queasy. I had no idea Aunt Donna even knew when my birthday was. My mom has never mentioned that she sent her sister weekly

updates on my unbelievable adorableness. And who the hell is K?

I turn the box upside down to make sure I haven't missed anything. A photo flutters out and lands on the carpet facedown. There's a date scrawled on the back—*Feb 15, 1989*. Three weeks before I was born. I turn it over. My mother and Aunt Donna are standing in front of the Sylvia Hotel in Vancouver's West End. I recognize it from all the times my mom and I have stayed there. In the photograph, Aunt Donna is very, very pregnant. My mother is not. I look up at my mom and she is crying silently, with her hand over her mouth. I just make it to the bathroom before I lose my breakfast, my lunch and my mind. I don't want sorbet anymore.

Chapter Two

When I finally come out of the bathroom, Mom—or whoever she is—is sitting at the kitchen table. The pink blanket is on her lap and she is staring at the photograph. My dish of sorbet is still sitting on the counter. Suddenly I crave the simple cold sweetness on my tongue. I stand silently, spooning the melted goop into my mouth. I finish off what's in the bowl and get

the container out of the freezer and keep eating. It's easier than talking. And I figure the ball's in her court. No way am I starting this conversation.

"She made this for you, you know," she says. She strokes the blanket. "She was so young—your age. Can you imagine?"

I laugh. It comes out more like a seal's bark. Harsh and loud. I can't imagine anything at the moment, other than getting away from her and her lies.

I was nine when she told me I was a sperm-donor baby. Up until then I hadn't worried too much about not having a dad. I kind of wondered what had happened to mine, but lots of my friends had no dads. Vanessa's was dead, Rory's took off when Rory was little, Jason's was in jail. No biggie. My mom's best friends, Richard and Chris, were always around to do guy stuff with me. They would shoot hoops, fix my bike, order pizza, go to Daughter 'n' Dad Day at school. I wasn't suffering. But when I was eight I started bugging Mom nonstop to tell me about my dad. For

some reason I got it into my head that he was a millionaire who had died in a tragic ballooning accident. When I turned nine, she took me out for burgers at Duck Soup, my favorite diner. She told me all about sperm banks and donors. She told me how she had wanted a baby so badly and how she had planned everything and how great it all was. She said my dad was a really smart, super-healthy medical student. She also said that when I was eighteen I could register somewhere and maybe find him and any half-siblings I might have. I was, like, yuck! No thanks. For years after that I thought sex involved plastic cups. I never talk to Mom about it. It still grosses me out.

“So the whole sperm-donor story was crap?” I say. “All that stuff about wanting a baby so much but not having a partner, and planning, and choosing the best donor? All total bullshit?”

“No,” she says slowly. “Not all of it. I didn’t have a partner. And I did want a baby very much, but I didn’t plan on Donna

getting pregnant. I didn't plan on adopting you. That just happened."

"Yeah, right." I snort and some sorbet goes up my nose. It feels okay. Very cooling. "So why make up the lame-ass sperm-donor story? Why not just—here's an original idea—tell me the truth? I've spent seventeen years listening to 'The truth is always the right choice' and 'Mutual trust is the cornerstone of successful relationships.' Do you really believe any of that shit, Mom? Or should I say...Aunt Sandra?"

Mom looks up from the photograph and glares at me. For a moment a spark flares in her eyes, but it is instantly flooded by her tears.

"Don't call me that, Emily. Donna gave birth to you but I'm still your mother. Legally, emotionally—"

"Just not biologically," I interrupt. "You forgot that part. And what about that other thing—the part about who my dad was? Still going to stick with the sperm-donor story? 'Cause I'm not buyin' it anymore."

“I know you’re angry and hurt, Emily. I understand. Just let me explain. Please.”

I look at her. Her hair is a mess, she has chewed off her lipstick, and her mascara has run. I’m sure I look like hell too. Part of me wants to climb into her lap and burrow my head into her shoulder like I did when I was little. Part of me wants to run out the back door. And a tiny evil part wants to nick her with the box cutter. Nothing serious. Just a little friendly bloodletting.

I settle for boosting myself up onto the counter and kicking my heels into the cupboards, which I know she hates. She gets up, fills a glass with water and sits down again, smoothing the blanket over her knees. She picks up the picture and stares at it.

“Donna was born when I was eleven. Unplanned but welcome—your grandmother’s precious menopause baby. I went away to university when she was seven. I only saw her once or twice a year after that, but your nana kept me posted. She would tell me how pretty Donna was,

how cute it was that she had a boyfriend when she was twelve, how Donna sewed all the latest styles on her little pink sewing machine. When Donna was about fifteen, Nana stopped boasting about her. All she ever said was that Donna was moody. I found out later that Donna was drinking a lot and cutting classes. That she had a lot of boyfriends—mostly older guys. When she was seventeen, in her last year at Northwood, she called me. I was working in Calgary. She told me she was pregnant. She was too far along for an abortion and she wanted to get away from Mom. She had quit school, and she asked if she could come and stay with me until she had the baby. She was planning on giving it up for adoption.”

Mom stops for a moment and picks up her glass. The water slops onto the placemat as she raises the glass to her mouth.

“Shaky,” she says, almost to herself.

“So who’s my dad?” I ask. No millionaire, that’s for sure, I think. Probably some skuzzy dude from East Van. Tattoos, a

mullet, bad teeth. I finger my own hair, which has had better days.

“I’m getting to that,” she says. “Don’t rush me.”

Even in the middle of this emotional hurricane, she paces herself.

“I flew out from Calgary to get Donna. That’s when this picture was taken. We walked along the seawall, and I asked her about the baby’s father. She wouldn’t tell me anything. Not then, not ever. She said he knew she was pregnant and he had paid for an abortion, but he had no idea she hadn’t gone through with it. She didn’t want him to know and that was that. I didn’t ask why. I figured she had her reasons. I told her I wanted to keep you, and she said okay—as long as I never told you that she was your mother. She didn’t want you to hate her, I guess.”

“So why are you telling me now?”

“It was in her suicide note. Her dying wish. ‘Tell Emily.’ So I have.” A small tired smile ghosts across her face. “Funny—she didn’t seem to care at all if you ended up hating me.”