

Sunday

“This ended five months ago, Emma. You need to drop it. You need to move on with your life!”

Lucy Adams has stood by my side for these past five months. But, now that I’ve nearly revealed the truth, her patience has finally snapped.

I chew my lip and finger the photograph in my hand. My mind feels clouded and exhausted, but I have to keep going. “I don’t think I can, Lucy. I need to know. I have to figure this out.”

“Give me that. You’re going to smudge it,” Lucy says, tugging the photograph out of my trembling hand. Her eyes drift around the room, over the countless notebooks and the shelves of framed pictures. Finally, her gaze rests on me. “Listen. I don’t care if you spend the rest of your life in this room, trying to solve a mystery that doesn’t exist. Just because your mom died doesn’t mean that you’re allowed to shun all your friends and lock yourself away in this room, searching for ‘clues’!”

“My mom didn’t die,” I mumble, staring at the sepia photograph Lucy has propped on the mantle. “She’s still out there. I know it.”

Lucy’s eyes blaze. “Drop it, Emma! Please!” she screams, shaking me. “The police, and the doctors, and the evidence aren’t wrong! She’s dead, and you can’t change that!” Shaking with anger and frustration, Lucy stormed from the room, knocking another picture off my shelf and onto the floor.

Quietly and slowly, I pick up the picture and hold it firmly in my hands. A man in a casual blue suit with an ugly necktie has his arm around a woman with auburn hair cascading over her shoulders. A teenager with hair as black as coal stands next to them, smiling. That’s something I haven’t done in a while.

I set the picture back on the shelf, next to the countless others. *I'm going to find you, Mom. I know you're out there somewhere.*

The calendar on the wall looks like it's about to fall to the floor. I glance at it, thinking, *Sunday.*

"You failed, Miss Brook." My teacher, Mr. Wiley, slaps the previous week's science test onto my desk. Large red marks seem to pop off the paper, displaying every mistake.

I nibble on my pencil and don't make eye contact. "I was distracted."

"Emma, at the beginning of the school year you were a perfect student. You made top grades in every class!" my science teacher continues, trying to catch my eye. I stare at the gum stuck on the side of my desk.

"That was five months ago," I say simply. This needs no further explanation.

Mr. Wiley frowns. "I want these grades improved," he tells me. "At this rate, we're going to have to keep you back a grade."

I stare at the F on my science test. *F isn't for failure. It stands for fire! He's giving me a clue!* The bright red F swims in my vision.

I look up at him, my eyes revealing my sudden excitement. "Mr. Wiley!" I exclaim.

His reply is smooth and prepared. "No, Emma, that F has nothing to do with the word 'fire'." *I guess this has happened before.*

My thoughts these past five months are jumbled. It takes concentration to separate them and to remember things that just happened. Nobody knows this, except Lucy. Usually, she covers for me. But, not today. Today, she sits across the classroom, averting her gaze and pretending to never have met me.

I wonder how many times I've thought the F on my paper meant something. *Does everybody think I'm losing my mind?*

Frustrated, my mood darkens and I sink back into my own thoughts.

Sunday. Sunday. Sunday. On Saturday evening I sit at my desk, frantically clicking my ballpoint pen, staring at the blank notebook paper in front of me. *Then they'll see. My mom is not dead. She can't be.*

I can hear screams and loud voices downstairs. I freeze, then realize it's only my dad watching the television.

Dad's face always becomes sad whenever I tell him how my investigations are going. He'll look at me, and I can see the pain in his eyes. He'll run his fingers through his hair. "Go to your room, and write it down," he always says, gruffly.

Now I have fifty-eight notebooks filled with clues and evidence. Today, when I try to form my thoughts into words so I can put them on paper, nothing makes sense. I realize I've been writing something and stare at the messy letters. *Sunday*, they read. *Sunday*.

I close the notebook and add it to my stack. Even though Dad is the one who tells me to write my thoughts down, he refuses to read a single word.

I lie on my bed, in the dark, staring at the pictures on the wall and the ones on my shelf. My whole room seems to be made of pictures. Each one sparking a different memory. My phone rings. Silently I sit up and let the phone ring seven times. On the final ring, I reach for it but hesitate. I hear a click as the call goes to voicemail.

“Hey, Emma.” It’s Lucy. I’m surprised she called. “I just wanted to tell you I’m sorry about Thursday night. I hope everything goes okay tomorrow.” I let the words flow through my mind, treasuring the precious moment. Wanting Lucy to keep talking forever, wanting her words to keep me far away from the horror of life. There’s another click as the call ends. I sigh, my mind reverting back to that one word.

Sunday. Tomorrow, Sunday, they will finally believe me. They will realize, at last, that my mom isn’t dead.

“We’re leaving.” Dad shakes me awake, his eyes blank and tired, his black hair disheveled.

I can feel my heart beating rapidly as I get out of bed. *It’s Sunday!*

“I’ll be in the car,” Dad says, his voice slow and quiet. He hasn’t called me by my name for three months. Those two syllables that he always chokes over. His two lips that can never form the word.

I desperately want to hear my name, and he pauses for a moment, his lips trembling. I wait, but he closes his mouth and turns away.

Without saying a word, I wait until he leaves the room, then hastily get dressed and brush my long, dark hair. *Today. Today, they’ll all see!* Nothing matters anymore except for our destination. Once we’re there, everything will be okay.

I grab the sepia photograph and take it with me, feeling calmer with it in my hand.

Before I know it, we're on the road, but the drive seems endless. Inside the car, it is eerily quiet. Dad and I don't have much to talk about anymore. Mom was always the talkative one. I clutch the photograph to my chest, staring out the window, waiting to arrive.

At last, our destination comes into view. Squeezing the photograph and trembling with excitement, I rush through the gate. Dad follows, each step seeming to cause him great agony. Suddenly he falls to his knees in front of a block of polished stone. Swallowing the lump in my throat, I sit down next to him and read the carefully carved letters aloud.

"Emma Brook..." I find my dad's hand and squeeze it. "Born, May 6th, 1980." My words falter and all my previous excitement diminishes, leaving my chest feeling hollow. *I was wrong.*

I hear Dad finish reading the inscription, his voice gravelly, but strangely strong. "Died, August 11th, 2017."

The truth is suddenly exposed, as painful and horrible as an open wound. All of my previous ideas and stories telling how my mother survived vanish. I'm left empty, my breath shallow, my eyes stinging.

"She had your name, Emma."

I look up, hot tears streaking down my face. "I know," I manage.

He hugs me close to him as we stare at the gravestone. Tears drip off my chin onto the grass below us. I taste salt.

“I should have come here before. I shouldn’t have waited so long to accept the truth,” I whisper, my eyes glued to my mom’s date of death.

“I tried to get you to come out here. You were so stuck in your world of murders, suicides and dramatic escapes, I knew I could never convince you unless you saw this.”

I nod. The sobs wrack my body and I collapse beside Dad. He holds my head in his lap, stroking my hair. I can see the glossy tear tracks on Dad’s face.

“She died in a fire. No one murdered her; she didn’t escape,” Dad continued, placing the photograph in my hands. I stare at the picture of Mom, my eyes traveling over her long hair, her porcelain skin and her wide smile.

“She died in a fire,” I repeat. “That’s what really happened.” Dad gently takes the photograph from my hands and places it beside the grave. We look at the picture together, both our eyes drawn to her sparkling eyes, always full of laughter and kindness.

We sit beside the grave, sharing stories about Mom until the horizon glows orange with the coming nightfall.

I feel that our family is connected again. Even though Mom is gone, I can feel her with us, and I know Dad can too. I feel safe and peaceful.

Dad starts calling me Emma again, as we talk together. The words are no longer painful for him to say. I listen to the sound of my own name, closing my eyes and letting the pleasure of that sound wash over me.

Dad’s dark hair glows in the escaping sunlight, and the spark comes back into his eyes. I can see the mischief and humor in him that has been buried so deeply for so long.

I lie back and gaze at the stars, which are only just starting to emerge from the inky sky.

Something stirs in my chest, a feeling I haven't felt in a long time. I cling to it, promising myself that I will never let it go. For the first time in five months, I have hope.