

***A Family of Strangers* by Emilie Richards**
Excerpt

CHAPTER ONE

What do alligators dream about?

I was four years old when I asked my sister that question. Wendy was home from college, introducing Bryce Wainwright, her future husband, to our parents. I liked him because Wendy seemed happy whenever he was in the room. The day we talked about alligators she seemed intrigued by my question.

"Fish," she said at last. "They dream about fish. Everything dreams about something smaller and weaker, whatever they don't have to be afraid of. Otherwise they'd never get any sleep."

"Sometimes I dream about alligators." I had lowered my voice in case my mother was lurking nearby. "Scary alligators."

"Then you'll have to grow up to be bigger than one." She lowered her voice, too. "Until you do, sleep with the light on."

Since our no-nonsense mother, Arlie Gracey, had already told me there were no alligators in the house, I knew she was unlikely to cooperate. But that night after Mom left me in darkness, my sister slipped into my room with a new night-light. When she plugged it in, the friendliest possible alligator grinned, and light beamed through a mouth not large enough to nip a finger. I was only four, but I never forgot the way Bryce smiled from the doorway as Wendy tucked the covers around my shoulders.

"See how much bigger you are than a silly old alligator, Ryan Rosie? Now you can dream about fish, too."

Wendy had assumed our mother would never throw away any gift she gave me. And she was right. The gator glowed for years until I was no longer afraid of the dark and dreamed of other things.

I know Wendy remembers that night, because for my last birthday she gave me an alligator clock. The smiling gator, two tones of bright green, clutches a fish—definitely smaller and weaker than he is—while another fish swings back and forth, waiting for his turn to be eaten.

Now, above my desk, the poor doomed fish was lulling me into memories of my sister. I had just consulted the clock—which routinely gains one minute per hour—because ten minutes ago, Wendy had texted me.

Privat call soon. B reddy. No 1 else.

As instructed, I was waiting, even though a party was getting started in the common area behind my shabby little duplex in Delray Beach, Florida. When the text arrived, I'd been enjoying a frosted mug of Cigar City Jai Alai and a plate of Sophie Synecky's grilled pierogies and kielbasa.

Now Sophie came inside to find me.

My duplex is tiny, which is why the crew for *Out in the Cold*, the podcast I'm lucky enough to produce and host, was celebrating outside after fighting for space in my cramped living room for two hours. My office is the smaller bedroom of two. With my desk, a chair, shelves and files, there's hardly room for air, but that never stops Sophie from barging in.

"Crew meeting was adjourned, Ryan. Work's over for the day and tomorrow's Sunday." Sophie is *Out in the Cold's* administrator, researcher and coproducer. She's

three sizes larger than she wants to be, and her long blond hair is turning gray, another attribute she dislikes but chooses not to address. Today she was wearing a voluminous flowered tunic over skintight white leggings. We both thought she looked fabulous.

"I'm expecting a call," I said. "It's personal."

As I spoke, the photo on my computer screen changed. A shot of my sister and me in bathing suits, arms around each other's waists, filled the space. There we were, me, short at five foot four, curling dark hair, squinting into the sun with my dimples in plain view, and Wendy, towering over me at five foot nine, her straight blond hair hanging over one shoulder, a smile lighting her face. Even the sun's glare couldn't stop Wendy from looking her best.

Looking at it now, I remembered the coconut-and-lime scent of our sunscreen, and later that evening, our mojitos. I remembered the sun on my shoulders and the air-conditioned bar where we went to get away from our parents. Wendy and I spent so little time together that those moments are etched in my memory.

Sophie always needs to know more. "Is the call about your father?" I gave her "the look," which should have stopped her, but didn't. Her eyes lit up. "A man? Somebody I've met?"

I pointed to my office window, more like a porthole, where I could just see a Frisbee sailing back and forth in front of the communal laundry room. "The party's going to fade unless you get out there. You're the only one who can convince them to eat too much."

She made a noise low in her throat. It was the one she made when she conducted preliminary interviews for our podcast, and didn't believe the answers she was being fed.

Of course Sophie had many ways of getting to the truth. Now she pulled out guilt, a tool she manipulated with the precision of a top chef's boning knife. "It's not every week we get nominated for an award."

"Which is another reason you should be outside keeping energy high. That's a naturally suspicious bunch. Pretty soon they're going to come looking."

She gave up, something she never does on phone calls, and after she removed my clock from the wall and reset the time, she left me to wait alone.

The party, originally planned as a casual passing of cheap champagne around my living room, had morphed into a barbecue. This was all to the good. Something a bit more raucous was fitting for the year's final meeting of the talented crew that had created the first season of *Out in the Cold*.

Our podcast's stated mission was to take one cold case per season, warm it up again and bring it to the attention of the authorities. Apparently we hadn't done badly, which is why the meeting had turned into a celebration. Three days ago we had been nominated for a Webby for best documentary.

As if to remind me what I was missing, I heard shouts in the common area I shared with two other units. Before I came inside the sound designer and recording engineer, as well as two editors and a fact-checker, had been grilling miscellaneous cuts of meat. The composer of our theme music, along with two production assistants, had been laying out salads and desserts. Several cops, a lawyer, and our personal technology wonk, had promised to stop in later. They had advised us during the countless hours when we'd been so depressed about the show's prospects that we had secretly honed our résumés.

I was itching to join everyone, but I was worried. Our father, Dale Gracey, who'd had bypass surgery six days ago, was due to come home from the hospital that afternoon. While I lived on the east side of the state, Wendy was staying on the west, just a few miles from our parents while her submarine commander husband was submerged—God knows where. It was possible she'd heard something I hadn't.

Wendy always gets the news first. When you grow up in the shadow of a much older sister, you learn not to protest. The flaws of an older child are bleached by time, while a younger's are always in plain view. When the older child is Wendy, who is good at nearly everything, the right daughter to help during a family crisis is obvious. I am either protected or overlooked. That's how we roll.

The one place where I beat Wendy hands down was the written word. Although she's now forty-five, judging from the text, my sister still couldn't spell. Of course it was possible abbreviations and misspellings were one and the same. But how would I know? Wendy started college the year I was born. By the time I was in kindergarten, she was learning to be the perfect navy wife. Wendy turned into a larger-than-life role model who popped in now and then to tell me how big I'd gotten, while proving, by her very existence, that I could never catch up.

At last my cell phone blasted the opening notes of Carly Simon's "Older Sister."
"Hey." I waited, knowing that if I didn't, my next words would be swallowed.

For once she didn't hop right in. "Listen," she said after a pause, "this is serious. I need your help."

I'm suspicious of emotions, including my own, but I felt an unmistakable surge. Delight I was needed, countered by fear something unthinkable had happened. "Is it Dad?"

She fell silent again, but when she finally spoke she sounded surprised. "No. No, last I heard he was doing okay. I'm not in Florida. Remember?"

It was my turn to be surprised. When our father was catapulted into emergency bypass surgery last week, Wendy had been out of town traveling somewhere in the west for the development company that Dad built one rental property and vacation resort at a time. Wendy is Gracey Group's concierge and tour manager, and the story goes that as Dad was being wheeled into the operating room, he demanded that our mother tell her to continue the trip.

I was almost sure, though, that she had been scheduled to fly back to Seabank before he was released from the hospital today.

The details were a little foggy because I hadn't yet been home. The moment I'd learned about the surgery, I had offered to drive to Seabank, but Mom had insisted I stay put on Florida's Atlantic coast until Dad was ready for a real visit. In the meantime, Mom-of-Steel had continued to care for Wendy's young daughters, Holly and Noelle, while Wendy was away.

Now, even for her, taking care of the girls and a postsurgical patient was going to be impossible. My father was used to telling everyone else what to do. He was bound to be hell on wheels while he recovered.

I hoped I was worrying for nothing. "When do you get back?"

"That's the thing. I'm not coming home. I can't, and I don't know when I'll be able to. I need you to go back to Seabank and take care of the girls until things clear up for me."

"You're kidding." I really thought she might be.

"I don't want to go into detail. Can't you just trust me and do it?"

I paused, with no plan to restart until I made sense of her request. Finally I said the only thing that occurred to me. "Look, this sounds crazy. You have to tell me more."

"Great. Thanks a lot." For the first time Wendy choked up, as if she was trying not to cry. "I'm in Phoenix. Okay? There was a murder last night, and I'm pretty sure the sheriff will think I'm involved. I need to disappear for a while until it's sorted out. Is that enough to get you moving?"

I tried to rearrange her words into sentences that didn't catapult our family into an unfamiliar dimension. "Murder?"

"Yes. Probably, anyway. Will you help?"

"You're not kidding, are you?"

"You got that right."

Stunned, I fell back on the advice I would have given anybody. "If you run they'll find you, and then you'll look doubly guilty. Talk to a lawyer and get advice on what to say, how and when. Do it right now. I can get you a referral."

"Don't you think I know what a huge mistake that would be? I listen to your podcast, Ryan. I was right there in that awful prison with that poor woman, the one who was sentenced for a crime she didn't commit. That's as close as I want to get to iron bars and a cellmate named Butch."

I wasn't sure which was more startling. That my sister was on the run, or that she listened to my podcast.

My heart was pummeling my chest. "If you see a lawyer, he or she won't turn you in. Attorney-client privilege, remember? They'll help you figure out the best thing to do. You don't have to take their advice. But it could save you a lot of time and hassle."

"Ryan..." She sniffed, and her voice vibrated. "I can't take a chance I'll be arrested. I know if I lay low long enough, the murderer will be found and then I can surface. But I don't know anything that will help, and there's no guarantee these local bozos know their way around a murder investigation. Cops peg somebody for a murder right off the bat and stop looking. I don't want to be that somebody."

She was talking about a problem called confirmation bias, and she was right. Sometimes cops pegged a murderer early in the investigation, and from that point on they only looked for evidence that would prove they were right. "What do you need—"

But she was way ahead of me. "Drive to Seabank. Call Mom as soon as I hang up and give her some reason I didn't fly home this morning. But not the truth. That would kill Dad. Once you get there, take the girls back to the town house and stay with them until I'm able to come home. Can you do it? You can work in Seabank, can't you? They're in school during the day. And if you're there, you can help Mom if she needs you."

She made the trip sound like a cozy holiday. I pictured our family toasting marshmallows and singing "Now the Day Is Over." I could play cheerful auntie and give comfort to our mother, the same woman who wouldn't grab my hand if she was sinking in quicksand.

The whole idea was crazy. I hardly knew Holly and Noelle. When I was with them, they rarely spoke and always refused my invitations to swim in my parents' pool or collect shells on the beach. I was such a bad aunt that I was usually relieved.

I tried once more to change her mind. "Are the authorities looking for you yet?"

"I don't think so."

"Then just come home. Please. Right now." My voice was growing shrill. "Drive to

another city if you think you need to, and get a plane home from there. I mean it. It would be a big deal for a sheriff to arrest you in Florida and take you back to Arizona, unless he has an open and shut case. Maybe the navy will give Bryce leave so you can work this out together."

"Are you going to help or not?"

"What if I say no?"

"Then Mom's going to be alone with the girls. And she won't know why I'm not there, because I'm not calling her or anybody else. In five minutes I'm going to disappear." She drew in an audibly ragged breath. "This is the last call I'm making on my cell phone."

"What am I supposed to tell her?"

"You're the journalist. Come up with a story."

"Wendy—"

The line went dead. If I tried calling back, I knew she wouldn't answer. As far as Wendy was concerned, we were finished.

Where had she called from? I'd heard background noise as we spoke, cars passing on what might have been a highway. Last year after Wendy lost a cell phone, I'd helped her place a tracking app on her new one. Now I went through the steps to locate her, but the app had been disabled.

I zipped down to recent calls and hit Wendy's number just to be sure. I waited until I heard her voice again, but as I had predicted, this time the voice was a recording. She told me, in the sweetest, most genuine way, that she was sorry to miss my call, asked me to leave a message and wished me a good day.

Of course nothing about the recording was true. Wendy wasn't sorry to miss my call, and she'd made it clear there was no point in leaving a message. Worst of all? I was pretty sure I wasn't going to have any good days, not a single one, in the near future.