

***One Mountain Away* by Emilie Richards**
Excerpt

CHAPTER ONE

First Day Journal: April 28th

This park is always filled with children. I come here to watch them play, while at the same time I worry they make learning personal facts too easy. I feel absurdly protective, so I make it my job to watch out for strangers who show too much interest or approach them to start conversations.

This is absurd, of course, because to the children, I'm a stranger, too. A stranger enjoying a glimpse back in time to a childhood she never experienced. A stranger scribbling in a journal she resisted for weeks until the lure became too great.

I'm calling this my First Day journal because of a quote from the 1970s. When I first arrived in Asheville the words radiated in psychedelic colors from posters in every store downtown.

"Today is the first day of the rest of your life."

Ironically during the time the saying was wildly popular, I was too busy to think about it. For me a day was just something to get through to make way for another. But now every time I sit down to record my past and my thoughts, I'll need the reminder that every day brings a new start, whether we need one or not.

A shriek draws my attention. The boy swinging up the spokes of the metal dome with Maddie is named Porter. Apparently his mop of black hair makes it hard to see because he continually shakes his head in frustration, or maybe just in hopes the strands will fly out of his eyes for the time it takes to lumber to the top. I know his name because the other children shout it loudly and often. Porter's something of a bully. Overweight, a little shabbier than the others, a little clumsy.

It's that last that makes the boy pick on Maddie, I think. Porter's figured out an eternal truth. If he makes fun of someone else, no one will look quite so hard at him. While this makes me angry, I understand. The world's filled with bullies, but at birth, not a one of them glanced at the next cradle and plotted how to steal the pacifier out of a baby-neighbor's mouth. It's only later they learn that knocking down other people may help them stand taller.

So while Porter's behavior upsets me, I feel sorry for him, as well. He's still just a boy. I want to take him in hand and teach him the manners he'll need to get by in the world, but Porter's neither my son nor grandson. I'm just a stranger on a park bench watching children make mistakes and enemies, decisions and friends.

One of Maddie's friends is on her way to the dome right now to make sure Porter doesn't push her. This child, olive-skinned and lean, is named Edna, which surprised me the first time I heard another child call her name. Of course names are a circle. They come into favor, then go. Today's young mothers probably never had an Aunt Edna who smelled like wintergreen and mothballs and chucked them under the chin at family reunions. They find the name filled with music, the way my generation never did.

The child Edna is filled with music. She's a girl who dances her way through life. I think if she and I ever spoke she would sing her words. Edna certainly sings her way into the hearts of other children. She's powerful here in a way none of the others are. Edna can rescue any situation. She's tactful when she needs to be, forceful when that's required, and a mistress of the best way to avert trouble before it begins, which is what she's doing today. If no one beats her to the honor, Edna may well be our first woman president.

Edna waltzes her way up the metal bars with a quick, natural grace, and she's swaying at the top before Porter can work any mischief. From here it's obvious she's talking to him. Talking, not lecturing, because after a moment, I hear him laugh. Not derisively, but like the child he is. I bet Edna told him a joke, because now, Maddie's laughing, too. Maddie's a courageous child, and she shows no fear. If Porter knocked her to the ground, she would pick herself up and start the climb again. I think Maddie refuses to let anything get in her way. Better yet, she doesn't seem to hold grudges or rail against obstacles. She simply finds a way to go around them.

I rarely cry. When I was younger than Maddie, I realized how futile tears were. But today my eyes fill as I watch the three children divide the world among themselves. Here's the future, right in front of me. Edna will lead, efficiently, carefully, fairly. Porter will try to disrupt everything around him, but if Edna can influence him, he may find a better place. And Maddie? Maddie will struggle with whatever life throws at her, but she will always prevail.

For the moment, though, the three are simply children, laughing at Edna's well-timed joke while I wipe my eyes on a park bench thirty yards away. When I look up, I see Maddie's grandfather, Ethan, start across the baseball diamond beyond us to fetch his granddaughter.

I turn away quickly to make sure he doesn't see me. I wonder, though, if he did, would Ethan feel a glimmer of sympathy? Would he understand why I'm sitting here, watching a child I've never spoken to? Would he join me on this narrow park bench and tell me about the granddaughter we share, the granddaughter we haven't discussed since that terrible night ten years ago when we stood at the window of a neonatal intensive care unit and broke each other's hearts?

As I gather my purse and sweater, and slip my heels back into my shoes, I contemplate what to do next. I'm struck by how many possibilities confront us each moment of our lives, possibilities we rarely notice. We move on to the next decision by habit, then the next, and we never look around to see all the paths leading to other places, other lives. Right now I could meet Maddie's grandfather halfway across the diamond and ask

him to talk to me, even to introduce me to the young girl who is so much a part of both of us.

As always there are too many choices to contemplate fully, but as I stand and turn in the other direction, I know I'm making the only one I can.