



## **REUNION**

In the space of a few short months, Emma Langley's existence was turned upside down by a bitter divorce and the sudden death of the beloved grandfather who had raised her. Feeling lost and fearing the future, she believes herself to be alone in the world – until an invitation arrives from Cherokee Falls, an Appalachian town on the Kentucky-Virginia border. Emma is asked to attend a family reunion there – and the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration of a woman who shares her name. Eager to learn of her grandfather's secret past, Emma leaves Ohio behind for the summer and is immediately accepted into a family of strangers – all with secrets of their own. Emma is intrigued most by the matriarch of the Buchanan clan – her namesake – who lives up Misty Hollow in a house haunted by the spirit of a long dead child...

# REUNION

A Novel

by

Debbie Kuhn

## CHAPTER ONE (ROUGH DRAFT)

It was the happiness that woke her.

The dream made Emma Langley smile, but her heart remembered the painful truth. Those memories pushed her out of bed at midnight, away from that crisp, colorful October afternoon when she and Jake had sat on the patio behind her grandfather's modest house, lavishing the old man with presents for his birthday.

The air had smelled like spicy barbeque and her grandpa's soft laughter had fallen upon them continuously, just like the dry leaves that had rained down from the surrounding maples.

"The only present I want from you two next year is my first great-grandchild."

Emma had smiled at Jake, and he had squeezed her hand in return.

Now Emma stood wide-awake at her bedroom window, staring at the moon, fighting the urge to cry. She'd allowed herself to wallow in grief and self-pity way too much over the last four months. Tears would not change the fact that her grandfather was dead and her husband of eight years had moved out to be with his pregnant lover.

Exactly a month ago, on May 24<sup>th</sup>, the divorce was declared final. Jake hadn't forced her to sell their condo. He had simply wanted out of the marriage as quickly as possible – without having to feel guilty.

Her husband hadn't been able to look her in the eyes since Valentine's Day. That night she'd come across an email that should have been deleted – a love note to her husband from her young teaching assistant. "Happy six-month anniversary, hon."

"It's nobody's fault, Em," he'd said, watching her cry. "Lindsay and I didn't mean for this to happen. You've got to believe that I never wanted to hurt you."

Well, of course he didn't. Jake was a coward. He'd never even hinted that their marriage was in trouble. And he had probably wanted her to find that email so he wouldn't have to come right out and admit the nasty, painful truth.

*Just be angry, Emma.* Because wasn't it better to be consumed by rage than loneliness and despair?

Oh, but soon she would not be alone anymore. Emma turned away from the moonlight and eyed the mysterious invitation that lay on the nightstand. In a few hours she'd be leaving Columbus to attend a reunion in a town she'd never heard of until six weeks ago.

The letter from Cherokee Falls, Kentucky had arrived on the 10<sup>th</sup> of May, the day of her grandpa's funeral. He'd been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in March and Emma would never forget how lost and helpless she'd felt when the doctors had told her the news.

*Remember - anger is better than pain.*

The air conditioning kicked back on, and she shivered slightly in her oversized Ohio State T-shirt. The thermostat was down too low – a habit she'd picked up from Jake.

Emma crawled back into her queen-sized brass bed and switched on the antique lamp that hung above the nightstand. She picked the smudged envelope up off the small table and for the hundredth time, removed the letter and the two faded black and white photographs wrapped inside.

The larger picture, a 4 x 6, was of a family standing on the long verandah of a 2-story frame house. To the far left was a tall, ruggedly handsome man dressed in what was probably his best Sunday suit. He stood a few feet away from his slender, attractive wife, who was

holding a crying toddler. The couple wasn't smiling, and neither were the other three children who stood in a line to their mother's left – a boy and two little girls.

The shot was taken from an odd angle, as if the photographer was standing near the bottom of a hill looking up. One could see a large portion of the angry-looking spring sky. And this time Emma noticed something else she hadn't seen before: a blurred, shadowy shape between the man and woman, about the size of a young child. It was impossible to tell if it was a person or simply a flaw of some kind.

The second, smaller photo of a teenaged boy had made Emma teary-eyed the first time she'd seen it. She'd recognized her grandfather right away by his square jaw and wavy hair – hair that, back then, would have been a light shade of red. David Aaron Justice sat atop a large, dark horse, and there was a hint of a smile on his face. It must have been a cold day, for he was wearing a thick coat and a pair of heavy work boots.

Emma wondered what he'd been thinking. What had happened back then to separate him from his adoptive family? Why had he never talked about them? Why did he change his last name?

Instead of answering Emma's questions, the letter from Cherokee Falls only made her want to ask more.

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*May 8, 2000*

*Miss Rebecca L. Buchanan  
223 Misty Hollow Road  
Cherokee Falls, KY 41522*

*Ms. Emma K. Justice Langley  
1187 Trevillion Way, Unit C  
Columbus, OH 43209*

*Dear Emma,*

*First of all, let me say that my family and I share in your loss. We loved your grandfather more than you can ever know. I never thought of him as being adopted – he was just my mischievous younger brother, close to my age and always close to my heart. David had to grow up too fast, and for that we are all sorry.*

*We know that your grandpa never told you about us, but don't ever think it was because he didn't care about his family. He felt like he had no other choice, and he did his best to keep in touch with us through the years. There were so many things he wanted to tell you before he died, but he didn't want to cause you any more heartache.*

*Emma, he loved you more than anything on this earth. He didn't want you to be alone. And he realized that one day you would want to know the truth about his past.*

*He told us all about you, of course. It broke his heart when your parents were killed, but he was so proud of his "pretty little redheaded princess." You were the joy of his life.*

*We want you to come see us next month if you can. On June 24<sup>th</sup> we're having our family reunion over at the Breaks Interstate Park, not far from Cherokee Falls. I've written directions on the back of this letter for you, along with my phone number.*

*We'll also be having a 100<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration for my mother, Kate. I guess you don't even know that you were named after her. Your grandpa told us that you were supposed to be born on the 24<sup>th</sup> as well, but you decided to be late. Stubbornness sure does run in this family!*

*We already love you, child. Please visit us and stay for as long as you're able. We know you must have a lot of questions, but you shouldn't be worried about the past. Your grandfather was a good man.*

*Hope to meet you very soon.*

*Love and prayers,*

*Aunt Becca*

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It was seven a.m. Emma's bags were packed, and she was holding a small stack of photo albums she wanted to bring along on the trip. But she couldn't stop staring at the plain white shoebox on the floor of her bedroom closet. She'd forgotten it was back there.

Its contents were all that was left of her marriage.

*Don't look. You don't have time anyway. Just don't.*

But she did. She placed the photo albums on the dresser and sat cross-legged on the beige carpet with the scarred box of mementoes in her lap.

Inside were ticket stubs to the first movie she and Jake had seen together, “Ghost” with Patrick Swayze, a few extremely mushy Valentine’s Day cards, an itinerary for their first vacation together in Cancun, a menu from their favorite Mexican restaurant, matchbooks and dried rose petals from the wedding, plane ticket receipts and postcards from their honeymoon cruise in the Bahamas, a funny birthday poem she had written for Jake, an oversized card he had given to her on their first anniversary...

Despite her best efforts, a tear escaped and slid down her cheek. “Emma, you are *such* a masochist.”

What had gone wrong? Why had Jake stopped loving her? Why couldn’t a mild-mannered CPA and a high school English teacher live happily ever after? It wasn’t as if they’d rushed into the marriage. They’d met during their sophomore year at Ohio State and had wed two years after graduating.

Diane, her best friend from college, had thought she and Jake were perfectly matched, albeit in a somewhat insulting way.

“You’re the most laidback person I’ve ever met,” Diane had said, upon hearing the news of their engagement. “Jake is levelheaded, dependable, and, well, *safe*. Accountants don’t go around looking for excitement, which means you don’t have to worry about them cheating. You two will make the perfect couple.”

Emma choked back unhappy laughter. Diane had been floored by the news that Jake had gotten a twenty-year-old college student pregnant.

“What the hell is wrong with that prick?” Her friend had rushed over to comfort her the morning after Jake had moved out, but Emma never had a chance to vent. Diane took the stage, pacing back and forth while Emma sat silently on the couch, numb with shock.

The high school basketball coach (who stood six feet tall in her stocking feet) had suffered through more than one failed relationship, and she was now a confirmed bachelorette.

“All men are *slime*, girlfriend. They never appreciate what they have. You know, if you could just take away their penises they’d be so much smarter. I mean, what was Jake thinking? He had an intelligent, thoughtful, knockout of a wife – a woman who never gave him any grief. God, I just wanna skewer his balls!”

Diane was a “corn fed girl,” as Emma’s grandpa used to say. The blonde could have kicked Jake’s ass without even trying, and Emma had briefly flirted with the possibility of letting her.

But then self-doubt had begun to overshadow her anger. What if the breakup was really her fault?

She had never given Jake any grief because she wasn’t the nagging sort, but what if she’d failed to make him feel special. Had he simply gotten bored with her? She had always trusted him and given him the space he wanted. When their lives became more hectic and they began spending less time together, she hadn’t let it worry her.

*Stupid woman.*

Emma sighed and placed the lid back on the shoebox. What did it matter now?

She should throw the aging bundle of memories in the garbage and be on her way. She had at least a six-hour drive ahead of her.

Emma pulled herself up and hurried into the kitchen. The trashcan was almost full.

She wanted to drop the shoebox inside and walk away. She wanted to, but she couldn’t.

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“Don’t you worry about a thing, gal pal.” Diane had reached Emma on her cell phone just as she was leaving town. “I’ll pick up your mail, water the plants --”

“My plants are already dead.” *And thank God I don’t have any pets to worry about right now*, Emma thought. Jake’s allergies had prevented her from bringing home any furry critters.

“Well, anyway, just remember to relax and have a good time. You *need* this vacation.”

“Hmmm, this may turn out to be an adventure instead of a holiday. I’m actually a bit nervous.”

“But this is so cool! It’s almost like one of those gothic mysteries my mom used to read when I was a kid. I *know* you’re doing the right thing by meeting that family.”

Emma stifled a yawn. “Hope so. If things go well I’ll probably stay with them for a week or two.”

“Hey, you have the whole summer off – you shouldn’t be in any hurry to get back here.”

“That sounded like an order, girlfriend.”

“Only because I care. And that reminds me – did you bring along the pepper spray I gave you, and put that personal alarm on your keychain?”

“I pity the fool that messes with this redhead.”

Diane giggled.

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Emma left the Columbus suburbs behind and headed east on Interstate 70, but when she reached the Franklin County line she felt compelled to take a detour onto U.S. 40 – the Old National Highway. She had traveled this two-lane road through the Amish countryside many more times than she could remember.

It led to her grandfather’s house, and childhood memories.

She slowed her Volkswagen Jetta down considerably, ever mindful of the horse-drawn buggies and runaway livestock one was likely to encounter in the area. A fresh, warm breeze

rushed through the open car windows. The white farmhouses she passed by looked so clean and bright in the sunshine.

Not a lot had changed since she was a kid, but these days she had a greater appreciation for the scenery and the peace and quiet.

Her widowed grandfather had taken her in when she was five. The ranch-style home he had built before she was born was located halfway between Columbus and Zanesville. When she passed the old redbrick church she slowed down even more. The long driveway that led to the yellow frame house was just up ahead on the left, but she didn't turn onto it.

Emma had sold the property in late May, and she didn't want to intrude on the family that had just moved in. Since no one was behind her, she drove by the place at a crawl. Somehow it already seemed different, foreign.

“You can never go back,” her grandpa used to say. Now she knew he had truly meant it.

Emma sped up again, feeling a twinge of anger. Why didn't the old man tell her the truth about his past when he found out he was dying? Didn't he realize she loved him unconditionally?

It had broken her already bleeding heart to watch him die. But she hadn't shirked her responsibilities. The last few weeks of his life, when he was in and out of the hospital, she had stayed with him, taking a leave of absence from her teaching job at East Columbus High.

Her grandfather had accepted his fate much easier than she had, but Emma had forced herself not to fall apart in front of him. And she had indulged his every whim: ice cream at midnight, fruit pies for dinner. He only had an appetite for sweets at the end.

The end – it came on a perfect spring day. That morning, Emma had brought him home from the hospital for what she knew would be the last time. He'd been weak, but despite the painkillers in his system he'd seemed restless. When she had slowed the car down to turn into his driveway, he had motioned for her to keep going.

“Where to, Grandpa?”

“Wherever you like, Princess. Just take your time.”

And so she had driven on through the familiar countryside, past Amish farms, churches, and fruit and vegetable markets. Sometimes he would gesture for her to turn left or right at an intersection. Eventually they crossed the historic covered bridge that led to Buckeye State Park, where she'd once played as a child. They were following the park's scenic loop highway when her grandfather finally dozed off.

Emma drove home and helped him to bed. He gave her a tender, sad smile as she tucked him in.

“Thank you, Princess. I'm sorry I have to leave.”

She leaned down and kissed his wrinkled forehead. “I'm sorry too.”

When she checked on him an hour later, he was gone.

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Emma got back on the freeway near Zanesville and then headed south on Interstate 77, which would take her all the way down into Virginia. She felt pretty confident that the AAA map she'd brought along would keep her from getting lost in the Appalachians.

Although, sometimes getting lost on vacation wasn't such a bad thing...

*“I hear the train a comin', it's rollin' round the bend, and I ain't seen the sunshine, since I don't know when, I'm stuck in Folsom Prison, and time keeps draggin' on...”*

Emma joined in. “But that train keeps a rollin', on down to San Antooooone.”

Listening to The Man in Black always made her feel closer to her grandfather. Johnny Cash had been his favorite singer, and “Folsom Prison Blues” was a song he had played over and over again. No wonder Emma knew the lyrics by heart.

She let out a yawn and decided to take the next exit, which advertised food and gas. She was close to the Virginia border now. The gently rolling farmland she had been passing through for the last three hours had finally given way to steep hills with narrow, twisting valleys.

Emma felt relieved when she saw a restaurant close to the exit ramp. She pulled off the winding road and into the nearly deserted gravel parking lot of The Burger Barn. Inside, she stared at the greasy menu board and waited patiently for the pretty blonde teenager behind the counter to finish her phone call.

If Becca's directions were accurate, she should reach the Breaks Interstate Park in another two hours. The thought caused butterflies to swarm in her stomach. What would the family think of her? Would they be disappointed?

She had dressed carefully and conservatively – white slacks and sandals, and a light blue blouse with a lace collar. But had she used too much perfume?

By the time Emma left the restaurant, her appetite had disappeared and she had to force down the chicken sandwich she'd ordered. No way was she going to risk showing up at the reunion feeling lightheaded.

At least she had remembered to buy gifts for both Becca and Kate. And she hadn't forgotten to bring the photo albums – one filled with recent pictures and one stuffed with photos from her childhood.

Just south of the Virginia border, Emma left Interstate 77 and headed southwest on I-81. By that time, her thoughts had returned to Becca's letter, and the comment she had made about her brother having to grow up too fast. What had robbed David Justice of his childhood?

Emma's imagination worked overtime on the possible scenarios and when she saw the Dickenson County sign, she couldn't believe the last two hours of the journey had flown by so quickly.

Route 19 took her higher in altitude. Monstrously tall trees lined the twisty road, keeping it shadowed. Emma rolled down her car windows again to enjoy the clean, cool air, and her

daydreaming almost caused her to miss the turnoff to KY-VA 80. The entrance to the Breaks was at the top of a mountain. The park's 4,600 acres were divided between the states of Virginia and Kentucky. Emma would be meeting Becca and her family on the Virginia side.

She turned left into the park and paid the nominal entrance fee at the gate, feeling relieved when the portly young ranger handed her a detailed map.

Emma followed Laurel Branch Road around a small lake. The stone shelter house was supposed to be on the north side of the lake on a hill, but looking for it was difficult. She had to concentrate on her driving due to the crawling traffic and frenzied children who kept running back and forth across the road from the swing sets to the paddleboats.

She finally spotted Shelter #6, and made a quick left turn into the driveway, just beating a long line of oncoming vehicles.

In the next instant, Emma was forced to slam on the brakes as a Frisbee sailed over the hood of her car, followed immediately by a large, furry creature that clamped down on the disc in midair and landed safely on the other side of the driveway.

Emma pulled the car off the pavement into the grass and put it in PARK, her heart thumping from the adrenalin rush.

She turned and looked at the black and white Border Collie that was now sitting across from her. The unrepentant canine dropped the red Frisbee on the ground and grinned.

Emma wagged her finger at the dog. "Don't you grin at me, mister. Only cats have nine lives."

"Yeah, but Suzie Q seems to have the luck o' the Irish on her side."

Emma glanced up at the slender, smiling man who had appeared from behind her car. His gray T-shirt had an Ed Gorey graphic on the front, along with the assertion that, "Real men read."

“Sorry we gave you such a scare. I didn’t think the wind would carry the Frisbee this far.”

The man had a slight drawl, and Emma liked his smile – rueful, but friendly. He probably didn’t appreciate having a dimple in his left cheek, but she thought it looked rather cute. An unruly lock of jet-black hair kept falling in his face, much to his apparent irritation, and his rimless glasses were slightly askew.

Emma wanted to straighten them so she could get a better look at his electric blue eyes.

She smiled. “Suzie Q – I like that.” The dog’s tail wagged at the mention of her name. “And it’s okay. No harm done.”

The man adjusted his glasses and stared at her. “Damn. Red hair, Ohio license plates....you must be Emma.”

She nodded. “Right. Who are you?”

“Sullivan Quinn – Sully. You’ve just made me lose a bet, *cousin*.”

## END OF CHAPTER ONE

*(Further excerpts of this novel will appear in Debbie’s bimonthly newsletter, “The Nightwriter Report.” See form at the bottom of the main index page to subscribe.)*