**Tradition**

by rsw

**Chapter 12**

She awoke still wrapped in arm with her back to him. As she opened her eyes and turned onto her back, he said, “morning, sunshine. How’d you sleep?”

“Well, very well. What time is it?”

“Almost nine,” he replied.

“How long have you been awake?”

“About an hour,” he said. “I thought about going to get some stuff for breakfast, but I didn’t want you to wake up and find me not here.”

“You could have woken me.”

“You looked so beautiful, sleeping. Besides, I like holding you.”

She snuggled into him. They lay there for quite a while just enjoying the feel of each others’ body.

“Did I hear you say something about breakfast? My stomach is starting to grumble, and, if I’m hungry, a big, strong man like you must be starved.”

“I only have the snacks that I got last night, here, but there’s a little country store up the road not too far. I can run and get us some supplies right quick. How about bacon and eggs?” he said.

“That sounds wonderful. While you’re gone, I’d like to freshen up a bit. I don’t have any soap, shampoo, or even toothpaste or a brush with me though.”

“Check the top right drawer in the bathroom. Mom keeps all kinds of stuff in there, including spare toothbrushes for guests.”

Emily watched as Ben got out of bed and dressed. Not wanting to face the cold of the room, she stayed huddled under the blankets until he finished in the bathroom.

Grabbing his keys, he bent down to kiss her. She quickly covered her mouth.

“There’s no way you’re kissing me and my morning breath while you’ve got freshly brushed teeth. You’ll have to wait until after I shower.”

Grinning, he settled for kissing her forehead before leaving. She waited until he had left to get out of bed. She quickly noticed that he had left the bathroom heater on for her and that the small room was now quite toasty.

‘He’s so considerate,’ she thought.

By the time that she had attended to her needs and showered, she could hear him clanking pots in the kitchen. She paused before opening the door, feeling oddly nervous.

‘Quit being silly,’ she told herself. ‘Not only has he already been pretty intimate with you and ogled your naked body for hours, he’s also your boyfriend.’

Still, she couldn’t help but feel awkward walking around in front of him undressed. She wanted to go get a blanket to wrap up in, but remembered her silly blustering about staying naked. She knew that he’d readily let her out of it, but she couldn’t bear the thought of him thinking of her as a foolish child.

Bracing herself, she stepped out into the room.

“I could have done that,” she said, indicating the cooking chores.

He turned and looked at her, apparently over HIS shyness anyway.

“Nonsense, I wanted to do breakfast in bed for you.”

She tried not to shrink under his all-seeing gaze.

“I can at least help…”

He interrupted her.

“You look like you’re freezing. Get under the covers and get warm.”

She smiled at him. Did he know that she was embarrassed? She thought about pushing the point just to be obstinate but dismissed the idea as being too childish.

He finished up and brought quite a spread to her. The plate, containing biscuits smothered in white gravy, fried eggs, and bacon, sat on a lap tray with a glass of orange juice and a small bud vase with a single red rose. She clapped in delight.

“You know that I can’t eat all this, right?”

“Oh. I tend to think about how much I would eat and then add a little,” he said.

“You’re so cute,” she said.

Then, a thought occurred to her.

“How did you know that I liked my eggs over easy?” she asked.

“Same way that I knew what snacks and drink you would want last night without asking. I paid a lot attention over the last few years whenever you were around.”

He was right. He had bought her granola bars and a Diet Coke last night, her favorite snack. She hadn’t even noticed that he didn’t ask her in advance. How had she been so blind to his attentiveness for so long?

“Before I eat, I believe that you owe me a kiss,” she said.

After eating, Ben cleaned up the dishes while she stayed in bed. Between the bathroom heater, Ben cooking breakfast, and the sun rising, the small house was starting to heat up to a more comfortable temperature. She knew that she wouldn’t be able to hide under the covers all day.

As Ben finished up and walked over to her, she threw the covers off, exposing her body to him once again. He smiled, took off his shoes, and sat down next to her.

“Whatever shall we do with ourselves today?” he asked.

Her nervousness must have shown through to her face because, instead of touching her as she expected, he asked another question.

“Are you okay with this?”

She stumbled over her words a bit.

“I am. I really am. Last night was great. It’s just that this is all so new to me. You seem to know what you’re doing and be so relaxed about it all. Are you very experienced?”

“Are you fishing for my sexual history, here?” he asked.

“Kind of, I guess.”

“That’s fair,” he said. “I’m flattered that you think that I know what I’m doing, but I’m not all that experienced. I played all the usual kissing games in junior high, but I never had an actual girlfriend.”

“What about the stuff that you did right before we went to bed?”

His face reddened.

“There was this one girl…”

“Julie,” Emily guessed. “Did you have a thing for her?”

“No! I mean… I like Julie and all. She’s a great girl, but…”

He took a moment to compose his thoughts before continuing.

“Do you remember last year when Julie broke her leg?”

Emily nodded.

“I had had my leg in a cast my freshman year,” he said, “and I felt sorry for her. I offered my services helping her in any way that she needed. I carried her around so she wouldn’t have to walk on crutches and lifted her in and out of her car, that sort of thing. Then, one night she calls me and asks me to come over, not telling me what she wants.”

He face reddened even more.

“You know Julie; she’s not very inhibited. It turns out that she wanted me to bathe her. I tried to talk her out of it, but she said that I was the only one strong enough to lift her in and out of the tub without getting the cast wet. She said that she was tired of sponge baths, so she placed a plastic chair in the tub to prop her leg on and called me.”

“You don’t have to tell me the rest,” Emily said.

“No, it’s okay. Anyway, Julie’s like a force of nature and was not to be assuaged. Before I knew it, I was carrying her naked body to the bathroom. I thought that I’d be able to escape and wait in her bedroom while she finished, but she decided that I should bathe her. She wouldn’t even let me use a washcloth. Instead she had me put the soap directly from my hand to her body. She made sure that every part of her not in the cast got washed, too.”

Emily thought that Julie’s bath sounded awfully good. She filed the idea away for future reference, blushing a little bit herself.

“Anyway, after I washed and dried her, I took her back to her bedroom still completely naked. She told me that it wasn’t fair for me to tease her like that and leave. I tried to protest that everything that I had done had been at her direction, but she would have none of it. She started out by demanding that I have sex with her.”

Emily felt jealous at the thought of another girl having the attention of her boyfriend, but couldn’t help but be amused at the thought of Julie abusing poor, innocent Ben.

“On that issue, I did stand my ground, telling her that there’s no way that I would sleep with her. She finally relented, but not before I promised that I would at least help her get release. She pretty much orchestrated what she wanted me to do, telling me what to do and guiding my actions. That’s pretty much it. My only experience before last night.”

He looked at her.

“What about you?”

In a very serious tone, she answered him.

“There was this one guy. He made me take off my clothes and stared at my naked body before he kissed me. I was so turned on, that I practically begged him to take me. Instead, he caressed my body and used his hands to bring me to multiple fabulous orgasms.”

The look on Ben’s face was priceless.

“It was you, silly. Only you.”

After listening to Ben describe his experience with Julie and recalling the night before, Emily was getting pretty worked up again.

“I still don’t know how far I want to go,” she admitted to him.

“There’s no hurry,” he said. “We can even take a step back from what we did before.”

“No. I definitely want more of that.”

She blushed.

“I’ve also heard from the girls in the locker room that it feels really nice when the guy uses his tongue, uh, down there,” she said.

She couldn’t believe she was having this conversation. Where had her normal, shy self gone?

“I just don’t know if I’m ready for more than that yet,” she concluded.

Ben looked like he wanted to say something but that he was reluctant to.

“What is it?” she asked.

“It’s not easy talking frankly about this kind of stuff, is it?” he asked.

“No, but it does help build trust, right?”

“Well, last night, when I, uh, stuck my finger inside you, even though you were well lubricated, it was hard to get it in. I think that, if for no other reason than your comfort, we should work up to putting in anything larger.”

Emily didn’t understand for a second. Then she remembered getting a glance at the large tent in his boxers last night.

“Oh!” she said, and then she blushed.

“Speaking of that,” Emily said, “I feel a little guilty. You took care of me, and I fell asleep before I returned the favor.”

“All in good time, my dear. All in good time.”

She could tell that he was thinking about something.

“You did tease me mercilessly last night, though.”

“I was worn out after you finished with me. I’m sorry I fell asleep,” she said.

“I didn’t mean that. I meant before, in the car and getting into bed. I was thinking ‘who is this little vixen and what did she do with my sweet Emily?’”

She blushed but did not respond.

“Just know that payback’s a bitch,” he said. “But, right now, I just want to do this…”

He kissed her. Hard. Then he used his hands, mouth, and tongue all over her body this time. He tortured her in ways that felt so good and made her beg for him to put his finger inside her. He pleasured her until, out of breath, she pleaded with him to relent.

They lay there for quite a while, with him holding her tenderly, as she recovered. Once her energy returned, she looked down at the sweat-soaked body.

“I think that I need a bath. I hate the feel of that rough washcloth in the bathroom, though. Do you think that I can find a nice, strong hand somewhere to soap me up?” she teased.

“I think that that can be arranged,” he said while getting up.

He looked surprised when she remained on the bed.

“First, though, it’s my turn,” she said.

“Your turn for what?”

“My turn to try to make you feel like you’ve made me feel. Get those clothes off, mister,” she commanded.

He didn’t resist. He took off the shirt and pants once again as she admired his chiseled body. He seemed to hesitate slightly before slipping off the boxers, but he went through with it. She had never seen a naked guy before. She had, of course, changed diapers on baby boys and seen some websites that Beth showed her, but she had never seen one in person.

She stared in wonder at his erection.

‘Oh my God! It’s huge,’ she thought.

Ben turned and walked to the bathroom.

‘His butt is so cute!’

He returned holding a washcloth and laid down on his back next to her.

“What do I do?” she asked.

He didn’t answer. Instead, he took her hand and placed it on his erect member. He moved her hand up and down.

Emily got the picture. She marveled at the feel of it as she stroked and caressed it. She kept stroking until Ben suddenly grabbed the washcloth and used it to cover the head of his penis.

“Keep going,” he croaked.

She started stroking again. Seconds later, it started convulsing and a wet spot appeared on the cloth.

“Okay. Okay, that’s good,” he said.

Ben used the rag to clean himself off. Emily watched, amazed, as his erection slowly shrunk.

“That’s really neat. I want to see that again,” she said.

“Later. Maybe, later.”

The two spent the rest of the afternoon naked. Ben bathed her, which led them back to the bed and her needing another shower. Ben told her that he would call Beth and arrange the meeting while she cleaned up. Sad to be leaving their love shack, she finally got back in the Charger around 7pm. It still felt odd to be outside naked, but, silly or not, she refused to cover herself when Ben tried, once again, to try to get her to drape a blanket over herself for the ride home.

**Chapter 13**

Beth and Greg had spent the day in much the same way that Ben and Emily had, though without any of the inhibitions of the less experienced couple. Beth, too, was saddened to have such a great day end, but was looking forward to relating the events to Emily, and, more importantly, hearing exactly what she had been up to at Ben’s fishing camp.

When Ben suggested to her that they meet at eight at a rest area just outside of town, she readily agreed. She also didn’t have a problem when he requested that she bring Greg. That just gave her more time with her new boyfriend.

“Any idea why Ben wants you to ride with him home?” Beth asked Greg just before they reached their destination.

“Not really, but, since he spent a whole day with Emily, he probably wants to talk about the relationship. He can be worse than a girl.”

Beth stuck out her tongue at him, knowing that he was kidding. They had spent a lot of time talking about and defining their relationship during the day, and she didn’t exactly have to rope him into the conversation.

As she pulled into the nearly deserted rest area parking lot, she saw Ben’s Charger parked in the back corner, the one farthest from the road. She drove over and parked near his car. As she did so, she saw Ben get out and walk over to the passenger side. Though the parking lot was lit, both hers and Ben’s cars were in the shadows, and the darkness didn’t allow her to see inside his vehicle.

“Isn’t that sweet,” she told Greg. “He’s being a gentleman and opening Emily’s door for her.”

She took her eyes off Ben for a while as Greg said goodbye with a long, sensual kiss.

“I love you. See you later,” he said while getting out of the car.

“I love you, too, stud. See you soon,” she replied.

Greg turned away from her just as a very naked Emily stepped out from behind Ben. Beth couldn’t tell who was more shocked, Greg or Emily. He gawked at the naked blonde as she froze in her tracks. Emily then seemed to realize the display she was putting on. She let out a short scream, threw her arms across her breasts and bush, and sprinted to Beth’s car.

“What are you doing, bringing him here? You knew that I didn’t have any clothes!” Emily shouted at her.

“Calm down. I figured that you would have sense to wrap up in a towel or something. I’m not used to my shy cousin running around naked. Why aren’t you covered, anyway, and didn’t Ben tell you that he was picking up Greg?” Beth said.

“Ben knew that Greg was coming?”

“Ben is the one that requested it,” Beth answered.

“Ohhh. I am so going to kill him. He’s in for it now.”

“Care to explain what’s going on?” Beth asked.

The boys hadn’t gotten in the car yet, and she could see them laughing hysterically.

“I’ll catch you up later,” Emily replied.

“Okay, want to get dressed before we get on the highway? Your bag of clothes is in the backseat.”

“In a second,” Emily said.

Instead of getting dressed immediately or going into a catatonic state due to humiliation, Emily got out of the car. With her hands by her side, she slowly walked up to Greg and gave him a friendly hug.

“I’m sorry that I was rude to you a minute ago. Good to see you, Greg.”

Greg couldn’t find any words to reply.

Emily then strode to Ben and pulled his mouth to her. After a pressing her nude body fully against him and practically sucking his lips off his face, she broke off the kiss.

“Goodnight, lover,” she said and strutted back to the car exaggerating the movement of her hips as the boys’ eyes were glued to her departing butt. Beth would have laughed at the stunned expressions on their faces if her own face hadn’t mirrored theirs so well.

“What has gotten in to you?” Beth asked.

As Beth pulled away from their dumfounded boyfriends, Emily reached into the back seat and grabbed her clothes.

“Do you realize that I’ve been completely naked for almost twenty four hours?” Emily said as she slipped on her panties.

“Ah, those feel good.”

Emily finished getting dressed and told Beth all the details about her time with Ben. When she completed her tale, she asked, “anything new with you? How was the party?”

Beth told her about all that had happened at the cabin from the start of their performance through Julie’s one woman, four man, show. She told Emily about Kate going upstairs with Mike and about the other four cheerleaders promising to entertain the remaining players, then she said, “and sometime between the end of the party and me frantically calling Ben’s phone to find out your whereabouts, Greg and I officially started dating.”

Emily leaned over and hugged her cousin.

“What? That’s great. It’s about time!”

Then, she stopped and began to look concerned.

“Oh my God! I’m so sorry,” Emily said.

“For what?”

“For giving your boyfriend a naked hug. I wanted to make Ben a little jealous for playing that trick on me. I didn’t think about you and Greg’s relationship. I’m really sorry.”

Beth laughed.

“Honey, I’m not worried about you trying to steal my boyfriend. It’s okay. The look on his face was priceless.”

She laughed again.

“I wonder how Greg is feeling right now; he’s always thought of you like a little sister,” Beth said.

“He probably doesn’t think of me that way anymore. There was a distinct bulge in his pants when I hugged him.”

The girls laughed together.

As soon as Beth dropped her off and she got to her own room, Emily picked up the phone to call Ben. She was confused both by her own reaction and by Ben’s reason for pulling the prank in the first place.

“Ben, I can’t believe you did that!”

Ben burst out laughing.

“You completely deserved it, refusing to get dressed, pretending that being seen nude didn’t bother you. You have to admit that I gave you every opportunity to wrap a towel or blanket around yourself before we left. Heck, I practically begged you to.”

“But you let Greg see me naked. I thought that you’d be too jealous to let another boy see me,” Emily said.

“Why’d you think that? I’m not really the possessive type.”

“The whole thing with the party. You agreed to let me dance for you so that all the other guys wouldn’t see me naked. Right?” she asked.

“No. I agreed to it because I didn’t think that you could handle undressing in front of all of them. I wanted to protect you, not save your body for myself.”

“What about at the gas station, then? You wouldn’t let me go inside. You pleaded with me not to,” she said.

“Em, honey, you’re a smart girl and a good debater. You need to work on your poker skills, though. It was obvious that you were bluffing. I had to decide whether to call you on it or just give in to whatever it was that you were wanting.”

He laughed.

“I did imagine for a second what would happen if I would have handed you my wallet instead. I hadn’t realized before last night how stubborn you could be. I wondered for a moment if you might just actually go through with it. Whether you did it or whether you had to tell me that you couldn’t do it, I figured that it would be embarrassing to you either way. In the end, I guess that I decided that I would rather be humiliated than put you through it.”

With an explanation like that, it was hard to stay mad at him.

“So, what did you think of my reaction?” she asked.

“Truthfully?”

“Yes, please.”

“I wanted you so bad that it was hard to resist throwing you on the hood of my car and taking you right there.”

She laughed.

“Ben Miller! I can’t believe you said that.”

He laughed too.

“I can’t help it if I have a totally hot girlfriend.”

“I like the sound of that. Your girlfriend,” she said. “So, you gonna ask me out for next weekend or what?”

“We could do a traditional dinner and movie on Friday night?” he said.

“Sorry. No can do. Beth wants to do a cheerleading squad bonding night on Friday. I think that she wants to make sure that no one is seriously regretting their actions from last night.”

“Well, it looks like my Saturday is going to be completely booked, but I’ll probably be free by early evening. You up for something, then? We’d have to keep the time fairly flexible, though.”

“What are you going to be doing?” she asked.

“I have to fix the car. I don’t mind driving it for a week with the damage, but I need to get it dealt with as soon as I can. If the panel slips at all, it could start rubbing the tire. Anyway, it looks like it’s going to be an all day job, especially with the priming, painting, and all the waiting around for it to dry,” he said.

“Oh, Ben, I’m so sorry. Will it cost a lot? Is there anything that I can do to help?”

“Hey, I told you, it’s not your fault, and, no, it won’t cost hardly anything. I have plenty of paint, primer, and compound from when my dad and I painted it originally; the only thing that I have to buy is a couple of brackets that are too damaged to repair. I’ll get those from an auto salvage yard, though, so it won’t run me more than twenty dollars or so.”

“Can I help?” she asked again.

“It would be a long, boring day for you watching me pound out dents, but, sure, you can keep me company if you want.”

“Cool. What time do you want me to come over? I’ll have Beth drop me off.”

“Around ten or so? That will give me time to get a quick workout in before you get here,” he said.

“Sounds good.”

“Hmmm.”

“What?” she asked.

“Oh,” he said, “I was just thinking. If we’re going to be painting, we wouldn’t want to get your clothes stained. You might just have to take them off.”

“Ben!”

**Chapter 14**

On Monday morning, Roberta Wilson sent Carla Pederson a text message when she saw Emily exiting Ben’s Charger instead of her usual ride, Beth’s Civic. She sent another one when the two walked away from the parking lot holding hands with Ben carrying Emily’s book sack. Carla texted five of her closest friends, and, by the time the couple reached their lockers, the news was all over the school.

Bill Simon, who had been carrying a torch for Emily since the first day he had seen her at the start of their freshman year, clenched his fists when word of the new relationship reached him, but thought better of any action, though, when he visualized the size of the offensive tackle. Sam Turner took a more pragmatic view. The odds are that most teenage relationships don’t work out, and this turn of events meant the that delectable Emily was now officially a part of the school’s dating pool. Vince Thibodeaux, however, like most of the boys in the school, both liked and respected Ben and was happy that the shy senior was able to land such a major catch.

The reaction from the girls was vastly different from that of the boys. Beth nearly had to eviscerate one of the freshmen when she overheard the girl in the restroom talking about Emily. Beth understood that, though Emily was always as sweet as can be, a certain amount of jealousy permeated over her selection to the cheerleading squad at the end of just her freshman year, but those remarks were simply not called for!

Emily’s cheerleading friends tried their best to shield her from the remarks, but they couldn’t keep it a secret forever. She finally borrowed Beth’s phone from her purse and gasped as she looked through the text messages.

‘So, Marci is planning on stealing Ben out from under me, huh? And, Tracy thinks that Ben and I are too shy to do anything more than hold hands? We’ll see about that!’ she thought.

Even seated, Ben towered above most of the people in the cafeteria seating area, so she spotted him easily. He started to wave at her when he saw her approaching but cut the motion short, apparently puzzled by the expression on her face. She marched right up to him and, in front of practically the whole school, pulled his mouth down to hers and gave him a slow, smoldering kiss before walking away without saying a word.

The students burst out in applause.

‘The only thing that would have made that better,’ she thought, ‘was if I had been wearing my cheerleader outfit.’

It was the first time that she had ever actually wanted to seen wearing it.

By the end of the week, the newness of their relationship had worn out for the rumormongers, and Emily and Ben were left pretty much alone.

As promised, Emily had Beth drop her off at Ben’s house at around 10am Saturday morning. She found him out in the garage already under the car. She was glad that she had worn sweats, as it was a bit chilly in the unconditioned space. They weren’t much to look at, but they were warm. Plus, she had brought along a bag with a cute outfit that she could wear if they went out later. It was the best of both worlds.

“Hey, Loverboy, what are you doing?”

Ben grunted.

“Hey Em. Just taking off some bolts. I soaked it with PB Blaster, but they’re still a bit tight.”

He pushed himself out from under the Charger and stood up to embrace and kiss her.

“Good morning.”

“Ummm. Good morning to you too. What’s PB Blaster?”

“Have you ever heard of WD-40?”

“I think I’m seen my dad use that. It comes in a blue can, right?”

“That’s the one,” Ben said. “One of the uses of WD-40 is to help loosen bolts. PB Blaster does the same thing, only better. Have to be careful with it, though; it has a lot harsher fumes.”

“Okay. What can I do to help?” she asked.

“Not much really. Just keep me company.”

He climbed back under the car. It didn’t take too long for Ben to finish disconnecting the brackets holding the quarter panel on. He wore a white tank, and she liked the way that his muscles bulged as he worked. She marveled at how easily he picked up the big piece of metal and carried it to a work table.

‘I wonder how much that thing weighs?’

She pictured those huge hands manhandling her and sighed.

Ben set the panel down and picked up a small sledge hammer. He looked like he was just about to strike the metal when he abruptly stopped.

“This is going to be really loud. Did you want to go inside for a while?”

“No,” Emily replied, “I’d rather watch you.”

It was amazing how quickly she could go from barely noticing him being around to looking at him like he was a piece of meat.

She stuck her fingers in her ears. He smiled and began pounding out the dent.

‘Look at his attention to detail. Every little part has to be perfect,’ she thought.

Breaking only to eat sandwiches for lunch. Ben worked relentlessly. After the metalwork was completed to his satisfaction, he stripped off the old paint and applied primer. As he waited for it to be ready, he waxed the rest of the car and then buffed it off while the paint dried.

‘Look at the way that he caressed the car’s body. Should I be jealous?’ Emily thought.

By sundown, the panel was back on the car and looked as good as new. He and Emily cleaned up and got dressed in time to eat dinner and catch a movie.

The next weekend, Beth got a job house-sitting for neighbors who were going out of town. She invited Greg, Ben, and Emily over on Friday night.

When Ben and Emily pulled up to the house after dinner, Greg and Beth had just started watching “Step It Up 2” on DVD. Greg looked like he was being tortured and tried to take the opportunity provided by the other couple’s arrival as an excuse to stop the movie. Emily hadn’t seen it yet, however, and wanted to watch it. Ben, of course, supported her fully. With Greg outvoted three to one, the foursome got comfortable in the living room.

“Well, that was fun,” Greg said when the closing credits started to roll.

“Oh, come on. It wasn’t that bad,” Beth said. “Besides, it gave me some ideas for some new dance moves. Maybe I’ll show them to you later. In the bedroom.”

“Maybe it wasn’t as bad as I thought.”

Emily smiled at their banter. The movie hadn’t exactly been a cinematic masterpiece, but it did have a lot of dancing. She loved dance movies.

“So, what should we do now?” she asked.

Beth smiled slyly.

“There’s a pool out back.”

“A pool? It’s freezing outside,” Emily said.

“It’s heated. I put my foot in earlier. It feels heavenly.”

“Too bad I didn’t bring my swimsuit then,” Emily replied.

Emily expected Beth to offer one of her bikinis. She was already thinking that maybe it would be okay to parade around in a skimpy two piece. She wasn’t prepared for Beth’s suggestion.

“Who’s up for skinny dipping?”

The two guys agreed immediately and, along with Beth, were halfway to the back door before Emily was able to process the information.

“Last one in has to do a dare!” Greg shouted.

Emily hurried after them. She walked out to see her friends rapidly shucking their clothes. By the time first Greg’s, then Beth’s, and finally Ben’s bare butts had dived into the pool, she had removed her shoes and socks and unzipped her jeans. All three sets of eyes were glued to her as she pushed them down her legs.

‘I can do this. They’ve all seen me naked, anyway.’

She and Ben had slowed down since their first night together, deciding that they needed to get to know each other better as girlfriend and boyfriend rather than let their raging teenage hormones drive their relationship. Even Ben hadn’t seen her in her birthday suit for the last two weeks.

It seemed different, too, taking off her clothes in front of them. When Greg had seen her last time, she had been irritated at Ben for tricking her and was still awash in a glow of the day’s sexual activity. Those emotions weren’t present now. With no preparation, she was going from sitting in the living room watching a movie to stripping outside for the entertainment of her friends.

She stepped out of the pants revealing cute, pale pink panties and then pulled her shirt over her head. Her lacy bra matched the panties.

‘Am I really going to do it, strip with them watching me?’

She kept her gaze on Ben as she unhooked her bra and let it fall to the ground. It was easier that way, concentrating on her boyfriend. She pushed down the panties and stood there naked. She was about to jump in the pool when Greg stopped her.

“Not so fast,” he said. “You still owe us a dare.”

“He did clearly say that the last one in owed a dare,” Beth said.

Emily, feeling really stupid just standing there with everything exposed, turned to Ben.

“Hey,” he said, “if you really don’t want to…”

“No, it’s okay.”

She turned back to Greg.

“What did you have in mind?”

“Nothing major. How about you go down the slide?”

Emily could feel their gaze on her naked butt as she walked over to the ladder. The pool area was well lit, and she knew that the thin metal struts weren’t doing much to cover her as she started climbing.

Ben had seen much more of her than this and a lot closer up, and Beth was girl. She didn’t really worry too much about them. Greg was a different story.

‘He’s seeing more of me than he ever wanted,’ she thought. ‘Wait, he’s a guy. He’s probably not seeing as much as he wants!’

She blushed..

It wasn’t too bad until the height took her above the privacy fence.

‘Anyone at all can see me now!’

In her haste to get out of the potential view of the public, she didn’t even bother to try to preserve her modesty as she separated her legs to bring them from the ladder to the slide. She quickly launched her bare backside down the slippery surface.

Instead of submerging like she expected when she hit the water, she landed right in Ben’s waiting arms. With his height, he had no problem standing even in the six-foot water of the deep end.

He gave her a long kiss, and their tongues intertwined.

“Lay your head back and relax,” he told her.

Demonstrating her complete trust in him, she immediately did so.

He used his hands to caress her entire body. He teased her all over as she floated on the calm water. With one hand submerged and one hand over her, he traced his fingers lightly over her feet and legs. He stroked the inside of her thighs and massaged her behind.

She felt her body react to his touches. Her nipples grew erect, and she knew she was wet from more than just the water. Still he teased her.

He gently squeezed her breasts and rubbed her clitoris from the outside. He gave her ethereal kisses on her neck and, underwater, behind her ears. His hands were everywhere, never staying where she wanted, needed, them for long.

Her growing arousal made relaxing and, therefore, floating impossible, and she began to sink. She felt only the briefest sense of alarm before his arms caught her. He drew her body to him, and she wrapped her legs around his waist. They kissed, long and deep.

Somewhere she felt the movement but could concentrate only on her desire, her craving. Her lips were torn from his as she was lifted out of the water, and her butt made contact with the rough concrete. She gasped as his tongue entered her. She spread her legs and let him have his way. Finally, her back arched with release, and she uncontrollably raked her long fingernails across his shoulders. She couldn’t help but moan.

Dimly, she was aware of Greg and Beth looking at them, at her, but, at the moment, she was so lost in the afterglow that she didn’t care. Ben climbed out of the water, his enormous love muscle extended and dripping water. He picked her up and carried her inside.

She knew that he wanted to take her, to have his penis inside her. After he dried both of their soaking bodies, he laid her in bed and climbed in next to her. She was ready. She lay on her back and spread her legs, waiting. Instead, he pulled her close to him and embraced her. Holding and caressing her, whispering his love for her in her ear, until they both fell asleep.

Emily woke the next morning still in his arms. Once again, he had woken before her and was watching her as she slept.

“Ummm, good morning,” she said as he kissed her.

“Morning.”

“So, why didn’t you take me up on my offer last night?” she asked.

“That’s not the kind of decision that you should make on the spur of the moment. If, or when, it happens for us, I want it to be because we’ve both decided in advance that the time is right.”

**Chapter 15**

Christmas and New Year’s Day came and went, and the green buds of spring replaced the barrenness of winter. It was late March, after cheerleading practice, when Julie struck up a conversation with Emily.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you,” Julie said, “how’s the sex with Ben? I had the opportunity to feel him up once while he was hard. He’s huge. I bet with just a little bit of experience, he’d be awesome in bed.”

Emily stared at her in horror.

“What? Is the sex awesome?” Julie asked again.

Coming from anyone else, Emily would have been surprised or angry. With Julie, she couldn’t help but be amused. Instead of running away like she should have, she answered.

“We haven’t actually gotten that far.”

“What?!? Em, is there something wrong with him?”

“No, there definitely nothing wrong. We’ve played around; we just haven’t gone all the way.”

“Why ever not? He’s a stud. How can you play around with him and not want him in you?” Julie asked.

Emily blushed.

“I do, sometimes. When we play around, I’ve begged him to put it inside me, but he won’t. He says that we can’t make that decision in the heat of the moment. I have to tell him in advance.”

“That’s easy enough,” Julie said. “Go up to him now and tell him that you want him tonight. Sex is great! You’ll love it.”

“I’m not sure that I’m ready.”

Julie looked at her like Emily should be wearing a straightjacket.

“Would it help you if you had company? We could do a three-way.”

Emily blushed and shook her head emphatically.

“NO!”

“Hon, does he go down on you?” Julie asked.

Emily hesitated, but answered yes.

“Does he finger you?”

“Yes.”

“Then what’s the big deal. Well, in Ben’s case, I guess it is a BIG deal. Don’t worry. It won’t hurt much,” Julie said.

“I’m not really worried about it hurting,” Emily said. “It’s just… I don’t know…”

“Girl, if you want to keep him, you’ve got to do it.”

Emily’s shoulders tensed and her eyes narrowed.

“What do you mean?”

“I know that Ben is a nice guy,” Julie said, “but he is a guy. Guys want sex. If he doesn’t get it from you, he’ll get it somewhere.”

“Ben isn’t like that!”

“Em, honey, all guys are like that.”

Emily tried another approach.

“Ben wasn’t exactly getting a lot of experience before he started dating me, was he? He turned you down.”

“That’s because he had eyes only for you. Now that you’re dating, the newness will wear off. And, think about this: next year, he’ll be away at college around all those mature coeds. Do you really think that you can hold onto him without sex?”

Emily was mad at Julie but had to concede that she made a good point. She hadn’t wanted to think about Ben, and Beth for that matter, leaving her. How did she feel about Ben going off to school? Would he still want to date a virgin high school girl, practically a child, while surrounded by all those women so much more experienced than her? She thought hard about it for a few days before broaching the subject with Ben.

“So, prom?” she asked him.

“Yes? What is it?”

“It’s a big dance where people get all dressed up, but that’s not important right now,” she said.

He laughed so hard that she thought he was going to suffocate. Before being around Ben, she hadn’t known that people really do slap their knees in response to a joke, and it amazed her that, no matter how many times she made a similar “Airplane” reference, it always cracked him up. She couldn’t help but smile; he was such a lovable geek.

“Seriously, you haven’t asked me yet,” she said after he had regained his breath.

“We’ve still got a month, and I didn’t know if you’d want to go.”

“It’s only the biggest event of the year, and I’ll probably be the only sophomore invited. Why wouldn’t I want to go?”

He looked chagrined.

“Remember when we started dating, and I told you that I don’t have a lot of qualities that a teenage girl looks for in a boyfriend? Truth is, I don’t dance.”

“You have a lot of qualities that this teenage girl is looking for.”

She smiled at him, and his face lit up.

“I can teach you all that you need to know to get by. Besides,” she said, ”I was reading this romance novel…”

This was the hard part. Should she do it? Was she ready?

“And?” he prompted.

“Well, I’ve decided. I want you to ravish me.”

“Ravish, huh?”

“Yes. Ravish. I know that it’s a cliché, having sex after the prom, but it sounds nice.”

“I guess I’ll be renting a tux.”

It was a Friday night, just shy of two weeks before prom, when her dad called out to her.

“Emily?”

“Yes, Dad,” she said, walking into the living room.

“You know what tomorrow is, right?” he asked.

She looked at the date on the calendar.

“Oh! I had forgotten. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t feel bad. It’s good that you’re moving on. Still, though, are you going with me?” he asked.

She gave him a hug and a quick kiss on the cheek. This was one of the few things that they still shared, and he had been so nice about giving her what money he could to buy a prom dress.

“Of course. Let me call Ben and tell him that I won’t be available until the evening. We had been planning a picnic.”

Emily and her dad drove in silence, and she wondered what was going through his mind as they passed through the gates of the cemetery. Five years ago today, they had laid her mom to rest. Emily found it hard, sometimes, to even remember her face, her voice. What would things have been like if she had lived?

Her dad parked near the grave and grabbed flowers and a small book sack from the back seat. As had become their ritual, she walked with him until they reached a bench near the grave. She sat, allowing her dad some private time. As he approached on the way back, she could tell how emotionally draining this was for him. She looked away so that she wouldn’t see the tears still fresh on his face. Without a word, he sat next to her. She got up and trudged to the tombstone.

Emily hated crying, the loss of emotional control, and fought hard against it. She summoned up the anger she felt at her mom for leaving her. Why did she have to work so late on a Friday night? If she had come home earlier, the drunk wouldn’t have been on the road yet. Because her mom had to complete some stupid, meaningless assignment for a deadline, Emily had to grow up not knowing her mom and with a dad so devastated that he couldn’t make himself deal with the world.

She stared at the epitaph, “Beloved Wife and Mother.”

‘Did you love me, Mom? Did you? If so, why did you leave me?’

She struggled to keep the anger. She needed it. She wanted to hate. Hate would fuel the anger.

All Emily could think about was the summer before the accident when her parents had taken her to the beach. They had laughed so much. Though the images were fuzzy, she couldn’t help but see the love that her mom had had for both her and her dad. Despite her best efforts, Emily couldn’t hate. Before the sadness could completely overcome her, she went back to her dad.

“I haven’t done right by you, kid,” he said.

“What do you mean, Dad?”

She could see tears forming in his eyes again.

“After your mom died, I knew that I needed to pull myself together for your sake, but I couldn’t. I tried my best, but I couldn’t.”

He reached out to hug her, and she embraced him. She had seen her dad upset but never like this, never so demonstrative.

“I love you, girl, and I’m sorry that I haven’t been a better dad for you. You’re turning into a fine young woman. You’re smart, beautiful, and, most of all, you have a good heart. Your mom would be so proud of you.”

It was all Emily could do to choke back the tears.

“I’ve been debating something for a long time, and I’ve finally come to a decision,” he said. “Your mom kept diaries from the time that she was in junior high until shortly before she graduated college. I’ve always thought that it would be an invasion of her privacy to read them, so I never have.”

He paused.

“I think that, under these circumstances, she would have wanted you to read them so that you could get know her better. You’re so grown up, taking care of me and with a boyfriend of your own, that I think you’re old enough now. I want to give these to you.”

He handed her the book sack.

She started with the first one, and read all the way home. She dimly registered her father’s goodbye as he dropped her off at the house and left again saying something about a bar. She retired to her bedroom and pored through the journals, not even bothering to eat lunch and barely remembering to call Ben to cancel their date.

It was close to midnight when she finished. After stretching, the first thing that she realized was that she was starved. The second thing was that her dad was not home.

Her dad never stayed out late, and he absolutely had not once in the last five years left her alone and not knowing where he was. He knew how her mom’s accident had affected her, how much she worried if he was even a little late. She cursed the fact that he was too stubborn to buy a cell phone for himself.

She did the only thing that she could think of. She called Beth.

**Chapter 16**

Beth could tell that something was wrong as soon as she heard the tremble in Emily’s voice. She got in the Civic and rushed over.

“Do you think he’s been in an accident? What should we do?” Emily asked as she intercepted Beth on the doorstep.

“I’m sure he’s fine. If he had been in an accident, the police would have called you. Your best bet is to go to bed, and, hopefully, we’ll know something in the morning.”

“I couldn’t possibly sleep with the day that I’ve had and Dad missing…”

Emily told her about the trip to the graveyard and the journals.

“I’m marked some passages that you just have to read,” Emily concluded.

“They’ll be time for that later. First, you get cleaned up and ready for bed.”

Beth knew that she was treating her cousin like she was a child but felt that Emily needed Beth the surrogate mother now, not Beth the friend. When Emily returned from the bathroom wearing her nightgown, Beth escorted her to bed.

“We’ll just lay down for a few minutes,” Beth told her.

Beth turned out the lights and crawled under the covers with the younger girl. She held her tight and lightly rubbed her forehead. In less than five minutes, Emily was sleeping soundly.

‘That has worked like a charm ever since she was a baby,’ Beth thought.

With Emily resting peacefully, it was time for Beth to get to work. She had a suspicion that she knew exactly where her Uncle Joe was spending the night, especially this being the 5th anniversary of his beloved wife’s death. She also felt sure that, like she had told Emily earlier, the police would have called if he were in the hospital but not if he had been arrested. It didn’t hurt to check, though. She dug out the phone book and called each of the town’s three hospitals. However positive she was that he was fine, it was still a relief when her search turned up no one matching her uncle’s description.

‘Nothing for it but to wait,’ she thought and picked up the diaries. Turning to the first page that Emily had marked with a Post It note, she began to read.

March 23, 1988

Dear Diary,

Dan Morton asked me to go to prom with him today! He’s only the dreamiest senior on the entire football team, and he picked me. I’m the only sophomore that’s been invited. This is so exciting! Dad pretended that he was going to say no, but, instead, he gave me $300 for a dress! This is the best day EVER!

Beth had a hard time picturing Aunt Carol as a boy-crazy teenager. Though her aunt had always been fun loving and had a great sense of humor, she seemed so shy and reserved. Beth had assumed that she would have been more like her daughter in high school and be more reticent around boys. She turned to the next marked passage.

April 9, 1988

Dear Diary,

I thought that last night would have been the best night of my life. My dress was beautiful, and Dan looked so handsome in his tux. I thought that I was the luckiest girl alive. Now, I don’t know.

Dinner and the prom were great. He took me to Chez Mouton! I don’t know how he could afford that, and he twirled me around the dance floor all night. I’m surprised that I don’t have holes in my head from all the jealous stares from the other girls.

After we left, though, he took me to a hotel room. At first, it was really romantic. He made me stay in the car while he lit candles and turned on really nice music. Then he picked me up and carried me in the room! Talk about sweeping me off my feet. Though it was only our first date, I felt a connection with him, and he was so gorgeous. I mean, DAN MORTON!

As we sat on the bed, he leaned in and kissed me. It was divine! My first real kiss!

Then he moved down to my neck, gently caressing me with his lips. I started to feel all tingly, especially down there! It was only our first date, though, and I began to think that I should make him stop. He had spent so much money on me, and the prom was so nice! Didn’t I owe him something?

I didn’t stop him as he unzipped the back of my dress, not even when the top part fell down to my waist and my boobies were exposed. He went for them immediately, but he wasn’t rough. He stroked them really gently, and it felt really good! I was really embarrassed when my nipples hardened. He just smiled, though, and started licking them! Oh, it was heavenly. It felt so good!

I knew that I should stop him; sloppy second was well far enough for a first date. When I tried to speak, though, he kissed me on the mouth again. It’s hard to object with his tongue in my mouth!

He stood and pulled me up after him. With nothing holding it any longer, my dress fell to my ankles. I’m sure that my face turned red with me standing in front of him wearing only my panties, a garter belt, stockings, and high heels. I didn’t have long to dwell on it, as he drew me to him and kissed me again. I could feel that he was aroused too!

Before I knew it, his hands were on the waistband of panties. I tried to grab them to hold them up, but I was too late! He had them down around my ankles in a flash. I was naked!

As I tried to cover myself, he pushed me onto the bed. I tried to object as he took off his pants and underwear, but no words would come out of my mouth. Then he was on top of me! And then inside of me!

I laid there as he finished. Afterwards, he got me a washrag and handed me my clothes. I got cleaned and dressed silently, and he escorted me to the car. He dropped me off at my house with barely a word and no goodnight kiss.

I still don’t know what to think. He hasn’t called. Does he still like me? Does he think I’m a slut? I need to talk to him about last night.

Beth couldn’t believe it. Aunt Carol had been a victim of date rape. Did anyone know about this? She turned to the next section that Emily had selected for her.

April 25, 1988

Dear Diary,

It’s been over two weeks since prom, and Dan still hasn’t called me. He seems to be avoiding me in the halls. Fran says that she heard that he was talking about what happened to the other football players. I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to show my face again.

I’m also starting to get a little worried. I should have started my period last Friday. It’s probably stupid; it’s not like it’s never a few days late.

‘Oh no!’ Beth thought. ‘Surely that hadn’t happened to Aunt Carol…’

She skipped to the last passage with a Post It note.

May 28, 1988

Dear Diary,

I went to the clinic to have it taken care of today. It wasn’t an easy decision, but I had no other real choice. My parents would have killed me. It’s lucky that I was able to hide it from them. I’m so glad that Samantha understood and helped me with the money. I can’t believe that Dan wouldn’t even help with that! I hope that God will forgive me for what I did.

‘Aunt Carol had an abortion and my mom paid for it?’ Beth thought. ‘Between it being the anniversary of the accident, her dad being missing, and finding out that her mom was raped and had an abortion, Emily must be a wreck.’

She ended up sleeping on the couch with the phone close by.

It was nearly ten when Emily woke. Her first thought was to rush to her father’s room to see if he made it home during the night. Her heart sank when she found the empty bed. She tried to shut out all the possible tragedies that might have befallen him as she made her way to the living room. Hearing Beth snoring lightly on the couch, she tiptoed through to begin breakfast preparations. She hadn’t even finished getting out all the ingredients when the phone rang.

“Hello?” she answered, picking up the extension in the kitchen.

“This is a collect call from the Springfield Jail from – Joe Taylor. Will you accept the charges?” the automated voice at the other end of the line said.

She recognized the recorded snippet of her father’s voice. The sense of relief so overwhelmed her that she didn’t even register the “jail” part of the message.

“Yes. Please, yes,” she said.

“Emily, I’m so sorry to worry you. I did a very stupid thing last night,” Joe said.

Emily glanced up to see Beth enter the room.

“What happened, Daddy? Where are you?”

“I’m in jail, honey. I went to a bar last night and tried to drive home after having a few too many.”

“Daddy! How could you? After what happened to Mom…”

“I know. Believe me, I know. It was incredibly stupid. Can you forgive me?”

Emily was so relieved that he was okay that she couldn’t maintain her anger, even for him being idiotic enough to drive drunk.

“Of course. I love you. What happens now?”

“I’ve arranged to post bail tomorrow and to get a ride home. Can you stay with Beth until then? I’m sure that Samantha won’t mind,” he said.

Beth could hear the conversation and nodded without hesitation.

“Beth’s here now; she stayed over last night. She says her parents won’t mind.”

Something that her dad said registered.

“Why do you need a ride home?” she asked.

“I’m sorry to tell you this, but I was in a bit of an accident.”

Emily’s hand that was holding the phone started shaking.

“An accident? Are you okay? Was anyone hurt?”

“I’m fine. Just a few cuts and bruises, and I didn’t hit anyone else. The car is totaled, though, and there was some property damage. I was damn lucky; I can’t believe that I was so stupid,” he said.

She wanted to yell at him for risking his life like that, for taking a chance of leaving her orphaned. She could tell that he was beating himself up, though, so she held her tongue. He needed her support, not her anger.

“It’s okay, Daddy. The important thing is that you’re okay. I love you.”

“Thank you, Em. You’re a special girl.”

There was a pause on the line.

“Honey? The officer is telling me that my time is up. I’ll see you tomorrow. Bye.”

“Bye, Daddy.”

As she hung up, Beth walked over and gave her a hug.

“See, girl. It’s going to be okay.”

“I can’t believe that he was so stupid, though,” Emily said. “My faith in men isn’t all that high right now. Did you read about what happened to Mom when she was my age?”

“I did. But not all guys are like that. Ben and Greg certainly aren’t.”

“Greg, maybe. I’m not so sure about Ben,” Emily said.

“Emily! What are you talking about? Did Ben do something?”

“No, not really, but I was talking to Julie the other day…”

“About boys?” Beth interrupted.

Emily nodded.

“That’s a really bad idea. If you need advice on how to improve performance in bed; talk to her. Any other advice concerning men, stay far away,” Beth said.

“But she made some good points. She told me that guys all really like sex. That’s true, right? Is Ben going to stay with me next year when he’s away at college if I refuse to do it with him?”

“Em, I chose Ben to witness your dance because he was literally the only guy that I trusted with you and that was before I saw how he treats you since you started dating. I’ve never seen a guy so head over heals, except maybe the way your dad was for your mom.”

“Well, he wasn’t planning on taking me to the prom until I promised to have sex with him afterwards.”

Beth looked shocked.

“He made you promise to have sex with him before he would agree to take you to prom?”

“It wasn’t exactly like that, but sort of…”

“Emily! How was it exactly?”

“We were talking about the dance and whether he was going to take me, and I told him that I wanted him to ravish me after the dance. It wasn’t until I told him about the sex that he said he’d take me.”

“I see,” Beth said. “And this was very serious conversation?”

“No,” Emily admitted, “it was kind of joking.”

“Do you really think that he’s only taking you because you agreed to have sex? Do you think that, if you called him right now and said that you changed your mind, he’d refuse to take you?”

Emily knew in her heart that Ben wasn’t like the guy who had slept with her mom, but, between learning about the abortion and her dad’s incredibly moronic actions, she was feeling mad at all men.

“No,” she said softly.

“Emily, only you can decide when you’re ready. If you love Ben and want to share this with him, go ahead. If you’re not ready, just tell him; he’ll understand. And, don’t project your anger at others onto him. He deserves better from you.”

“You’re right.”

It didn’t ease her anger much, however, and she was fairly short with Ben when she called to tell him that she’d be staying with Beth and riding to school with her on Monday.

**Chapter 17**

Ben moped around his room for several hours on Sunday afternoon after talking with Emily. Finally, he could stand it no longer and called Greg to talk.

“Emily is breaking up with me,” Ben said.

“What happened?”

“I don’t know.”

“She’s breaking up with you, and you don’t know why?” Greg said. “I don’t understand.”

“First, she canceled our plans for a picnic on Saturday afternoon, then she called off our date for that night, and she called me this morning to tell me she’d be riding to school with Beth on Monday.”

“Let me get this straight, Ben. Because something apparently came up and she couldn’t see you this weekend, you think she’s dumping you? Get a grip, man.”

“It wasn’t just that. It was the way she talked to me, like I wasn’t important. She even sounded mad at me for the last phone call.”

“Emily wouldn’t be mad at you for no reason. Did you do something?” Greg asked.

“No, I didn’t do anything. She’s a teenage girl, for God’s sake. She probably just changed her mind about wanting to go out with me,” Ben replied.

“Come on. Emily’s not like that. Besides, it’s two weeks before prom; there’s no way that she’d break up with you right before the social event of the year without a darn good reason.”

Greg paused.

“Look, it’s one of two things. She’s either upset about something that has nothing to do with you, or you did something stupid that you don’t even know about. I could tell you some stories about stuff Beth found offensive when I was, like, you’ve got to be kidding me. Feel her out Monday at school. If it’s the former, just be there for her. If it’s the latter, apologize, even if you didn’t do anything wrong.”

Greg was making a lot of sense.

“I guess it’s like the Wizard’s First Rule,” Ben said.

“What?”

“It’s a book by Terry Goodkind. The rule, paraphrased, says something like people will believe any lie if they’re afraid that it might be true,” Ben replied.

“Exactly, you’re afraid she might break up with you so you think that she is going to,” Greg said. “You’re a wise and intelligent man when you’re not being an idiot.”

Emily knew that it was wrong of her, but she avoided Ben at school on Monday. Beth was right; he had done nothing wrong. She hated being irrational and felt stupid for the way that she was feeling, which, of course, made her even madder. Her best bet was to not deal with him for a while.

She practically ran into the house when Beth dropped her off. Seeing her dad seated on the couch, she rushed over to him and gave him a huge hug. She only let go when she noticed that he tensed up, and she realized that she was hurting him.

“Dad, you’re hurt!”

“It’s nothing. Like I said, a few bumps and bruises. The seat belt left a bit of a mark, and you were squeezed up against it. No big deal.”

She looked him over. There were a couple of scratches on his face and a knot on his forehead. Beyond the physical damage, she could see guilt and sadness in his countenance.

“Tell me what happened,” she said, sitting down beside him.

“Not much to tell. I went to a bar downtown intending to have a couple of beers to take my mind off things, had too many drinks, and, like an idiot, thought that I could drive myself home. The details are fuzzy, but, for some reason, I swerved and ended up crashing into a shop. The car went through the building façade, damaging a bunch of merchandise. The accident triggered an alarm in the store, and the police arrested me for DUI. I’m lucky that I didn’t kill myself or someone else.”

She took his hand and held it.

“It’s okay. We all do stupid things.”

“I’m glad you’re being so good about this. You’re more understanding than I have any right to expect. There is more, though. I contacted a lawyer who talked to the DA for me.”

Emily’s pulse jumped. She had been so glad that her dad was all right that she hadn’t thought about possible consequences.

“There was a lot of damage done to the shop, over $10,000 worth. If I pay restitution, I can take a plea deal and get probation with community service to go with the loss of my driver’s license for a year. If not, the store owner will press charges for damaging her property, and I’ll be incarcerated for up to two years.”

“Do you have enough money? Can I do anything? I can get a job,” she said.

“I’m sorry, Em. You getting a job won’t help. I have to come up with the cash in the next month, and I don’t have it. I’ve already talked to Samantha. She doesn’t have it either. I don’t see any way to avoid jail.”

Emily couldn’t help but think, ‘What will happen to me?’ She realized, though, that, no matter what hardships she would have to endure, it would be nothing compared to her dad having to spend years in prison. Being careful not to hurt him, she buried her head in his shoulder and embraced him.

“I know that this is hard for you,” he said, “but it will be okay. Samantha has agreed to take you in. She and Bill are staying here in town until Beth graduates, so you’ll be able to finish out the school year before they move.”

Emily tried to block thoughts of herself out of her mind but couldn’t. Even though Ben, Beth, and Greg were leaving, she still had a lot of friends at school. She was popular and a cheerleader here. At a new school, she’d have to start over. Cheerleaders were normally chosen at the end of one year; there’s no way she’d be able to get on a squad for her junior year. This was horrible.

Her poor dad, though. She had seen The Shawshank Redemption; she knew what kind of things happened in the big house. How would he be able to deal with it?

They stayed on the couch, holding each other, for a long time.

It was a long and emotional evening and night. Between the worry about her dad going away and about her moving across the country, she barely slept at all. If anything good at all could have been said to arise from the situation, it was that the anxiety and sadness she felt about her dad’s plight overwhelmed her unreasonable anger at Ben. She resolved that she would end his banishment on Tuesday.

She had it all planned out in her head what she would say to him. Obviously, she would start by apologizing profusely and follow up with an explanation of exactly what was bothering her. He would explain in great detail how much of a silly goose she was being, and all would be well.

When she saw him standing in the hallway, all her plans evaporated. Is he mad at her? She basically hadn’t spoken to him the entire weekend and had deliberately avoided him on Monday, and, for all he knew, she had no reason.

‘I would be mad at me,’ she thought.

The expression on his face when he saw her coming toward him wasn’t anger, though.

‘Why does he look so scared?’

She couldn’t help but remember how it felt to be in his embrace, how safe and secure it was. The emotion from the past few days caught up with her. She tried to open her mouth to speak, but she couldn’t. All she wanted was for him to hug her, to let her know that everything would be okay. Without a word, she threw her arms around him.

He hesitated for a moment before reciprocating the hug.

“Whatever it was that I did, I’m sorry,” he said.

She looked up at his face. She treated him like crap for days, and he was apologizing to her? She snuggled her head deeper into his chest and resisted the temptation to let him take the blame.

“It wasn’t you; it was me. I had some pretty intense family stuff going on and needed some space. That’s all.”

He gripped her tighter and kissed the top of her head.

“Anything that you want to talk about?”

“No. Not right now.”

“I’m here if you need me,” he said.

“I know. This is what I need.”

He stood there holding her until she finally relaxed her grip.

“Thanks,” she said. “I’m so sorry about canceling our date and the picnic. Rain check?”

“I’m free next Saturday…”

“Sounds great… Oh, wait, I promised Liz that I would help her with some techniques. Cheerleader tryouts are just around the corner. Late afternoon would be fine, though.”

“Liz?” Ben asked.

“Do you know Liz Appleton? She’s a freshman.”

“I know her. TJ has a thing for her.”

“Your brother has a crush on Liz? Really? I didn’t know that,” Emily said.

“It’s not something that he advertises…”

Ben stopped talking and a strange look came over his face. What was he thinking?

“Liz’s friend, Jeff, he’s not going to be there, is he?”

“I think that Jeff is her stepbrother. As far as I know, he’s not.”

“Good. Em, I want you to promise me something. Do not hang around with that guy. He’s trouble, and I don’t think it’s safe. Promise me that you’ll call me immediately if he shows up with her.”

“Okay. No problem.”

Ben looked her in the eye.

“I mean it, Em. Promise me that you’ll call.”

He was usually so docile. She liked it when he took charge.

“Okay. I promise.”

“So, can I give you a ride to school tomorrow?” he said.

“I’d like that.”

Ben smiled at her.

“I love you.”

**Chapter 18**

Ben had scarcely finished shaking hands with Mr. Taylor when Emily walked into the living room. Any time that he saw Emily, he couldn’t help but be in awe of her beauty, but, tonight, she was absolutely amazing. He had expected her hair to be fixed up and curled, the way the girls seemed to prefer it for dressy occasions. Instead, her blonde locks were left straight and fell to the middle of her back, just the way he liked it.

There seemed to be a twinkle in her eye as she watched him admire her in stunned silence, but it could have just been the reflection of her shiny, pale-blue dress that matched the color of her eyes so perfectly. He was having a hard time believing that it was his shy girlfriend standing before him wearing this off the shoulder gown that exposed so much of her cleavage and came down to only mid-thigh on her bare legs. He had also never seen her wear such high heels, blue of course, and wondered how she was going to dance in those things.

“So?” she finally had to prompt him.

“You look incredible. I can’t find words to even begin to describe how beautiful you are.”

His comment seemed to please her as her face beamed, making her look even more lovely.

As he held out his elbow for her to take, he noticed Emily’s Dad’s expression. For a second, Ben thought that Mr. Taylor was going to say something, possibly about his daughter’s clothing, or lack thereof. Instead, he shook his head and opened the door for them.

Emily gave her dad a quick peck on the cheek, and Ben led her to his car, holding the door open for as she got in.

Once they were safely in the Charger, Ben turned to her.

“Em, that dress…”

“You like it? Beth helped me pick it out.”

“I love it, but, well, there’s not much of it. Aren’t you, uh, cold?” Ben finished lamely.

He had wanted to ask her if she was embarrassed but decided not to put that thought into her head. She looked so sexy.

She smiled at him.

“No. I think it’s warm enough tonight. In fact, you seem to be sweating.”

He knew that she was teasing him. Her voice shook a little bit with her next statement, though.

“I decided that I we’re going to play a little game tonight. Each time you do a certain thing, I owe you an article of clothing. I’m only starting with three pieces if we count the shoes as one, so you’d better figure out the action pretty darn quick.”

She arched her backside off the seat and hiked her skirt up to her waist. As he tried to keep as much attention as possible on the road, she slowly pulled down her royal blue thong. Once she had slipped it over her shoes, she handed it to him. He absently stuck it in his jacket pocket.

“That’s for the first time,” she said.

Over the past six months, he had seen her naked many times. Literally every curve, every fold of skin, was burned into his memory. It amazed him how he still couldn’t get enough of seeing her.

“You’re going to the prom without underwear? Are you sure?” he asked.

She smiled at him.

“Well, unless you do the action two more times first, then I’ll be going naked.”

He laughed. He loved it when she was in a teasing mood. Still, he wanted to make sure that she was really okay with it. He had never seen her wear so little in public.

“Seriously?”

“It’s okay. Really. I know that the skirt is short, but it’s also stiff. It won’t accidentally flare up. As long as I’m careful about sitting down, I’ll be fine,” she said.

“Even with underwear, that dress wouldn’t leave much to the imagination.”

She blushed at his comment.

“You like it, though. Right? I haven’t exactly been the best girlfriend lately, and I wanted tonight to be really special for you.”

“Em, the night is really special because I’m with you. You don’t have to do anything that makes you uncomfortable.”

Her face lit up at his response.

“It’s not that bad. I know what some of the other girls are wearing, and this won’t be the most revealing outfit there, believe me. It’s something that I want to do for you. You do like that I’m wearing this?”

“Very much so. You are so hot. I can’t believe it,” he said.

She positively beamed.

“So, what’s the plan? You haven’t told me much about what we’re going to do tonight.”

“To start with, we’ll be dining at Chez Mouton.”

He expected her to be very excited. Though the prom was being held in Springfield, about a forty-five minute drive from their small town, he didn’t expect that many of his classmates would be able to score reservations for one of the finest restaurants in the area. Luckily, the Tech football coach had connections and was willing to hook him up.

He glanced at her hoping to see a pleased expression on her face. Instead, she had a really weird countenance that he couldn’t interpret. Had he done something wrong?

“Should I have picked a different place to eat? I can cancel, and we can go somewhere else.”

Slowly, a smile returned to her face.

“No, it’s fine. It’s great, really. I’ve heard good things about it; the name just triggered a not nice memory That’s all.”

“It’s really no big deal. I know of this nice trattoria that could fit us in on short notice,” he said.

“No. Please. I’ve always wanted to eat there. Let’s go.”

She hesitated a second before continuing.

“How can you afford it? I’ve heard it’s really expensive.”

“I’ve been saving up. I want tonight to be special, too.”

As they pulled into town, he tried to sound casual as he said, “You know, this isn’t such a bad drive. It’s certainly easy to make the trek on weekends, and it’s not even too far for the occasional weeknight.”

They hadn’t really discussed yet him going off to college next year. He hoped that she intended to keep going out with him but had his doubts that she would be willing to put up with a long distance relationship.

She seemed to instantly know what he was getting at.

“If it’s okay, I’d rather not discuss that tonight. Let’s enjoy the moment, okay?”

He pretended to be occupied with paying attention to the car in front of him for a moment so that she couldn’t see his face.

“No problem, I understand,” he said.

As he pulled into the parking lot at the restaurant, she said, “Look, the sign says valet parking only. What are you going to do?”

“I’ll pull up to the guy and tell him that I prefer to park it myself. I’ll tip him anyway, so I’m sure that it won’t be a problem.”

“Why don’t you drop me off at the stand? That way, I don’t have as far to walk.”

He thought her response was a bit odd but didn’t give it too much consideration. She got out of the car when the valet opened the door for her, and he explained the situation to the attendant. As he expected, the guy didn’t put up much of a fight, and Ben was able to park it himself.

As the hostess greeted him, he couldn’t help but stare at Emily as she stood waiting for him.

‘How could such a gorgeous creature be my girlfriend?’ he thought.

He was worried that she was going to break up with him soon and had to fight not to let it make him depressed.

‘This very well could be my last night with her; I have to make the best of it while I can.’

He bent and kissed her, and placed his hand on the small of her back as the maitre de escorted them to their table. Ben tried not to wince as he looked at the menu and hoped that this was the kind of place who gave the women ones without prices. Otherwise, he would never be able to convince Emily to order.

She seemed discomfited by the poshness of her surroundings. She did, however, rave about her fancy grilled chicken salad, and Ben could tell that she was impressed when the waiter used some kind of metal device to sweep all the crumbs off the table.

“Dessert?” he asked.

She winked at him and blushed slightly.

“I’ll give you your dessert later.”

It was Ben’s turn to blush.

He made it a point to not let her see the bill and paid their waiter with folded currency. He knew that she would feel bad if she found out how much of his hard-earned money was going towards this meal.

When they reached the valet stand, Emily told him, “I’ll stay here, and you can pick me up.”

‘That’s really odd. It’s almost like she’s…’

He turned and winked at her before proceeding to the car.

**Chapter 19**

Emily realized that Ben had figured it out when he winked at her. Waiting at the valet stand had been risky, but walking to the Charger with him would have been worse. Once they got there, how would she have been able to prevent him from opening the door for her? Then she would have had to give him her shoes. At least, this way he could decide if he was going to make her give up more clothing.

She hoped that he would let the attendant open the door for her, and not insist on doing it himself when they got to the prom. She knew that he wouldn’t do both, but, if he did either, she’d have to dance all night with bare feet. She would do whatever he decided, though.

He pulled the car up and made no move to get out. The valet opened her door, and she noticed that Ben stared at her crotch as she got in. She couldn’t help but be slightly embarrassed, but it was just Ben. It’s not like he hadn’t had the same view many, many times and in much better lighting conditions.

She wasn’t used to going commando, though. She felt like everyone was looking at her and knew that she wasn’t wearing panties. And the top was indecently low. The waiter had stared at her cleavage every time he came to their table. She had thought about moving the napkin from her lap to her neck but saw how Ben reacted. Instead, she had made it a point to lean forward whenever the guy was near.

She liked the hunger that she saw in Ben’s eyes. He was normally so reserved. Whenever they had private time away from prying parents, he always drove her crazy before satisfying her needs. Though he occasionally let her give him a hand job, it wasn’t the same. He never lost control like she did. When she slipped off her thong earlier, he had looked capable of losing control.

In a way, she liked the thought that she could make him want her so much. On the other hand, she couldn’t help but think about what happened to her mother, and imaging this giant of a man full of unrestrained lust scared her. She remembered reading the novel 1984 for class earlier in the year.

‘This must be what Orwell meant by doublethink,’ she thought.

She did her best to suppress the negative feelings and focused on having a good time with her date. She knew that Ben was safer for her than any guy she could ever meet. Who else would be so gentle and patient with her? She simply had to treat him better. She knew she had already hurt his feelings once this evening by blowing off his attempt to talk about the future; she hadn’t wanted to tell him yet about her moving out of state.

Ben pulled into the convention center parking lot and asked her, “Do you want me to drop you off at the front?”

“That’s okay; I don’t mind walking.”

After he parked, he grinned at her.

“I can open your door for you if you like?”

She almost laughed.

“I think that I can manage.”

Relieved that he had let her keep her shoes, she strolled hand in hand with him into the dance. She noticed that a lot of guys turned toward her when they saw her dress. Ted Johnson’s date even had to slap him to get his attention back.

Emily’s heart rate quickened.

“Ben,” she whispered, “is this dress too revealing?”

Instead of answering right away, he stopped, cupped her face in his massive hand, and gave her a long, deep kiss.

“The dress is absolutely perfect. Every guy in this room wants to be with you, and I can’t believe that you’re here with me.”

She didn’t know if she liked the concept of a lot of guys wanting her; it made her even more conscious of how much of her breasts were showing and of the air passing over her dampening, unclad nether regions.

‘Can any of them tell that I’m not wearing anything under this?’ she thought.

She felt her nipples harden.

‘Maybe I have more in common with Beth than I knew.’

With her increased arousal, she became more enthusiastic about the effect her exposure was having on Ben. His eyes were slightly dilated, and she could see a bump forming in his pants.

“I saw this old movie once where people were dancing and the guy drug his partner through his legs and tossed her up into the air,” he said. “Can we try that?”

She smiled sweetly at him.

“Try it, and you’re dead.”

He laughed and held out his hand to her.

“May I have this dance?”

The DJ was playing “Truly, Madly, Deeply” by Savage Garden as he led her onto the dance floor.

‘This is our first real dance. This will now always be our song.’

Though she had tried hard to teach Ben modern steps, he had no sense of rhythm. The best that she had been able to achieve was to have him hold her while doing simple three or four step movements. Good thing a slow song was playing.

She willingly left the floor with him when the DJ put on “The Chicken Dance.”

‘What is this, a wedding reception?’ she thought.

She laughed at the couples still on the floor as Ben went for punch. For the rest of the evening, he would occasionally ask for her hand when a slow song would come on. Otherwise, they enjoyed each other’s company and talked with Beth and Greg and Julie and her dates.

Emily liked watching her cousin during the more upbeat numbers. She and Greg moved well together. She laughed as Beth flashed her panties on more than one occasion. Funny that Beth was wearing underwear while she wasn’t!

All too soon, the party was over, and Ben escorted her back to the Charger. As she reached for the door handle, he stepped past her and grabbed it first.

“Not this time,” he said.

She smiled as she got in.

“Well?” he said once he had gotten settled.

She slipped off her shoes and handed it to him. Only one more item to go. Anticipation heightened her arousal.

“Where to now?” she asked.

He mumbled something.

“What’s that? I couldn’t hear you.”

He kept his eyes straight ahead on the road.

“I have a reservation at the Marriot.”

He was so, so cute when he was embarrassed.

“That seems a little presumptuous,” she said.

“But you said that…”

“I know, silly. I was just teasing.”

She could see the tenseness in his shoulders ease.

After he parked at the hotel, he leaned over and kissed her.

“I love you so much,” he said. “I’m going to register and get everything ready. You hang tight for a few minutes and don’t even think about touching that door handle.”

She heard him open and close the trunk and watched him enter the building. Goosebumps formed on her arms and legs.

‘Did he mean what I thought he meant?’

At least ten minutes passed before he exited the building. She had to fight the urge to get out before he returned.

He surprised her by getting in the car and driving around back. She waited for him to circle around and open her door.

‘This is it,’ she thought.

He kissed her deeply again.

“I believe that you owe me something.” he said.

Did he really mean for her to strip here? If she objected, she would know that he wouldn’t demand it. She resisted the temptation to chicken out.

‘Trust him.’

She turned her back to him.

“Could you help? It’s hard to reach.”

She felt his massive fingers fumbling with the small tab. Then she heard the unmistakable sound of the slider descending the zipper teeth. The pressure around her chest loosened, and she could feel the cool air on her back. As the zipper completed its drop, the top of the her dress fell to her waist, and her breasts were exposed. Not stopping to think about what she was doing, she gave the garment a final push, and the fabric slid down her legs to land in a puddle at her feet. She stepped out of it as Ben picked it up and locked it in the car.

She turned back to face Ben and the hotel. She couldn’t help but notice all the room lights that were still on. Anyone could be at one of those windows, devouring her nude body with their eyes, seeing her bare breasts with her hard nipples and looking at her trimmed pubic hair.

She moaned as Ben gently laid his hand on her butt, caressing it and slightly pushing her in the direction of the building at the same time. She ached for his touch on her and grabbed his free hand, trying to force it onto her engorged clitoris. It wouldn’t budge. The pressure on her backside increased. She didn’t care; she wanted him now!

“Inside,” he whispered.

Reluctantly, she lurched forward. The movement helped break her from her stupor. She realized how exposed she was.

‘I have to get to cover.’

Her pace quickened, and she was glad that Ben parked so close to the door. He quickly inserted a card key and opened it for her. She stepped into an enclosed stairwell.

“Which way?” she asked.

“One floor up. Follow me.”

He stopped when he reached the second floor landing.

“Wait here for a second,” he said.

Ben walked through to the corridor, momentarily leaving her alone. She didn’t have time to panic, however, as he quickly returned.

“The coast is clear. Let’s go.”

He led her a short way down the hall before opening up one of the rooms with his card. Relieved to be out of potential public view, she rushed inside.

Ben had already prepared the room. All the lights were out, and dozens of small candles provided the only illumination to the space. A clock radio played mood music. Emily was instantly struck by the further similarities between her prom night and her mom’s. She shook her head to try to dislodge the thoughts that sought to ruin the rest of her evening.

Ben grabbed her from behind and began rubbing his hands up and down her body. She gasped as his finger brushed against her breast and moaned as her massaged her clit, but fought to urge to give in to his touches. She wanted him to desire her as much as she did him.

He seemed perplexed when she led him to a chair across from the bed and indicated for him to sit down. She backed away from him and began moving her body to the rhythm of the music. His eyes widened when she caressed her own breasts and teased her nipples. Encouraged, she moved her hands lower and touched herself. She was soaking wet!

‘What am I doing?’ she thought. ‘I’m full on masturbating in front of him.’

Surprised by her own action, she took a step back. Since she had forgotten that she was so close to the bed, she tripped and fell back on it. With her lying on her back, her legs spread wide, Ben must have taken as an invitation. She saw him grab a package containing an XXL Trojan and begin to unbuckle his pants.

An image of her mom in the same position popped into her mind, and, for an instant, the vision melded with her. She could feel her mom’s fear and doubt. As Ben/Dan moved toward her, she screamed.

“NO!”

She rolled off the bed and ran to the bathroom, slamming the door in her wake. Moments later, she heard a knock.

“Go away! Just stay away from me,” she yelled.

Trying to shake off her sexual haze and the aftereffects of her hallucination, she turned on the shower and stepped in. It was at least a half hour later before she shut off the water and wrapped a towel around herself.

Emily didn’t fully know what to expect when she stepped out of the bathroom. Should she apologize for her behavior? How could she explain what happened? Would Ben be mad at her? What she really didn’t expect was for him to be gone.

Her dress, shoes, thong, and the overnight bag she had stowed in the Charger earlier in the week were all sitting on the bed, and Ben was nowhere to be seen.

‘He didn’t get what he wanted, so he left me,’ she thought.

**Chapter 20**

Ben felt guilty for leaving Emily without a ride, but he knew that she had her cell phone in her purse. She could easily call Beth. Besides, the room was paid for through the night; someone should get use out of it.

While driving the dark, deserted back roads to his house, he couldn’t help but dwell on the events of the evening. He had been shocked by her actions. One minute, she was deliberately teasing him, getting him all worked up, and, the next, she was running away from him.

It had confused him greatly at first, but he figured it out quickly. Obviously, she had been planning on breaking up with him soon but had decided that she would sleep with him first. A pity fuck, he believed they called it. She must have gotten scared at the last minute and decided to back out. He wished she would have explained how she was feeling; he hated leaving on bad terms with her.

What he still didn’t understand, however, was the scream and the look that she had given him before rolling off the bed. Both had been filled with such fear, anger, and even hate. He realized that she often got angry for no apparent reason, which was annoying but not a huge problem. What could he have done to make her afraid of him, though? He loved her; how could she hate him?

When she had told him to go away, he did. He knew that she wouldn’t want to deliberately hurt him and was probably groping for a way to break up with him without leaving hard feelings. He decided that the best bet would be to leave, that way she didn’t have to deal with it. He made sure to return all her clothes and get the overnight bag out of the car before departing.

The night played over and over in his mind, especially her screaming and glaring at him. He couldn’t stand the thought of her hating him, even if he had given her no reason.

He was barely aware of how heavily his foot was leaning on the accelerator until he glanced at the speedometer and saw that he was pushing eighty miles per hour on a curvy road with a forty-five mile per hour limit.

He knew the highway well. He visualized the next curve, rated at thirty-five. It was right before a bridge, and the land beside the pavement dipped into a steep ravine with a low fence and an old oak tree on the other side. He often wondered if his Charger would be able to clear that fence if he were going fast enough.

He punched the gas petal and watched as the red needle hit one hundred twenty.

“Just two good ole boys…” he sang quietly to himself.

He could see the Charger, black instead of the orange General Lee, launching into the air. Only this time, there would be no cut away to a new vehicle after it landed. This time, the car would be a mangled heap of twisted metal wrapped around a tree.

Would he survive, he wondered, if he left his seat belt on? Better to unfasten it after leaving the ground.

He raced toward the curve. At what point would be too late to pull back even if he wanted to?

He didn’t think of his family or his friends or the bright future that he would be throwing away. He did think of Emily, though.

How would she feel about this? Would she blame herself? She would. She would feel responsible for the rest of her life.

Years of experience with high speed driving had taught him that slamming on the brakes would result in a loss of control. Instead, he downshifted. He winced as he heard the strain on the transmission, but it couldn’t be helped. He was close to the curve, too close.

He drifted as far to the outside of his lane as he could. His only option would be to cut hard to the inside lane. He prayed that no one would be traveling in the opposite direction around the curve at that exact moment because it would mean disaster for both of them.

Still traveling way too fast, he wrenched the steering wheel to the left. He felt the rear tires slip a little. If they lost too much traction, he would fishtail and could end up crashing into the ditch doing three-sixties. He heard the squealing and smelled the burnt rubber, but his investment in high-performance radials paid off.

Once he was safely around the curve, he was able to slow down, and, with his heart beating rapidly, make his way home.

A little over two weeks passed with Ben and Emily studiously avoiding each other. Even Beth and Greg couldn’t get any details out of either of them, though not for lack of trying.

On Tuesday, Joe Taylor called the school and told them that Emily wasn’t going to be attending that day. Instead, both dressed in their Sunday best and went to the courthouse.

Emily couldn’t help but be anxious when she entered the building. Would this be the last time that she saw her dad outside of a prison for a long time? Her dad’s attorney had called late last week and set up this meeting with the prosecutor. He had been a vague on the details, and neither Emily or her dad knew if this was the day that he would begin serving his sentence.

She took a handkerchief out of her purse and dabbed at her eyes. She had went nearly five years without shedding a tear after her mom was laid to rest. For the past two weeks, she hadn’t made it through a single day without crying.

Joe shook his lawyer’s hand as soon as he walked in the room and somberly took his seat. Emily quietly sat in an out of the way chair in the back.

“Mr. Taylor,” the assistant district attorney said, “I have the paperwork for your plea agreement prepared. Your representative has already read through it and okayed it. By signing here, you are admitting to criminal charges of driving under the influence. You will lose your license for a period of one year, perform one hundred hours of community service, and be placed on probation for three years.”

“I don’t understand,” Joe said. “What about the restitution?”

“According the my records, the restitution has been paid,” the DA said while pulling out a sheet of paper from the file on his desk.

“May I see that?” Joe asked.

Emily saw her dad scan the document. He turned to her.

“Emily, this says that Benjamin F. Miller paid the money last week. Ben Miller. That’s your boyfriend, right?”

Emily didn’t know what to say. How could Ben have paid it? Where would he have gotten the money? How did he even know about it? Why would he have done it?

Without much further conversation, Joe signed the necessary paperwork. After some discussion of the requirements of his community service and probation, Emily’s dad was allowed to leave the courthouse a free man.

The confusion that Emily felt at first was replaced by joy for her dad by the time they got outside. She hugged him, and they both laughed and cried. She had never been so relieved in her life. Her dad wasn’t going away! She would be able to stay here and continue to be a cheerleader.

During the ride home, thoughts about Ben interrupted her celebration. Surely he didn’t think that she was going to sleep with him because he had prevented her dad from going to jail. Did he think she was some kind of prostitute? Her anger at him had almost subsided to the point where she missed his company; most of the tears that she had shed had not been for her father. Now, she felt the anger returning.

Her dad had borrowed Beth’s car for the trip into Springfield. The plan was for Greg to drop her off after school to pick it up. Emily would make Beth give her a ride to Ben’s house; she wanted to confront him.

As expected, Beth had been fine with the idea of giving her a ride. Once they were in the car, she said, “Good, you two need to talk, anyway. Any particular reason that it has to be now, though?”

Emily spit out her words.

“He paid my dad’s fine.”

“Oh, Em, that’s great news, but why do you sound so mad?”

Emily didn’t respond, and Beth pulled the car over to the side of the road.

“Emily Taylor, I don’t know what happened between the two of you, and I don’t really care. I do care, however, that you’re acting like a spoiled child. Ben Miller is one of the nicest, kindest people that I have ever met. He certainly doesn’t deserve to have you treating him like this. If you’re not planning on being nice to him, I’ll turn this car around right now, and you can find another ride.”

“You weren’t there. You don’t know what he did.”

“You’re right,” Beth said. “I wasn’t there. I don’t know anything about it; neither you or Ben will tell me anything about it. I do know both of you, however. You are quick to anger so that you can avoid feeling anything that might make you vulnerable, and he is so smitten with you that a single mean word from you would crush him.”

Emily bristled at both Beth’s description of her and of Ben.

“You weren’t in that room; you don’t know.”

For the first time, she could see a concerned look on Beth’s face.

“Honey, did he hurt you? Did he rape you?”

“No, but he wanted to,” Emily said.

“He wanted to? What do you mean?”

“I could see the lust in his eyes.”

“I see. And what were you doing at the time?” Beth asked.

Emily couldn’t tell her that she was laying on her back on the bed, naked, with her legs spread wide. Instead, she stayed silent.

“Tell me, Emily, how did you get away from him?”

“I ran to the bathroom.”

“Did he try to stop you? What did he do?”

“No. He knocked on the door, and I told him to go away. The room, the night, everything, it was so much like what mom described.”

Beth grabbed her hand.

“Reading that about your mom, especially with what happened with you dad right after, must have been horrible for you. Not all guys are like that creep your mom wrote about. Will you trust me that Ben isn’t like that?”

Emily started to disagree with her, but Beth cut her off.

“Emily, at least give him a chance to explain. Will you do that? Will you do it for me?”

As much as she didn’t want to give him a chance, it was hard to refuse her cousin. Beth had always been there for her. How could she say no?

Grimacing, she nodded.

When they pulled into Ben’s driveway, Emily almost told Beth to drive away because Ben’s Charger wasn’t there. She was just about to speak when spotted him pushing a lawn mower at the side of the house. She told Beth to stay put and got out of the car.

He clearly saw her approaching because he shut off the engine.

Her promise to Beth to give him a chance clearly in the forefront of her mind, she strove to keep her voice level.

“You paid my dad’s restitution.”

He didn’t meet her eyes.

“Yes.”

“Why?” she asked.

He continued to stare at the ground and didn’t answer.

“If I were a cynical person, I’d think that you had a ulterior motive for paying a large sum of money on behalf of your ex-girlfriend.”

“If I could have kept the source anonymous, I would have. They made me give my name,” he said, still looking anywhere but at her.

“Where did you even get that much…”

She stopped herself as her brain made an odd connection.

“Ben, where’s the Charger? You never let anyone else drive it. Now, you’re here, and it’s not. Didn’t you tell me one time that it was worth a lot of money?”

Ben didn’t answer her.

“Why would you sell the thing that you love most in the world to help me when we’re not even dating?”

Ben mumbled something.

“What was that?” she asked.

“I said that it’s not the thing that I love most in the world. Not even close.”

Was he crying?

“I don’t get it. If you care so much for me, why did you run out on me just because I wouldn’t have sex with you?”

He finally looked at her, and, from his expression, he probably wouldn’t have thought that she was any more stupid at that moment if she had said that Britney Spears was the best singer on the planet and Miley Cyrus should win an Oscar for her acting.

“What the hell are you talking about?” he asked. “At every single point in our relationship that involved anything sexual, you always took the lead when we went to the next level. I never pushed you. Not once. Ever.”

It finally occurred to her that it was possible that she had misjudged the entire situation.

“You were the one that wanted to have sex that night,” he continued, shaking his head. “I knew that I should have stood my ground and told you no.”

“You didn’t want to?” she asked.

“No.”

“But guys…”

“Guy’s always want to,” he finished for her. “Yeah, guys aren’t supposed to worry if they’re going to do it right or worry how it will effect the relationship. I do, though. And, I always thought that my first time would be with the person that will become my wife, not necessarily on my wedding night, but... Look, I knew that I should have told you how I felt, but it’s so hard for me to say no to you.”

She couldn’t help it; she seized upon the one part of his statement that she could twist around on him.

“You didn’t want me as your wife?” she said.

“Emily, I told you that first day that I wanted to marry you, just as you told me that you didn’t know how you felt about me. I still don’t know how you feel about me. It seemed like you sure had fun hanging out with me and exploring the sexual stuff, but how would I know how you really feel? How many times have you told me that you love me?”

“All the time. Right? Surely I…”

“Never, Em. Never.”

She stood there thinking. She couldn’t remember a single time when she had told him how she felt. Did she even know how she felt?

She had learned with her mom’s death that it was dangerous to love. Love led to loss. She couldn’t help loving her dad and, of course, Beth. Was it worth it to let someone else in?

She thought about how he had been with her, so kind, so loving. Did she ever truly believe that all he wanted from her was sex? Was her anger really just a way to keep from having to admit how she felt? If there was ever a man in this world who deserved her love, it was him.

“Ben, I…”

“Don’t you dare say it now!” he shouted.

He had never raised his voice to her in anger. She didn’t know what to do, how to react.

He turned and started walking away from her toward the front door of his house.

Now that she had discovered how she felt, she didn’t want to lose him. If she let him get away now, things would never be the same. She only had one weapon left at her disposal, but she detested it’s use. Did the ends justify the means? Could she ever respect herself again if she went through with it?

She had no choice. It was her only shot.

She focused on what life would be like without him, on how much she had hurt him. She let down her defenses, let herself be lost in the emotions. Tears streamed down her face, and her body was racked with sobs. Ben couldn’t help but hear her.

He turned back to look at her, his face hard and eyes cold. She could tell that he was trying to fight it, but he was losing the battle. His face softened. He took a tentative step toward her. Then another. He ran to her and swept her up in his arms.

“I’m sorry. I love you. Please, just don’t cry,” he said.

When she was finally able to get her tears under control, she told him in a still shaky voice, “Ben, I do love you. I’ve been so stupid; can you ever forgive me?”

“I could never not forgive you,” he said.

Emily sent Beth home and stayed to talk with Ben for hours.

“So, Benjamin F. Miller. What’s the ‘F’ stand for?” she asked him.

He grimaced.

“Franklin.”

“No way, Benjamin Franklin. Too funny,” she laughed.

“What can I say, I have patriotic parents.”

“What about your brother, TJ, then?”

“Thomas Jefferson Miller. Sad, huh?” he said.

“That’s horrible. Can I tease him?”

“Be my guest.”

She paused.

“Ben, can we go to your parent’s fishing camp tomorrow?”

“If you want. Why?”

“I’m ready. I mean, I’m really ready this time. I want to complete what we started on prom night,” she said.

“Em, I love you, but didn’t you hear what I said about wanting my first time to be with my future wife?”

She smiled at him.

“I heard you perfectly.”

THE END