

Chapter One

Emerson

My life used to revolve around money, but I stepped off that carousel a long time ago.

I cradle my cell between my cheek and shoulder while handing the coffee shop guy a five-dollar bill. “I don’t care if he’s loaded. Quit trying to set me up.”

Jenny’s been playing matchmaker ever since I started babysitting for her. “He’s a banker,” she says, her voice sing-songy.

“I don’t care if he’s got the freaking keys to the US Treasury.”

“He’s got a killer body. You should see him without a shirt on.”

“I haven’t met a guy I’m interested in seeing naked.” I lean over to grab the cup with EMERSON written in bold black marker.

“I can help you out with that.” The guy handing me change glances at my cleavage, tempting me to tug the V-neck of the Camberton College T-shirt higher to conceal my girls.

I ignore him and grab my cappuccino in one hand and my ten-pound textbook in the other. “No means no,” I say into the phone, putting steel in my voice like I’m threatening to end our friendship. “Find some other lucky friend to go with Mr. Gold Card.”

She snorts. “Picky people are lonely people.”

Her tone indicates I’m stupid and stubborn. I’m really only stubborn. “Bye.”

I place my phone on the table and open my Economic Statistics book. For one second, I try to remember the reason for declaring an econ major. Oh yeah. Because smart people don’t major in booty shaking, which was how I earned money last summer at Earl’s Temptations.

My phone vibrates. I flip it over to see who’s calling. The unfamiliar number causes a surge of what-can-it-be-now panic through my veins. Only a few people call me, and it’s never good to answer a strange number at seven o’ass-crack-of-dawn.

Most likely it's linked to Gabby, my little sister, who is determined to be the death of me. Seriously. The last unknown call I took was from the emergency room when she sliced open her ankle while bungee jumping with some idiot boy who was pretending to be a grown man. The distressed call from her put a gray hair on my head. I found it under the florescent bulbs in the bathroom. Concrete gray and right in the part line of my dark hair.

"Hello." I breathe in and fill my lungs with crisis courage.

"Emerson?" The male voice is uncertain.

"Yeah? Who is this?"

"It's me," he says, like he knows me.

Come again? A static shock of familiarity and pleasure hits my senses, waking me up faster than a double shot of espresso.

"Dylan." His deep voice rumbles in my ear with a touch of irritation. Dylan, who acts like I don't exist 99 percent of the time?

"Hi." I wait for his response. When he doesn't say anything, I freak. "I didn't touch that thing on your dresser." I squeeze my eyes shut. "Okay. That's a lie. I threw away that skank's panties because cleaning your house doesn't include—"

"Emerson."

"Yeah?" My skin tingles. I've waited months for him to call, but something is definitely not right.

"I need you to do something important for me. A favor."

I should record this moment. If I did that journaling type of thing I would. For now, I savor whatever is coming. This is the guy who protested when his roommate Jordy hired me to clean their house.

"What kind of favor?" I ask.

"I'm in jail."

"Excuse me? You wanna repeat that?"

He waits a beat. "You heard me." His tone is one shade shy of embarrassed.

There's a faint buzzing sound inside my head. One million and one questions zoom around my brain—maybe they're the source of the buzzing. "Let me get this straight. You want me to bail you out?"

“Yes.”

“Not one of your roommates or something?” This doesn’t make sense. There’s a good chance the freaking apocalypse is happening at this very moment.

“No. I need you to post bond. Jordy’s speaking about his company at some brainiac software conference today. Collin isn’t picking up his cell.”

Silence.

“Are you coming or not?” He exhales, a tired sigh.

Background noise bleeds over the line and I imagine him in jail with the hardened criminals eyeballing his suit and tie and ass.

I glance down at my econ book. I am so going to fail this exam. “Yeah. I’ll have to get a bondsman and then I’m on my way.”

He doesn’t even question how I know the process for bailing someone out.

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I lose \$150 and half an hour to the bail bondsman.

I glare at the county jail’s parking meter. The metal thief requires an ungodly amount of change that I scrounge together from my coffee fund. My one luxury. Inside the building, I wait my turn behind a middle-aged couple signing in to visit someone.

Paperwork completed, I sit in the waiting room and read the public service announcements taped to the walls. This will be the first time I’ve really talked to Dylan since our disastrous night of making out—that one night constitutes the 1 percent of the time he hasn’t ignored me.

He walks out looking like a battle survivor—one swollen eye, messed up hair, and a busted lip. *Color me surprised and turned on.* I look around for signs of the apocalypse. “You. Look. Terrible.”

His eyes narrow. “Ready,” he says like I’m his personal chauffeur.

What a tool. “You’re welcome.” I shake my head and walk to the exit. I struggle for a second with the heavy station door. He reaches out a hand and opens it.

“Go ahead,” he says, his sharp tone jabbing me.

A cop escorts a prisoner in handcuffs past us. The guy in the orange jumpsuit examines me, then Dylan, with equal opportunity leering.

I pick up my pace across the parking lot and glance at him. “Who decorated your face?”

“Some mouthy guy at a bar.”

“Oh?”

Dylan makes a grunting noise that tells me he will not be elaborating.

I slide into the driver’s seat and wait for Dylan to get in and buckle up. It’s a chance for me to study his face without it looking like I’m actually...well, studying him. The damage can’t hide the handsome factor. Thick, dark hair always trimmed to the perfect length. Stubble at a perfect five o’clock shadow. Perfect white teeth that gleam when his lips part in that perfect, wicked smile.

It’s his eyes and that knowing smile that probably get him a name and number wherever he goes.

Beware naive women everywhere. This guy is a perfect player.

The drive to his house is silent as a courtroom waiting on a verdict.

It’s a forty-minute drive from the station. Forty minutes and no thank you from Dylan. Forty minutes of stale beer and silent anger. Forty minutes of not talking about his charge for drunk and disorderly conduct.

Forty minutes of me thinking about the night three months ago, the night that ended in the hot-hot-melting-hot make-out session. A twelve on the ten-point sizzle scale.

Unspoken regret for forty minutes.

I pull into his driveway and park on the side like I do every week when I come to clean. I get out and swing my purse strap over my shoulder.

“What are you doing?” Dylan stops mid-stride. He shields his eyes from the sun.

“I’m here. Thought I’d get some things done.”

“Can’t you come back later? I’m a little hung over.”

I eye him carefully. A muscle in his jaw twitches and I’m well aware that I tiptoe the line between employee and friend. Not that I consider myself his friend. But he’s the one who hurdled over that line today.

“Nope,” I say. “I need to manage my time this week and since I already—”

“Whatever.” He stalks inside. There’s a rip along the back of his designer shirt and beside that, a dark liquid stain deserving identification in a crime lab.

The house is empty like it usually is this time of the morning. Both Dylan’s roommates are

at their respective jobs.

I put in a load of laundry, start a pot of coffee, and water the plants. There are mostly cacti in pots scattered around the kitchen area. Plants I brought in when I started working here. Otherwise, it'd resemble that county jail waiting room. Institutional. Minimal furniture. No personality.

Sunshine streams in from the backyard and fills the kitchen. Sometimes I pretend it's my house with the spacious rooms and the beautiful deck out back.

Since there's no time to go back to the coffee shop, I drop into a kitchen chair and pull out my textbook. I have enough time to ensure I get at least a passing grade. It's soothing to study here with the view of an oak tree. A resident squirrel sprints to the top and daredevils along the thin branches.

The churning white noise of the washing machine almost masks the sound of footsteps. The hairs on the back of my neck prickle.

"Thanks for bailing me out." Dylan says in a fierce, forced tone. He walks to stand at the window with his hands in his pockets.

I lift my gaze to his and nod. I could tease him, but I won't. He seems too vulnerable today.

He's showered and dressed for work, wearing a black suit, crisp white collared shirt, and gold tie. "I didn't have anyone else to call."

His statement has effectively stunted my snarky bone. I'm the Grand Poobah of sarcasm. This lonely tone he has? It slices the skin of my defenses like a serrated blade, leaving me as vulnerable as he seems.

I glance out the window to the point where he's staring, but he's not even looking at the acrobatic squirrel. "Bad night?"

"You could say that." He rubs his fingers across his forehead.

We're both silent for minutes of me staring at the same nothing in the back yard. I can't stand the heaviness of his thoughts that sit on his shoulders like gargoyles on a building rooftop.

I exhale loudly and drum my fingers on my book. "Going into work, huh?"

"Thought I would."

"You sound very excited about it."

"I'll give you a check for the bond money later. My checkbook is at the office." He moves

to the table and pulls out a chair. The scraping sound of wood against tile reverberates through the kitchen.

I'm alarmed when he flips it around and has a seat so close our knees might touch. I hope he can't hear my unsteady heart rate rattling like a runaway cup in the wind. "I knew you would."

"Were you in class when I called?"

"No." I suck in a composing breath and open the textbook so I'll have somewhere to look other than his face.

"What are you studying?"

His questioning spikes my heart rate to space-shuttle speed. "Econ." I stare at the page before me like there might be a pop quiz in the next five minutes.

Even though it can't be that long since Dylan was in college, he's never asked me about school or my major or anything beyond where he can find the clean towels. He leaves before I arrive to clean. He returns after I'm gone. If we cross paths, he might ask a question using less than ten words. Probably five.

It's silent as I continue to stare at the words on the page, allowing them to blur together since I'm incapable of concentrating.

The seconds stretch my patience. "Do you want something?" Besides to give me an aneurysm from anticipation. My gaze flicks up to meet his.

His mouth pulls up into the slowest, sexiest smile of the millennium. "I wanted to thank you."

"You did that already." My heart pulses in my ears like a tornado warning. *Down girl. He's saying thanks, nothing else. He's definitely not saying he's going to put that sexy mouth anywhere close to mine. Too bad.*

Dylan folds his hands along the top of the chair and rests his chin on the knuckles of one hand. "I don't take you for granted."

"You'd better not. Or I'm asking for a raise." I look down at my book and flip a page.

"Emerson, do you have a boyfriend?" he asks.

My gaze lifts to meet his.

Since the night of the infamous kiss, I've cleaned their house twenty-four times. In those

twenty-four, I've come across several phone numbers with 'call me' scrawled on them, one pair of lacy panties, and numerous shirts smelling suspiciously of perfume.

Not so much as a phone call until this morning when he asked me to bail him out.

When I was younger, no guy would've treated me this way.

"Yes. Yes, I have a boyfriend." I don't swallow. I'm normally a good liar. Someone asks how I'm doing and I pull on my hunky-dory mask. Another mentions my dad in the federal penitentiary and I act as though it doesn't bother me. My real feelings are buried deep, a grave of emotions. No visitors allowed.

His eyebrows inch up a fraction. "I see. Well, okay. Just curious." He rises from the chair and reaches across with his right hand. For a second, I wonder if he's going to grab me and kiss me.

He gently rotates the book, placing it right-side up in my hands. "Easier to read this way," he says with a smirk.

And then he walks away and out the front door.

"Damn," I mutter under my breath. I jump to my feet, wishing I had a punching bag or one of those voodoo dolls. Who does he think he is? I roll my eyes so hard I risk going cross-eyed. I stand a little straighter and get myself a cup of coffee, settle down—with my book in the right direction—and study for my test.

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As far as quizzes go, it could've been worse. It could've been written in Latin, or Chinese, or Braille. At least in English, I was able to make a weak guess on the multiple-choice questions.

I exit the business building and make a wide pass around the guy giving me the once-over. Men are such douchebags. My unhappy expression—the don't-even-approach-me-buddy face—can in no way invite any kind of interest, yet this jock thinks it's a possibility. I want to stop and give him a lesson that having breasts does not qualify me as interested.

Due to my last minute sprint to available parking, I'm winded by the time I reach the lot reserved for off-campus students. I tug my sweater closed. Leaves swirl from the trees, falling quickly after the latest drop in temperatures.

I search among the cars for my pale blue Toyota. A dependable car. Boring. Inexpensive. Nothing like the car my dad gave me on my sixteenth birthday—a red Ferrari as flashy as my

family.

I'm better off the way things are now. People either like me for who I am or I have no use for them. Money lies. It tells you you're pretty and desirable and invincible.

I flip up the windshield wiper and peel a flyer from the front glass. When I turn it over, I realize it's not an advertisement.

You have something I want and I intend to get it. I know where you live.

I read the words twice before looking up to scan the parking lot. My heart crawls up my throat, planning an alien-style exit.

I inhale, exhale, inhale. I'm chilled from the wind hitting my flushed face.

There're quite a few people getting into vehicles. A couple of girls get into an SUV a few spaces over. A guy with dreadlocks puts on his motorcycle helmet and catches me watching him. He flashes me a smile. I nod and look away.

No one in particular looks as though they are paying attention to me. I suppress my uneasy feeling, reach into my purse, and curl my fingers around the kubaton weapon on my keychain. I visualize stabbing an assailant in the eye or the throat.

Last summer, when I resorted to dancing at Earl's to keep the lights on, a strange guy had given me the creepy stare all night. After work, he appeared beside my car, asking me if I'd like to meet his joy stick. He seemed surprised when I asked if he'd like to meet mine.

Although I was pressed against my car at that point, I'd jabbed the kubaton into his crotch. Hard.

Bailey, the bouncer, took care of the pervert after that. I quit two days later.

A tap at my window makes me squeak and grab my chest. I lower the window a fraction. "Yes?" The girl at my window looks vaguely familiar and I recognize her from a class last semester.

"Your tire is flat." She points toward the back of my car.

"Oh no." I moan as I get out. "Really?"

"Yeah. Sorry. I noticed it and wondered what I'd do if I ever got a flat, since I don't know how to change a tire." She winces and lifts both shoulders. "Wish I could help."

"Thanks for letting me know." I'm not a helpless little ninny who can't change a tire. I *was* a helpless ninny years ago, but times change. I take off my good sweater. No sense in ruining it

while I change a flat.

The motorcycle guy with dreads hasn't left yet. In fact, I wonder why he's still sitting there watching us. I glance at the note from my windshield now sitting in my passenger seat.

The girl looks at her watch. "Good luck with your tire. You should call Triple A or something. Don't they change tires for people?"

I can't afford roadside service. The money I gave the bondsman this morning has left my account dry. "I've got this. Thanks."

She strolls away in a hurry as if I might change my mind and ask for her to pump the jack. I pop my trunk and walk to the rear of my car.

"Hi," a deep, melodic voice comes from behind me.

I turn in slow motion, knowing it's that guy—the one from the bike. "Hey," I say in an even tone.

"Let me do this," he says.

"Ah, no. I'm fine. I know how to do it."

"It's not a question of knowing how. It's the fact that I want to do it." He leans in as I move the stuff in my trunk so I can remove the tire and jack from underneath a carpeted flap.

"Oh sure. But I've got this." *Move along, dude. You're freaking me out.*

"I can't leave a girl with a flat to fix it herself. You can either let me do it or I'll stay until you're done."

I abandon my task and step back from the trunk. There are a few people in the lot, so just let him try something—anything—and I will scream like he's stabbed me. "Did you leave a note on my car?"

His eyebrows bunch together and his blond dreadlocks swing as he shakes his head.

"Um...no," he says. "I'm not the note-writing type." He grins and dimples appear.

I look down at the patch on his shirt. *Folks' Automotive*. I must be blind. Now his attitude of obligation makes sense. He works with cars.

"What's it gonna be? I'm not trying to rush you, but I need to call my boss if I'm going to be late." He gives me another smile, dimple popping out like a ray of sunshine.

I try to think of alternatives. There are none. It's broad daylight and there are at least four people within a hundred yards. "Sorry. Sounded a little paranoid there, didn't I? I had this strange

note and...never mind.”

“I’m Toby.” He holds out his hand to shake.

“Emerson.”

“Emerson, I’d appreciate it if you’d let me change your tire. Then I need to get to work.”

I close my eyes for a second. It’s exhausting to handle every crisis alone. “Okay, sure. Thank you.”

He flashes me a second smile and those dimples appear like magic. “Good. Get your sweater back on girl, or you’ll freeze.”

Toby moves around me and rummages in my trunk until he locates the jack. He glances up at me. “Emerson, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but you don’t have a spare in here.”

“No.” I want to scream the word instead of the calm answer I give. “I have a spare.” I step up beside him to peer over his shoulder. Empty. I know I had a spare but I also know I allow Gabby to drive my car when she needs it. “I think my sister may have taken it out.”

“Looks that way,” he says.

My head begins to pound. I could call Jenny, but she’d have to drag the baby out. I could ask Gabby’s latest boyfriend for help, but the thought makes me want to eat gravel. “I’ll call somebody. This isn’t your problem.”

He lowers the trunk door until it latches, then checks his watch. “I can go to work and bring back the company truck to get your flat tire fixed. Let me drop you at your house. I’ll need to work my shift. I promise I’ll take care of it.”

“Okay. You’re going to take me on the back of your bike?”

“Well, it’s pretty safe. It’s not like I planned to deliver you home on my handlebars.” His green eyes twinkle.

“Yeah. Okay, Toby. I’ll accept, but you have to let me pay you for your trouble.”

“Sure. You can pay for fixing the flat. Folks’ Auto won’t rip you off, so it’ll be reasonable.”

I lock up my car and follow him to the bike. He hands me his helmet and I put it on.

“Address?” he asks.

I hesitate for a moment. “413 Magnolia Bridge Way,” I finally say, giving him Dylan’s address. Dimples or not, I don’t give my address out to strangers.