

Chapter 1

The handsome stranger held the mini-mart door open for me, and I gazed up into twinkling, meadow-green eyes. I kid you not. I had read about twinkling eyes in more than one romance book, but this was the first time I'd seen them live and in action. He was dressed for an early-September day on the lake with plaid swim shorts to his knees and a white T-shirt hanging around his neck. My eyes shifted to the "No Shoes, No Shirt, No Service" sign that was displayed prominently in the gas station's window. I checked his feet. At least he was wearing sandals.

I must have been staring too long because Grace pushed me from behind. The bare skin of my shoulder inadvertently brushed across his well-defined, caramel-colored chest and something akin to a spark sent heat rippling down my arm. When a curve of his lips revealed straight, white teeth perfect for biting things, I mumbled an apology and hurried to the snack aisle.

"Hi, Tom," he called out to the cashier, confirming that he was a local. "I'm on pump six, but I need to grab a few things."

Tom nodded. "No problem, dude. Take your time."

"What type of chips should we get?" Grace asked, bringing my attention to more pressing matters than my tingling skin.

We had stopped for snacks on our way to the Twelve Gables Bed & Breakfast to avoid paying minibar prices. Grace was covering a charity ball being held at the Brauns' lakeside mansion in Fontana, Wisconsin, for the *Chicago Tribune*, and I was her plus one. Besides the black-tie affair tonight, guests could spend Saturday through Monday relaxing by the pool or boating on the lake. It had sounded like a cushy assignment to me, but to Grace, it was another perfect example of how people used her connections to get what they wanted.

Having grown up with the fashionable people her editor wanted to feature, she was stuck on the Life & Style desk, though she yearned to write a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative article on some injustice in the world. Since Edward and Ivy Braun were family friends of Grace's, this weekend's assignment immediately went to her. She hated using friendships in this way, but she couldn't refuse her editor if she wanted to keep her job.

"Maybe Chex Mix and Doritos? You choose." I already had spied a lone glazed donut in the bakery case next to the register, and I was an enthusiast when it came to sugary confections.

I wandered through the other aisles while I waited for her to decide on a snack. Grace didn't eat junk food often, so what to get was a serious decision worth slow and thoughtful deliberation. Based on her furrowed brow, we would be here for a while.

Mr. Green Eyes plopped three bottles of water and a Gatorade on the counter. "Gimme that donut too, please."

I stopped so abruptly that my left ankle gave out, and I had to grab the metal handle of a nearby drink cooler to steady myself. I limped over to Grace. "That guy is buying my donut!"

She blinked her eyes slowly at me. "*Your* donut? Don't they have more than one?"

“Probably not.” Yes, I was being petty. It was only a donut, but once I committed to sugar, I liked to follow through.

“Just pick out something else.” She pointed to a pack of chocolate chip cookies with an expiration date two years in the future. “Get those.”

My nose scrunched in revulsion. “I’d rather eat sawdust. The taste would be the same but with fewer calories.”

“Emma,” she said in her best schoolmarm voice. “You realize that Chef Porter will be laying out a whole table of luscious desserts for us to gorge ourselves on tonight?”

I did, but I didn’t know how to tell Grace that sometimes the frou-frou desserts of her people turned me off. Sometimes a girl just wanted a glazed donut. It was safe and comforting, and right now, I needed all the comfort I could get.

We had met freshmen year at Northwestern University in Journalism 101 and became instant friends despite being from different worlds. I was on a financial-need scholarship. Her father had a building on campus named after him. I was so nervous that I had forgotten a pencil. She had ten and gave me two “in case one broke.” We’ve been inseparable ever since, always living together and now working as reporters at the *Tribune*. She was like the sister I never had but without all the petty fighting.

She finally chose some corn chips and sashayed to the checkout.

“Excuse me,” I said to the cashier. “Do you have more donuts? Preferably glazed.”

The cashier’s bored eyes shifted to the bakery case and then to me. “Nope.”

“Are you sure? Maybe you have more in the back somewhere?”

“Ryan got the last one. Maybe if you hurry, you can buy it from him.”

Grace snickered beside me.

I pulled the bag of chips out of her hands and slid it across the counter. “We’ll just take this.”

By the time we got outside, Ryan, a.k.a. The Green-Eyed Donut Thief, was gone.

Chapter 2

Built in 1852, the Twelve Gables Bed & Breakfast sat on the shores of Geneva Lake, a block from the edge of Fontana’s village square. Designed in a Victorian Gothic style, it offered four large suites, each with a fireplace and soaking tub, and a private pier with boats available to rent.

I was Grace’s plus one because her boyfriend—sorry, ex-boyfriend—had chosen Las Vegas with his friends over her, despite committing to the charity gala weeks ago. Grace had met Joe at the Chicago Athletic Club where we worked out in the evenings. She hired him as her personal trainer, and it quickly turned into dating. I warned her that he was too young and immature, but she thought he was funny, and his chiseled body sealed the deal.

As I took in the antique furnishings of our room, I doubted the sanity of my best friend. This was not a place you take a guy you’ve been dating a few months. This was a place you took your significant other and proposed marriage. I knew Mrs. Warner was making noise about Grace’s biological clock, but we were only twenty-six years old. Taking a guy like Joe to a place like this reeked of desperation and was the first step on the road to losing him.

Grace dropped her bags and appraised the room, her eyes stopping on the king-sized four-poster bed. “I hope you don’t mind sharing.”

When I didn’t respond, she raised a perfectly arched eyebrow at me. “What? You don’t like the décor?”

Joe had come by our apartment this morning to tell her his change in travel plans. After a fight loud enough to make our upstairs neighbor stomp his displeasure, Grace had kicked Joe out. Half a box of Kleenex later, she had pulled herself together, and I was packing my swimsuit. I didn’t know how to answer her question without setting off another round of tears, but she guessed what I was thinking.

“I didn’t pick this place. It’s Labor Day weekend, and there was nothing left by the time Charlie approved my travel voucher. He almost had an aneurysm when he saw the rate.”

I nodded. Charlie was her editor and notorious for ignoring paperwork. He kept hoping top management would give him an assistant, but budget cuts always got in the way. In the meantime, Grace and the other Life & Style writers suffered from his procrastination.

Grace sat on the bed and sank several inches into its soft, quilted coverings. “I know, I know. Joe would have hated this place.”

I was about to walk a tightrope. One wrong word and I’d be ordering a couple of gallons of triple chocolate ice cream, and Grace would be posting her resume on job websites. I took a large swallow from my water bottle to wet my throat and resisted the urge to knock on the wooden desk next to me for luck.

“Maybe you should take the weekend to relax and forget about your love life. Then come Tuesday, reevaluate things with a fresh perspective.” My ears strained against the silence, waiting for the first snuffle or catch of her breath. “You might realize it’s all for the best.”

With arms outstretched, she collapsed backward and studied the floral canopy above her. After an excruciatingly long minute, she pushed herself up. “I can do that.”

Whew. Crisis avoided. But just in case, I decided to get her moving. Sitting could lead to wallowing, which could lead to tears. “Should we get ready?” I asked with more enthusiasm than I normally showed. “You promised me a fancy hairstyle.”

Her face lit up. “That I did.”

Grace loved to do other people’s hair and makeup. In college, all the girls wanted to be in her dorm so they could benefit from her talent before hitting the nightclubs or frat parties. I usually refused her offers, preferring to throw my strawberry-blond hair in a pony and dab on lip gloss. Sometimes I did it to rile her up, but sometimes I thought, why waste the time? No matter what magic Grace performed, I would never pass for the rich and fabulous.

When she insisted that I go with her to the gala, I balked, using my sad wardrobe as an excuse. But obstacles were like flies to Grace. She either swatted them to death or shooed them out of the way. As she was willowy and I was not, her closet held no solutions. On our way out of town, we stopped at her family home in Chicago’s Gold Coast district and borrowed a gown and accessories from her sister, Marjory, who was more my size. As Marjory was an Instagram model and nightclub promoter, I knew her vast closet held many treasures, but it took some hunting before I found something conservative enough for my tastes.

I brought the desk chair into the bathroom and let Grace go to work. I shot off a steady stream of questions to keep her mind occupied, everything from how many people were going to be at this shindig to what was going to be up for auction—not that I planned to bid on anything.

As Grace pinned the sides of my hair up, she went through the auction items that she knew about. “The most expensive thing is a stunning, Art Deco diamond and ruby necklace with matching bracelet and earrings. The jewelry was donated by the estate of Clara Gordon, a Chicago philanthropist who passed away about six months ago. Clara was a sweet lady and heavily involved in the charity. She willed it to the foundation to be auctioned at the next gala. It’s valued at two-and-a-half million dollars, so it will be interesting to see how the bidding goes.”

She fastened Marjory’s rhinestone clip in my hair and then curled the sections she had left free. “There’s always a few vacation spots that are nice. This year, the Rowlands donated the use of their beach home in Anguilla for a week and two first-class plane tickets, but everyone at the charity ball could afford to go there on their own if they wanted to. The real appeal is if you can get the trip at a bargain price. Rich people *love* a bargain.”

I nodded. At least I had that in common with them.

“Then there’s a few sports packages, like dinner with a Cubs player or courtside seats at a Bulls game. All of the men will bid on those.”

No interest here. I saw enough sweaty men at my day job at the *Tribune*. I was a bit of an athlete growing up, and my affinity for stats made me a natural choice for the Sports desk.

“There’s some designer jewelry, one-of-a-kind pieces, of course.”

“Oh, of course,” I said to keep her going.

“Then there’s a home-cooked meal by Passerotto’s chef.”

“Is that the place on Clark Street?”

Grace nodded and sprayed her creation with toxic hairspray. I quickly covered my nose and mouth and glared at her for the lack of warning.

“Last year, the event raised over three million dollars for the Inner-City Youth Project.” She squinted critically at my head from various angles and then said, “Makeup is next.”

Fifteen minutes later, she helped me into a simple strapless gown with a sweetheart neckline. I picked up a piece of the floor-length skirt and slid the silky, black creation through my fingers. When I slipped on the medium-heeled pumps, which I had insisted on over Marjory’s choice of five-inch stilettos, I felt as if I were Cinderella—minus the puffy costume that weighed a ton and a half.

“I’m glad we went with black,” Grace said as she fastened a string of square emeralds set in silver around my neck. “The color accentuates the red highlights in your hair.”

“You did a fantastic job. Thanks so much.” My fingers tentatively touched the jewels glowing on my chest, and I smiled gratefully. The most expensive trinket I owned was my gold class ring from Northwestern. Who needed sparkly gems when you were interviewing jocks in their underwear?

She shrugged off the compliment. “It was nothing. I’ll be ready in a few minutes.”

And she was serious. I’d never met anyone who could do hair and makeup in less time than it took me to brush and floss my teeth and come out as stunning as a movie star. Any of

Grace's self-perceived flaws were nonexistent, as she was beautiful to the point of perfection. Her jet-black hair was cut into a stylish bob that accentuated her high cheekbones, and, thanks to the best dermatologist in Chicago during her teen years, her creamy complexion was void of any acne scars. Her tall, slim frame could make a plastic garbage bag seem chic. If I didn't love the girl so much, I would certainly hate her.

I had just finished checking my email and social media accounts when Grace appeared in a deep mauve-colored gown. The top of the dress hung off her shoulders like a soft shawl, and the bottom half flowed away from her body in shimmering waves. A two-inch band of sparkly, white gems created a high waist under her bust, and she had chosen simple diamond studs for earrings.

"Wow. You are more beautiful than a Grecian goddess. Joe doesn't know what he's missing." I slapped a hand over my stupid mouth that couldn't remember the advice I had given my best friend about forgetting her love life for the weekend.

She smiled to ease my anguish. "Thanks. I think we both look pretty hot."

"Your shoes!"

Grace lifted her dress to inspect her shoes, her brow creasing in concern. "What? What's wrong with them?"

"Absolutely nothing. They're precious!" Even though she was taller than the average woman, Grace never shied away from wearing heels. But tonight, she had chosen crystal-coated ballet flats. With each step, the light caught the crystals and sent magical sparks flying.

"I don't like working in heels, and these are comfortable."

“So, wait a minute,” I said slowly. “I could have worn flats too?”

Her head jerked backward. “No. Don’t be silly.”

“But if you get to wear—”

“We’d better hit the road.” She headed for the door. “Don’t want to be late!”

I grabbed my purse and scowled. Someday I was going to get even with the Warner sisters.