

8. EMERALD'S REGRET

For all her social grace, Emerald knew that she could never attain the nonchalance of Sunny. Here she had the opportunity to do Sunny one better. And she was just helpless at closing the deal.

Right before her, sat her perfect match. She became misty-eyed contemplating his attributes. He was charming. And, he was playing a waiting game. On the other hand, she could hardly imagine introducing him to her friends.

“Where did you meet this guy?”

“In a bar.”

Sure she could come up with a more appropriate cover story. But that wasn't what she had in mind.

Sunny would never have given this a second thought. In a heartbeat, she would have been off to the races. But Emerald could sense that she was mangling things at the starting gate. And she wasn't going to allow her dashing companion to rescue her from this disaster.

“You don't want another drink.”

“I have a drink already. As far as another one, I am already way past my limit.”

Under most circumstances he would have taken this as a challenge, but Emerald was doing everything that she could to stifle his debonair. He was scrambling just to maintain his cool. She acted as if she didn't notice his extra effort.

Jason had often left the bar alone. He prided himself on his elegance of manners, better to retreat into obscurity than risk his reputation on a tawdry liaison. But tonight, Jason had played too far to admit defeat. And he wasn't going to leave without something to show for his tireless efforts.

“You do have a model's good looks.”

He realized that he had offered her the most trite of compliments. However, he meant it in the most literal of terms. She had brushed her hair back from her face to accentuate her most healthy features. And her lips had an inexpressible pout that would get boys running from miles around just to see her frown. She looked back at him with her mooning eyes.

“Don't you have anything better to add?”

He wanted to muster the ultimate in poetic tribute to her delights. But he settled for just staring at her.

“This won't do.”

“No, it won't”

And he knew that he was wasting an opportunity. He would have to do his best to save the situation. Promises weren't enough.

“Jason, I'm not looking for romance.”

Was she setting him up? Or did she want some kind of pledge from him based on their short time together?

“Are you one of those modern girls who values honesty over having a good time?”

She imagined that he was storing up something really shocking to share at a moment like this.

“You're not really a bar girl, are you?”

Her smile only made him feel more of the pressure.

“You go for church and picnics.”

“You’re kidding?”

“I’m not sure.”

“You should have quit while you were ahead.”

“Was I ever ahead?”

“You probably were until you offered to buy me a drink.

Surely, she was teasing him, but her digs were so constant that he seemed to have little choice.

“Maybe another time?”

She didn’t want to let him get away so easily. Anything less than her adamance, and she would be giving him another opening. As much as she would like to play along, this was the last thing on her mind.

Emerald’s long ride home offers her little consolation. Jason had made his strategy apparent to her, not so much in desperation, but motivated by the sincere belief that she would be moved by his entreaties. It was obvious that she was not the first girl who he had tried to woo with his craft.

As she got ready for bed, she thought about her hesitancy to follow through with Jason. He was doing his best to be honest with her. Could he really know the difference? Sunny would have gone with the moment, just let herself be free. That made no sense to Emerald. Why set yourself up for heartache? The you just made things more difficult: always maintaining this front to yourself.

She replayed the events of the night in her mind. She wanted to accommodate his advances. She envisioned herself at his place now. All she could think about was how to leave.

Emerald didn’t want to admit that she was inhibited. Her parents teaching had prevented her from even branching out on her own. Just the sight of the inviting waters were enough to get her to turn her head. They did have a point. A few moments of temporary insanity then back to the comfort of her own bed.

Sunny was proud of her body in a way that was something new to Emerald. It was almost as if she felt the most natural prancing around naked. Emerald tried to capture the same feeling. She could hardly survive a few seconds without wanting to put on a bathrobe. Maybe if she worked out more, she could acquire that confidence that she lacked. Sunny’s tight body left her with no doubts about who she was. No man could take that away from her. Emerald felt as if the prolonged touch of a man would sap her strength. She did everything that she could not to be tempted the raging carnivores that surrounded her.

Emerald’s deep rationalizations were convincing her that she had made the right decision. Jason made this a practice of applying his skills to girl after girl. He told himself that he wanted to settle down. And every one was the perfect opportunity that would finally allow him to focus his ardor. Through it all, he could never maintain that resolve.

What would possess a girl to listen to this amateur con artist? He was always somewhat oblivious to his surroundings. So she saw exactly what he wanted to see. And he did everything that he could to get the girl thinking in exactly the same way. He would get close enough that she was captured by his heat. She would feel privileged that someone had broken the terrible

silence. She was relieved by his gentle touch. That was so important. He would begin to touch her so that she thought his body was part of hers. This gave her a sense of relief. It was only a matter of time before the two of them felt connected. He would rub his hand along her back. She was surrendering herself to him. The inevitable kiss would be too much to bear. She was now certain that this was the guy who would give her life of sense of hopefulness. His flattery would pinpoint that need with such accuracy. He was burning away any resistance.

As his hand clasped hers, there was nothing that she could do. Maybe she wouldn't go back with him. But she would surrender her life to him. Each moment after that would be a constant wait for him to lift her from her drudgery. Nothing could break the spell.

Emerald's heart raced as she recounted the events of the night to herself. He hadn't got that far, but he had come much closer than she realized. It had hardly been any effort for him. He just closed his eyes and let himself cruise on automatic pilot. She was easy prey. Until she escaped, she offered little in the way of hindrance to him. And he knew it.

Fortunately Emerald would not have to wait for the dreaded call. She has made a clean getaway. Although she replayed the night in her mind, its events touched her only like a lucid dream. She could make the story bend to her wishes. And she thus put it out of her world.

Emerald told herself that the morning offered her a new beginning. It was not as if she had got off her game plan the night before. She just needed to reassure herself that she hadn't done anything outlandish. Although she let her imagination indulge in a little of its own mischief.

She hated the fact that she was going back to work without much to show for her efforts. But it would have been much worse if she had have gone home with that loser. She thought about how her friend Sunny would have handled things. Emerald would no be hearing all about Sunny's adventures. Emerald had none of Sunny's dash.

"You never know if he's the right one."

"Sunny, I'm not at all like you. I just get all tense if I don't trust a guy. It's never much fun for me."

"Emerald, you've got to quit letting your imagination get the better of you."

Emerald believes that Sunny has enough heartache to fill her days.

"I'm not like you. I don't let it bother me. I get a little soused. I do what I've got to do. And when I'm over the heartache, I'm over the guy."

"It really is such a matter of fact thing for you."

"Do you want a little more heart? If I was like you, I'd be crying my eyes out all the time."

Emerald was having a lot of trouble trying to make sense of Sunny's either-or approach to love.

"You had a guy coming on to you last night, and you let him get away."

"He was a real creep, just throwing around money and the like."

"You'd rather some good for nothing without a job."

"I'm not for sale. He' would have taken me back to his place, and I wouldn't hear from him again."

"You have to have a little more confidence in yourself."

"I'm not really looking for a makeover."

“Anything to brighten up your disposition!”

“So I dye my hair blonde and put on some twelve-inch heels. Is that really going to attract a quality guy? That’s like trying to catch flies with vinegar and honey.”

Sunny didn’t pick up on the comparison.

“You have to make guys want you. You can’t expect them just to come to you.”

Sunny was trying to cast her as some kind of wallflower. But she had been in full bloom last night. And she still didn’t feel that good about it all.

“This isn’t something that you need think about or plan out. You just have to take care of it. And let it go. That’s why you have friends.”

“So you can grant me absolution for my sins.”

“That’s not quite how it works.”

“Then what?”

“You just have to let go. And that will make you feel better. And talking about your regrets will make them go away.”

Emerald felt that her life seemed all the more empty by sharing her experiences with Sunny. She could embellish things to help feel better about herself.

“It’s not as if Prince Charming is knocking down your door and offering you his kingdom.”

“When I get opportunity, I’ll know how to take it.”

Emerald didn’t only want to hear about Sunny’s misdeeds. She imagined herself being part of the action. She felt this bizarre attraction for Sunny’s body. It wasn’t simply envy on her part. She imagined herself touching Sunny’s breasts. She dwelt on the idea just long enough to get her excited. Then she put it all out of her mind.

She played the scene from the night before. This time it was Sunny in her place. She watched Sunny get wined and dined by the curious stranger.

“Where is this going to stop?”

“It’s never going to end.”

It gave Emerald a chance to again admire the naked bodies that frolicked in her imagination. What made her so active in her thought and then caused her to freeze up in deed. Maybe Sunny could give her some tips.”

“Its not as if I really think about it all that much. I just do what comes naturally.”

How could Emerald make it happen naturally if she needed some kind of supernatural power to get herself going? She couldn’t really channel Sunny’s skills to use at her disposal.

It wasn’t as if she had been an embarrassment the night before. She just found it difficult to suspend her disbelief long enough to let the seduction take hold. And even if she tried to dress like Sunny or to adopt her mannerisms, it wasn’t going to end up much differently.

She could have lost herself in the candle light. Or surrendered herself to the passion of the moment. Just lost herself in his eyes. Instead, she broke the spell before it could even take shape.

The champagne bubbles always had a way of setting her off. She liked playing these grown-up games because they gave her the excuse to leave the hum drum behind. This was Sunny’s power. She knew how to submerge herself in the now. Emerald needed to learn how to do Sunny.

“I’m in way too deep to turn back now,” she heard the echo of Sunny’s words.

She let herself become the kiss. The world swirled around her. She could hardly catch her breath. Why was she going along with a fantasy when she had already dismissed its appeal the night before?

She felt as if she needed him more than ever. Her longing only became more intense as she worked her way through her recollection. It would have been so easy last night. Now, she felt herself backtracking in the most terrible way. It was either regret or shame.”

She reviewed the events with an eye of dispassionate analysis. This time, she again rebuffed his advances. Why was there a problem? What was the burning sensation inside that upset her composure.

Would Sunny have succumbed? Of course, she would have followed through without ever looking back. Emerald wanted that sense of self-assurance.

“What if you did something that made you so ashamed? How could you ever get rid of the guilt?”

“I don’t think that I would ever let anything bother me that much.”

“You wouldn’t. I thought that shame isn’t something that you can control. It just comes over you.”

I used to feel that way. I simply put all feelings like that to bed one night. And when I woke up in the morning, I was free.”

“I wish that life was so forgiving. It’s just that the worst feelings end up becoming part of your life, as if they just seep into your flesh.”

“I never thought about it that way.”

“That’s how it affects me.”

“You wish that there was a pill that you could take to make it go away. Drinking doesn’t help.”

“I pretend that it does. But it only lasts for a little while. And then I want more to make the good feeling stay.”

“Maybe you’re worrying about it too much.”

“It’s not something that I can turn on and off just by closing my eyes.”

“Don’t you wish that there was some cream that you could just rub on your skin just to make it go away?”

“What if the cream had its own power. You could almost become addicted to it.”

“Shame is something that guys invent to get control over you.”

“How does that work?”

“Guys invoke that kind of thing every time that you think of leaving them. You know the whole bit. The guy calls you a dirty girl if you want to be with someone else. He acts as if you have a problem. As if your fear about sex makes you insatiable. You just go from man to man trying to get rid of your pain.”

“I’m not really into that kind of thing.”

“Where do you think this idea of shame comes from. Guys who don’t think that you should enjoy sex. So they invent this story about how you’re a very bad girl. And every time that you have fun, you feel bad about it. So you find some guy to stay with in the hope that the feeling will go away.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You just become his little whore. And you do whatever he wants.”

“So what’s so bad about that?”

“It’s all bad.”

“You’re just making it sound bad because you’re cynical about love.”

“It never stops there. He knows that you feel guilty about sex. So he tries to keep you on a short leash. And you never think that you’re good enough for him. You do all these things to try to make up for your shortcomings. It’s a wicked spiral.”

“I could never see myself ending up like that.”

“Why? Because you’re a good girl who can’t tell a guy what you want.”

“I’m not going to get caught up in that cycle.”

“It has a way of surprising you.”

“I need to get over my shame.”

“I told you that’s the way to go.”

Emerald mulled over Sunny’s argument. It made it her feel so much better. But it was easier said than done. It was one thing to roll through the events of the night and casually file them away for good. This was all from the comfort of her own apartment. But if she was again in a bar, she’d become weak. And she’d just go along with all his arguments. Until that moment when she’d just give up and leave. She’d have that feeling that she had just wasted her time.

“I’m just a pushover. I don’t have my own opinions. I end up getting swayed by whomever is around me. I can’t help saying yes. So I end up saying no to cover my venality.”

“Do you want a lesson in love making?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Is that what you need?”

“I think that I need to develop a conscience.”

“You have too much conscience and not enough pure desire.”

“I’m just afraid that if I gave in to my desires that I’d lose my mind.”

“You’ve been with a man before.”

“Of course, I have. A number of them. But it’s always the same kind of thing. I can’t let them know what I really want. And they just don’t have to power to give it to me. So sex becomes this stalemate.”

“You don’t know how to do bad?”

“I don’t know how to do good.”

“You’ve got to do something about it.”

“I just don’t know where to start.”

“Treat yourself.”

“How do I do that?”

“Indulge your sensual pleasures. Go for a long walk. Have a good meal. Take extra dessert.”

“You know what that’s going to do to me.”

“Everything that you do is based on rules. You have to learn to break your own rules.”

“I’m dealing with enough shame. I can’t take on any more.”

“You’ve got to keep pushing until you come to a breaking point.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of. That I’ll break before the feeling does.”

“You’ve got to take that risk.”

Emerald created this vibrant image of Sunny working out at the gym. The sweat poured off of her body. Every inch of her body spoke of sex. Her muscles were tight. Her breath was hard, but rhythmic. She enjoyed every second of her existence.

“Emerald. I can help you all that I like. But you are going to have to take that first step on your own.”

“And what is that first step?”

“Go out for dinner. Order an extra drink.”

“And one drink will lead to another. And some available guy will think that I’m an easy target.”

“Take it for what it is. And when you reject him, it won’t be because of your shame. It will be because he’s not good enough for you.”

“That’s what you call power-eating!”

“You can call it whatever you like. It’s your choice.”

Was it really her choice? She could sit around with Sunny all night and eat popcorn. She could talk about all the great things that she was going to do for herself. But Emerald was going to be the same person the next day at work. And when she went out to a club, she’d be the same frightened Emerald again. She needed a new story. New friends. A new life. She needed some more popcorn.

“You need a practice lover.”

“What is that?”

“Someone who you use to practice all your techniques on. Then you leave him once you’ve got your groove back.”

“That’s going to be no good. I’m going to feel guilty if I stay with him and guilty if I leave. I don’t do practice. I only do real.”

“Maybe I can follow you around and hold your hand.”

“That will make it too easy. You’ll just take the problem guys off my hands, and I’ll never have to deal with my troubles.”

“I can help you get a head start.”

“I’ll get too into your method that I won’t be able to head out on my own.”

“But you can practice while I’m around.”

“You’ll just make me nervous. I’ll feel as if I’m trying to perform for you.”

“I’ll just be with you for a little while. I can leave once you get things going.”

Emerald wasn’t trying to be Sunny’s understudy. Even if Sunny guided her through her crisis, she’d eventually be on her own. And she’d have to make her own decisions.

“Emerald, it’s not such a big deal if we hang out together.”

Sunny lets the idea sit with Emerald for the next couple of days. For her own part, Emerald only goes to work and comes home. She realizes that this is only making her a dull Emerald. And she is feeling more strain with her roommate.

“You could at least go running or go to the gym. Buy some new clothes. Get your hair done.”

“I’m around clothes all the time. I’d prefer not to take that route.”

“You shouldn’t sulk. You did nothing wrong!”

“I’m not sulking. I’m just tired.”

She wanted Sunny to feed her some of her own stories just to inspire her. But Sunny really had nothing to offer her.

“Maybe I’m not out for fun. But you could at least gratify me with some of your own exploits.”

“I’m not that kind of girl.”

“I’ve been living through you vicariously. And at a moment like this, you clam up on me.”

“I never was as rambunctious as you thought I was.”

“You’re all about being wild. Don’t disappoint me now?”

“You’re making me sound like some kind of animal that just escaped from the zoo.”

“You’re the one who’s depriving me of my life blood.”

“What do you want me to do, Emerald? Go out and cat around so I’ll have something to report to you.”

“I don’t know. What do you want to do? You’ve never had your shortage of trouble before.”

“I’m not a trained seal.”

Even without Sunny, Emerald could feel herself carry on this argument inside of herself. On the one hand, she saw herself as this carefree fun-lover. She was ready to give herself to a life of pleasure. On the other hand, her strict up-bringing made her more than ever susceptible to a cruel discipline that allowed her no enjoyment. This conflict had sapped her of any ambition. If she could just live a few weeks as Sunny, she’d have enough of an impetus to get out of her dilemma.

“So are we going out together?”

“I’ve met a man.”

“A man? Is it serious.”

“He’s talking marriage. Although he still hasn’t shown me a ring.”

“How long have you know him?”

“A couple of weeks.”

“Where did you meet him?”

“You know. I went home with him from a bar.”

“Are you serious? I thought that never works out.”

“I think that I was more woman than he’s ever had before. He likes it a little crazy.”

“Are you saying what I think that you’re saying?”

“He can be gentle when he wants to be gentle?”

“Does he have money?”

“He has an empire!”

“Money and a tiger in bed, what more could you want?”

“I’m still thinking about it.”

“You need that ring.”

“I think that his family hates me.”

“Gold-digger? Do they know that you met him in a bar.”

“They know that I won him by beating him at in a pool match.”

“Did it really happen like that?”

“I couldn’t make it up any better.”

“You agreed to go home with him if he beat you at pool.”

“I think that it was the other way around.”

“Did you let him win?”

“I never let a guy win.”

“So how did he get you home?”

“I think that I missed a shot.”

“Then what?”

“I made out with him on the pool table. We ended both getting kicked out of the bar.”

“You had nowhere to go so you ended up back at his place.”

“Back in his bed. If that’s how you want to put it.”

“It was that easy!”

“It was a lot more difficult than you might think.”

“Why? Because you decided to let him drive.”

“Because I fell for him so quickly.”

“Is Sunny losing her edge?”

“I’m losing my mind.”

“Wait until he gets you the ring.”

Emerald’s remedy seemed to coming apart just as she tried to hold it together. She couldn’t really go Sunny’s route. She was not ready to marriage. Even if that appeared to be Sunny’s intention, would she follow this story through to the altar?

“We broke up!”

“What happened? His stock portfolio took a dive?”

“No, I took a good hard look at him, and I realized that I’d end up killing him once we got married.”

“You realized that you’d kill him. Or that you’d kill each other.”

“He’s the one with the money. I’d take a long look at him, and I’d realize that I’d have to do him in just to keep my own independence.”

“How did that work? Did he get you on a pre-nup?”

“He just got me with his general obnoxiousness. I should have never slept with him.”

“Regret on your part?”

“It wasn’t so much that he convinced me how good he was. I just made him think that I was the best thing that he ever had. And that was enough to convince me that I must be something special.”

“Which you’re not?”

“Which I am. I just don’t need him telling me that I am!”

“So you dumped him to avoid blowing your cover.”

“Wouldn’t you do the same if you had the chance?”

“I don’t think that I’m ever going to get the chance.”

“What if you just took my place?”

“How am I going to do that?”

“I could teach you?”

“We’ve been trying to do that already. I’m no closer to being you than before.”

“Maybe we need to change your image.”

“I don’t look anything like you. We’re so different. Maybe that’s what I’ve finally learned.”

“Learned how?”

“I can try to look like you. I can learn your words. But I’m never going to feel comfortable doing what you do.”

“I need you to be me for a little while.”

“No one is going to believe that we’re the same person. What’s the problem? Haven’t you told him that the marriage is never going to happen.”

“I sent him packing.”

“So why do you need me?”

“To help me mop up.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Don’t worry. It probably won’t help anyway.”

Emerald tried to imagine how she could step in for Sunny.

“So we’re going through with the wedding?”

“You’ve decided to accept the ring.”

“When is the wedding?”

“I haven’t thought about it.”

“Neither have I!”

Emerald could never go through with the wedding. It was one thing to agree to substitute for Sunny. But she couldn’t really become her. She had her own agenda, and it would have easily forestalled any of the advances of Sunny’s potential fiancé.

“I wasn’t made for this at all.”

“Honey, what are you talking about?”

She started to consider Sunny’s actual intentions.

“You’re not going to try to kill him.”

“I thought that’s what you wanted.”

“You just needed to get the money from him.”

“And you were going to let him live.”

“If you let him live, he’s never going to let you get away with it.”

“I didn’t sign up for murder.”

All this because Emerald didn’t go home with some guy at bar.

“Emerald, it’s easy. I do it all the time.”

“But none of the guys really love you.”

“I don’t give them long enough to find out. Although I just made out with a really cute guy.”

“Doesn’t all this running around interfere with your plans?”

“I just bought a new house. I can pay for the mortgage. It’s almost a better deal than rent. I can sell it in ten years for a profit. It’s such a deal. You should go to cosmetics school.”

“I thought about it. I just can’t stand talking to those customers all day.”

“But you have to talk to all those people at the store.”
“That is temporary.”
“So what is permanent.”
“That don’t know.”
“More college.”
“I want to find the right guy first.”
“I’ve got the perfect guy for you. And he’d pay for everything. It’s just that you need to be a little more interesting in bed.”
“You can show me!”
“I can show you a few things. You can learn on your own.”
“Maybe you can demonstrate them on me. Then I can try them on you.”
“What are you asking me?”
“A little girl on girl action.”
“Emerald, I’m not like that. I didn’t think that you were either. You’re the one who’s afraid of her own orgasms.”
“It’s not as if I’m really afraid.”
“Then what are you trying to tell me.”
“I’m not really into girls. Not strictly. But if being with a girl will help me with being with a guy, I’m not going to object. I like the female body.”
“I’m not here to help in that department.”
“But I want you.”
“I’m not real unless you haven’t noticed.”
“So you’re not going to marry that guy.”
“I left him for you. You think that you can take over in my stead.”
“What am I supposed to do? Who am I supposed to look for?”
“Some guy who’s looking for some consolation. But you can’t quit in the middle of things.”