

*Love
Unfinished*



Darian Wilke

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Love Unfinished
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Print addition:
ISBN-13: 978-0-615-48405-1
ISBN-10: 0615484050
Library of Congress Control Number: 2011908193



This book is dedicated to my husband, for his endless support, encouragement, and understanding. To my Mom, although she is no longer with me to see my dream in print, without her this book would never have been started. And to my friends Teri and Matt, for their patience and help throughout this whole process.

One

~CAROL~

May 23rd, 1946

The stunned congregation watched the explosion of red condiment, but Ted saw only the beautiful young lady with her face and paisley green sundress splattered with ketchup.

Her ocean-colored eyes were wet with embarrassment. She turned away from the gawkers and tried to discreetly lick her thumb and rub the splotches off.

Ted strolled up beside her, cleared his throat, and coyly offered a handkerchief. She raised a hand to shield her eyes from the beaming sun and gazed at the tall, thin dark-haired boy holding out his hand to her. Seeing him there so eager and handsome she felt something change inside her, although she didn't understand what it was.

She tried to offer a smile. "Thank you."

"It's very pretty," he said with an awkward nod at her stained dress.

"Thanks. It was anyway. Stupid Tommy and his tantrums. He always ruins everything," she said with a sideways sneer to her little brother pouting behind the tree. "My Mama's gonna be so mad when she sees this."

"Try this," he said, dipping the embroidered cloth into a pitcher of water. "My Mom always uses a wet cloth." His hand trembled as he rubbed a smear on her shoulder. "I, uh, maybe you should do it?" he said with a nervous chuckle and handed her the handkerchief.

She dabbed the dress with the wet hankie and glanced back up at him with a grin. "I think it's working."

"It should come out—"

"I'm Carol," she interrupted as she extended her hand.

"T-Ted," he said, and clasped his hand around hers. "I, um, you wanna go over there?" he said, nodding toward the swing set.

“Sure.” She jumped up from the picnic table and started to walk past her infuriated parents scolding her brother. “Mama,” she whispered from over her shoulder and pointed toward the swings.

June 16th, 1954

“Gosh, Mama...it’s beautiful,” Carol whispered as she fluffed out her skirt.

“I can hardly believe I managed to finish it on time.” Mama clasped her hands at her waist as she took in the satin wedding dress. “You look amazing,” she said, raising a hankie to her eyes.

“Oh, Mama, don’t start. If you start crying then I’ll start crying,” Carol teased as she fanned her watery eyes with a hand.

“Mama grinned, dabbing her eyes with a hankie as she composed herself. “Goodness this heat. I hope my hair holds up.” Mama pressed a hand to her up-do as she stepped closer to Carol. “Just look at you. I’m so happy for you, the both of you.”

“It’s finally going to happen, Mama! I can’t believe it,” Carol said, taking an anxious breath and gave Mama’s hand an excited tug.

“There’s just one last thing,” Mama said, riffling through her purse and pulled out a hand stitched hankie. “It’s from Aunt Sally. She wanted you to have it when the time was right.” She unfolded the bunched up cloth and uncovered a brilliant gold brooch.

“Oh, Mama, I couldn’t possibly—”

“Hush now, it’s what she wanted. And I’ve just the spot for it anyhow,” she said through a smile and carefully pinned the brooch in the V of Carol’s neckline. “Perfect...”

Carol ran a finger along the small delicate swirls and the emerald jewel. “I don’t deserve this much,” her soft voice cracked.

“You deserve nothing less, baby,” Mama said as she patted Carol’s hand. “There, now you’re the perfect bride.”

The entire town was there to celebrate the marriage of the kids they all knew would marry someday. The preacher and deacons attempted to seat the guests crammed in the pews by setting up dusty folding chairs from the cellar. Women huffed in frustration, fanned themselves, and pressed worried hands to their delicate up-dos in the humid stagnant air.

Carol stepped onto the crisp white aisle runner, and her soft features were luminous in the golden sunset pouring through the faded stained-glass windows. With her loving eyes fixated on Ted waiting at the altar, the church hushed in romantic awe as the heat was forgotten.

Ted's legs trembled at the sight of this captivating woman as she walked toward, with her smile so bright it made the stars jealous. He took her hands into his and the instant her attention shifted from adjusting her train to his eyes, everything around them morphed to a gray blur. Verses the preacher read became a muffled slow motion speech, the whipping sounds of the makeshift paper fans faded to tiny flutters, and the anxious pounding of her heart slowed to a steady beat as she stood hand in hand with her best friend.

Carol looked radiant in the handmade dress. The long, lacy train was draped behind her as she gazed into her new husband's eyes. Carol cocked her shoulders back, standing tall and confident in the gown Mama so carefully made. Not a hint of doubt or worry flickered in her stare. *Everyone should be so lucky to marry their soul mate*, she thought, marveling the tender man gazing back at her. She heard the preacher's cue, and then gently slid the simple wedding band on Ted's long finger as she recited her vows by heart.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife," the preacher announced with a wrinkled grin.

The crowd erupted into joyous clapping as the couple turned to face them. Her body exhaled in relief, grateful to start the path in life she was meant to be on. She tried to blink them back, but tears trickled down her blushed cheeks as they rushed down the aisle with their hands clasped together.

"You two need to be getting on to the reception. Folks are waiting for you," Carol's Daddy said as he closed the car door for her. "I'm getting your Mama, and then we'll be on behind you."

"All right Daddy. We'll see you at the hall," Carol said, waving as the car pulled away.

Carol loved the way the satin shimmered in the faint evening light. The embroidered lace trim glided between her fingertips; she could hardly imagine the abuse Mama's hands must have suffered sewing the pearls and crystals on the gown.

Ted smiled in awe at the young bride beside him, and raised an arm gesturing for her to scoot closer.

“I’m Mrs. Ted Parkman,” she said as she scooted across the bucket seat, stretching her arm to admire the gold band on her left hand. “I can’t believe we’re finally married.”

“Just think, this time tomorrow we’ll be on our honeymoon! What do you want to do first, love? Do some site seeing? Maybe find something for the house?”

“I want to lie on the beach all day, just like a spoiled movie star!” she said through a chuckle. “Wouldn’t that be lovely, Ted? And how you deserve the break with the hours you’ve worked lately.”

Carol closed her eyes and pictured huge blue waves rolling onto the smooth sandy shore. “Oh it’s going to be beautiful, Ted. I just know it,” she said, opening her eyes from the childlike daydream.

“Sure turned out to be a nice night, huh? With those clouds earlier, I thought we’d be eating in the rain,” he said, rolling down the window.

Huge elm trees hung over the small road like a canopy, shielding it from the clear evening sky. Ted sat up a little straighter, rubbing his tired eyes to focus better on the curvy stretch of pavement.

Carol leaned against him as she gazed at the stars peeking through the leaves. It almost felt like a carnival ride to her on the big hills, with dips and turns along the windy road. As they came down a large hill that felt like it might lift her right out of the seat, the car started into a sharp turn and pushed her into Ted as they drove.

As the car came around the bend they saw a tanker jackknifed in the middle of the two-lane route.

“Ted, look out!” she screamed as she instinctively braced against the dashboard for the impending crash.

Ted tried to swerve and slammed his foot on the brake. The tires screeched, the car clipped the side of the truck and whipped it into a spin. Carol’s horrified shriek filled the quiet night as the car started to roll. Time seemed to stop. Before she could even think the car had skidded down the shoulder and slammed into the guard rail. Her limp, battered body hung helplessly half out of the windshield.

“Carol! Where are you?” Ted screamed with desperation. “Please...please...Carol...” he mumbled. His exhausted arm frantically reached in the air and caught part of her weathered dress.

“Carol!” He tugged on a tattered strip of her gown. He could only make out a hint of her white form. He grasped and fumbled in

the darkness in search of her hand. He struggled to bring her slender hand to his lips, kissing her limp fingers and caressed them on his cheek.

Carol's head lay in a pool of blood on the mangled hood. Her beautiful wedding dress was a shredded mess with beads and crystals scattered everywhere. The delicate satin was smeared with bloody swirls and grime from the road. Her mind was filled with fog and confusion, muffling the vague whispers and strange noises around her.

A sudden gasp filled her lungs. She screamed in horror as piercing pain coursed through her body.

"Carol?"

"Ted...is that you?" she managed.

"Are you all right? I...I can't see," he mumbled. His exhausted body fell against the steering wheel.

"I, I think," Carol tried to take a breath. "I'm on the hood. It hurts." Bloody ran from her nose as she murmured. She tried to lift herself up, but her muscles had nothing left in them for movement.

"Can you feel me?" he stammered. His wearied eyes fought to stay open as a strange tingling numbness crept up to his fingers clutching hers.

"I, I can't feel you Ted," she cried in fear. "Ted, please help me!"

"I hear...someone's coming. Hold on, Carol," he mumbled. Dizziness swirled in his head. "I...I love you..." he said through a wheeze.

Her weeping slowed to faint whimpers; her eyes only catching quick flashes of light as sounds faded in and out around her. "Ted...I'm so tired," she said. Her slender hand went limp and fell to the dashboard.

"You hold on, do you hear me?" he said through a desperate cry. He started bawling and tried to squeeze life back into her hand. "Carol please!"

"Ted..." she whispered. "I, I lov..." She struggled to breathe but choked on the blood pooled in her throat. She lay with eyes wide and panicked, gasping before she collapsed like a rag doll.

"Carol?" he whispered. "Talk to me," he cried as he shook her arm to revive her. "Please, baby..." Tears streamed down his bloodstained face. Faint panicked yelling came toward the car and his foggy, exhausted eyes forced themselves shut.

“Please, God, I need my baby...” he muttered. His eyes flickered one last time, and then his body buckled beside hers.

Two

Dark stillness clung to her. No sight or sound filled her senses. At first a faint muffled noise trickled in, growing louder as her thoughts sparked and lit her soul alive. It was calming and rhythmic. A soft whisper of the gentle swishing of the ocean, with big foamy waves rolling onto the shore and back out again. A terrible weight pulled on her eyelids and her body with a paralyzing numbness. Carol strained to wiggle her fingertips and felt the rough crystals of sand between her fingers. The morning sun dotted beads of sweat onto her face, but was calmed by a cool breeze that drifted onto the shore and brought with it the salty scent of the sea.

Was it all a dream, she wondered as she dug her hand in the hot sand. *Am I on my honeymoon?* She grimaced trying to urge her muscles to lift her body up. As she gained focus, a flurry of visions of metal, sparks, and blood flew through her hazy mind. She gasped for air and instinctively shot up.

She squinted and covered her brow with a hand to see through the green blobs dotting her vision. As the fuzziness cleared, a breathless awe consumed her. The beautiful crystal-clear water and white shoreline stretched as far as her eyes could see. She took a hushed breath, pressed a hand to her cheek, and turned to share the moment with Ted. But he wasn't there.

Carol stumbled clumsily trying to stand and glanced down at her feet to see what they were tangled on. She was still in her wedding dress. A rush of panic engulfed her as she scanned the beach for Ted.

"Ted!" she called out. "Ted!" her hysteric voice screamed again. "Where am I?" she whispered. Frightened and her lip quivering, she spun around in dread glancing for signs of life on the empty island.

For countless hours she walked the length of the desolate shore. Her feet dragged through the sand, her muscles ached from clutching the weight of the gown, and caused her arms to give way and dangle like stretched rubber.

Exhausted, she collapsed onto the ground. The salty sting of sweat burned her eyes as it rolled from her forehead. She wiped her brows and tried to calm the furious pounding of her heaving chest.

“Where is he?” she asked no one as she twisted the wedding band around her finger. She stared down the shore, and a tear began to roll down her sand covered cheek when she saw the tiny hint of figure waving at her in the distance.

“Ted!” She jumped to her feet, bunched the dress up in her arms and started jogging down the beach. “Ted! Ted, I’m here!” she yelled, waving her arm in the air as she ran. The dark figure stood motionless as it waited. She smiled. “Ted I’m coming!”

Her sprint slowed to an apprehensive walk as her look contorted from delight to sudden bewilderment. Cautious, Carol stood at an angle as she approached the familiar face.

“Grandma?” She leaned in a little, “Is that you?” she whispered, eyeing the soft wrinkled features.

“Hello, Pumpkin,” Grandma said with a warm smile.

“I, but...Grandma, you’re, you’re de—”

“Yes, Carol, I am no longer a part of Earth,” she interrupted, cocking her head to the side. A tender gaze of patience poured through her hazel eyes. Her complexion glowed in the daylight, looking flawless and healthy. Her soft porcelain skin was warmed by her blushed round cheeks.

“Where’s Ted?” Carol asked through a trembling whisper. “What’s going on? Where am I?”

“He has been sent to his own waiting place, Pumpkin. His guide is with him now, I am sure,” she assured Carol with a sweet grin and reached to press her hand to Carol’s cheek.

Carol almost jerked away, still not believing this woman could be her Grandma. “Waiting place? I, I don’t understand.”

“It can take time to set in, Pumpkin. Be patient and I can explain.”

“For *what* to set in?” Carol’s brows pinched in worry as she shook her head in disbelief. “Where’s Ted, Grandma!” she demanded.

Grandma let out a patient breath. “Hush now, Pumpkin,” she whispered as she returned her hands to her lap.

“Why won’t you tell me what’s going on?” Carol collapsed to the ground, unable to restrain the surge of frenzied tears, and buried her face in her hands.

Grandma knelt on the sand, pulled Carol into a gentle embrace, and cradled her distraught grandbaby on the shore that Carol chose. Carol sobbed as she breathed in Grandma's comforting scent of baby powder with every panicked inhale.

Carol murmured into Grandma's shoulder as her mind ran wild with horrifying fragmented images and sounds. She saw herself from the side of the road as the car flipped, heard the crunch of metal and saw her body smash through the windshield. "Oh my God..." she breathed in terror and pushed Grandma away. "Am I, did I die?" She clasped her hands over her mouth in horror.

"Yes, Pumpkin, you did," Grandma said and reached to comfort her.

Carol slapped Grandma's hand away as she shook her head. "No, no, that's not right. I, I couldn't be dea—"

"Shh, Pumpkin, breathe—"

"Is, is this heaven? Did Ted— is he here too?" Carol cried as her black eyeliner drizzled from her tears.

"This is your waiting place Carol. Ted is in his own."

"Waiting place? Waiting for heaven?"

"No, Honey. Waiting to complete your soul's fulfillment, your destiny."

"Destiny? I don't understand..." Her feverish breathing grew to labored pants, sucking in more air than her lungs could handle.

"I know it's hard to understand, Honey. But you haven't finished your life's fate. So, you wait here, until it's time for you to go back."

"Go back? I don't understand. Why can't I be with Ted now? Please let me see him," Carol begged.

"You must find him again, Pumpkin, to finish what time wouldn't allow—"

"Please, Grandma, you don't make any sense."

"You must finish your lives together, by finding each other again."

"But I already had him..." Carol muttered. "Why won't you take me to him?"

Grandma caressed Carol's cheek. "I wish I could, Pumpkin. But you'll get a chance to love him in a new life, to find your Ted again." She bent her lips to a soft smile and ran her fingers through Carol's hair to comfort her.

"A new life! But, I, I don't want to—" Carol shook her head. "I want to be with Ted now. How can we find each other if we're

strangers!” she cried as her tears flowed freely down her face. “Why can’t I be with Ted?” she said through a sob.

“You must trust in the strength of your love. That is what will pull you together again.”

“But if he doesn’t remember me? How will—?”

“His heart will remember. Love will remind him. If only the faintest feeling of familiarity, you’ll know that you’re meant to love each other.”

“I, I don’t want to, Grandma,” she muttered with a shaky voice. “I want to see him now.”

The breeze grew stiff and cool, covering her pale arms in goose bumps as a shiver crept down her spine. The clear horizon dimmed to perfect shades of gold, crimson and purple as her time there dwindled. Carol had never seen anything so beautiful before. The rolling waves slowed to mere ripples in the water. The sand felt cold and soothing against her tired, blistered feet, and she felt a twinge of comfort ending her first day there wrapped in Grandma’s arms.

Grandma knew the change churning in the distance. “Ah yes, your time comes soon,” she said as she turned back to Carol. “It’s time for me to leave now, Pumpkin.” The fullness of her love beamed in her tender smile. “You looked stunning.” Her eyes welled up as she looked down at her grown granddaughter, turned, and walked away.

Carol jumped up and began chasing after Grandma. “Wait!” she screamed as she sprinted across the shore. “Don’t leave me. I don’t want you to go! Please, take me to him,” she yelled as she tripped and fell.

She scrunched into a tight ball, holding herself as she bawled on the cold sand and watched grandma fade into a billowing mist. She started to rock herself, sobbing and muttering as she swayed in the darkness. “I want to be with Ted...Please, I want to be with Ted,” she whispered over and over until the sky grew black. And then darkness took her again. The cool breeze vanished. She heard no soft swishing of the waves. She lay on the cold ground, holding herself in the darkest of black. Waiting.

Three

~EMMA~

June 20th, 1992

Emma cracked the window to let in the cool evening air, hoping it would distract her from his annoying drumming on the armrest. The barrier between them seemed to soak up the air around her, stealing her breath before her lungs could fill. Her gaze drifted to the figure beside her. He was handsome with firm muscles filling the sleeves of his Oxford shirt, calm and lost in his own thoughts.

“I think we need counseling,” Emma said, not hearing the words come out of her mouth.

“What?” he said, cocking his head toward her.

“I think we need counseling, Craig. I think we need—”

“Counseling? Like, marriage counseling?”

“Well, don’t you agree?” she said, shifting on the cold leather seat.

He ran his fingers from his forehead to the nape of his neck, took a deep breath, and rubbed the knot in his shoulder.

“It wouldn’t suit our image well. You know how people around here like to talk,” he said as he straightened his tie.

“The superficial smiles, the mindless chatter at these stupid events. Is that really all that’s left of us?”

“The election has been hard on both of us,” he said as he put a cool hand on her knee. “But doing something like that would be detrimental.”

“Detrimental to what, your election or our marriage?” she said, crossing her legs and watched his loveless hand fall from her knee. She tightened the shawl around her bare shoulders and raised her eyes to his.

He fidgeted with a cufflink and straightened his sleeve. “Once the election is over, things will be better. Just ride it out, Emma.”

“Ride it out? I don’t want to just *ride out* our marriage—”

“What do you expect, Emma? We’ve been married for eight years. Young love can’t last forever.”

Resentment tore through her well-trained patience. She crossed her arms and let a fierce stare rest on his unflinching gaze.

“Of course I don’t expect that, Craig. I’m not—”

“You really want to be pawing all over each other like teenagers? I think we both realized a long time ago the motives behind our marriage.”

Emma froze staring at his polished onyx eyes.

He took a peaceful breath, raised his cheeks to the charming smile people loved, and took her hand in his. “We may not have the perfect marriage, darling, but our needs keep us together. It makes our marriage work.”

“Marriage shouldn’t feel like an arrangement, Craig. That’s not what I want for us.”

He gently kissed the diamond ring on her left hand as his eyes rose to hers. “Now, darling, you know where you would be without me,” he said with a smile. “And I cannot fulfill my dreams without you. We’re a team, you and I.”

As he caressed her hand on his smooth cheek, she was desperate to feel a flicker of love between them in his touch.

“So, you see, we’re perfect for each other. Don’t let being tired spoil a perfect understanding.”

“I don’t want an *understanding*, Craig. I want love, what happened to—”

“Oh, Emma,” he laughed, shaking his head as he let go of her hand. “That childish imagination of yours. Let’s not discuss this anymore.”

“We need counseling Craig. We need something. I can’t keep going on like this, being married to a stranger,” Emma said as she faced him square.

Craig reached into his briefcase and started flipping through the week’s agenda. “Ah, remember that you have to attend that auction tomorrow. We need to have a presence established among the people.”

“Doesn’t it bother you that we’re like—like business partners?”

“Marriage *is* a partnership, is it not?” he said with a sideways glance.

“What about passion? What happened to that?”

“It’s really important for us that you be there tomorrow. Hopefully more collected than you are now,” he said as he closed the planner. Craig tipped his head back against the headrest, closed his eyes, and interlaced his fingers on his lap.

“Craig?” she said, leaning forward and saw his relaxed, closed eyes. “Craig?”

“I’m tired, Emma,” he said without opening his eyes, shifted on the seat, and turned his back to her.

“But...Craig?” she said softly. His eyes clenched tighter, and she knew no response would come from his lips.

The limo seemed to split in half from the quake of their crumbling marriage. She took a solemn, empty breath watching the husband she lost to greed. Her watery stare shifted to the window as the city lights faded to specks as the car coiled up the hill. She scooted closer to the door, enforcing the chill between them.

“I can’t do this,” she whispered to no one.

Hints of morning sun crept through the taut curtains, dotting flecks of light in the dark, loveless bedroom. Emma whimpered in her sleep as she rolled over and dug her head deeper into the feather pillow. Sweat beaded on her face as muffled screams, sparks, and suffocation twisted her dreams into a familiar fright.

“Find me,” a voice whispered as her eyes shot open to wake. Her fingers trembled as she placed a hand on her heaving chest. She forced deep breaths to soothe her frantic heart as she took in the elegance of the posh Victorian room.

“It was just a dream,” she assured herself and took in another breath. “Just a bad dream,” she whispered. She rubbed her shoulders as if to wipe off the surreal nightmare and slid out of bed.

The swift clacking of the butler’s approaching steps echoed off the marble floor in the hallway. The air hinted of musk and laundry detergent as he popped his head in the doorway. “Ah, you’re up. Wonderful. Good morning, Mrs. Beckett.”

“Of course I’m up, Edward. Why wouldn’t I be?” she said, splashing cool water on her face as visions of the nightmare still flashed through her mind.

“Are you feeling all right, ma’am?” he asked and almost touched her shoulder.

“Do you have today’s schedule?” she said, patting her face with a towel.

“You’re to leave for the auction at eight, ma’am.”

“Have you heard from Olivia? She was due back in town last week, but I haven’t heard from her.”

“Well, Ms. Child does seem to have loose restraints on schedules.”

“Perhaps she’ll call for lunch, being Monday and all,” Emma said, scooting by his thin body in the bathroom doorway.

“I’m afraid that wouldn’t work. Mr. Beckett called earlier. He requests you meet him for lunch,” Edward said, making himself comfortable on her vanity chair and crossed his legs.

“Did he say why?”

“It’s of no importance, I’m sure,” he said with a flick of his manicured nails.

“Of course he didn’t,” she said to herself and leaned into the mirror to inspect the puffy circles engulfing her washed out gaze.

“You’re to head straight to his office after the auction. I have already instructed the driver of this.”

Dreading the unexpected lunch, her stomach coiled into knots. “Yes, of course.”

“Well, then, I’ll leave you to ready yourself,” Edward said with an abrupt twist of his feet and left the room.

“God forbid I don’t stay on schedule,” she said to herself, leaning close to the mirror and pressed a fingertip into the squishing circles. She let out a groan as she turned and eyed the walk-in closet. “Another day in the life of a trophy wife.” Craig’s fascination with being envied slid its slimy fingers into every crevasse of their lives, and her apparel was no exception. Her well-trained eye was mindful of his wishes.

With her feet planted to the ground, Emma’s stance wilted in the full-length mirror examining the modern-day Jackie O. that looked back at her. People saw only a beautiful, prominent woman in society, but she loathed the pathetic woman in her reflection. She tugged on the chiffon blouse, neatening the tuck in the waistband as she twisted her feet, second-guessing the ankle wrap shoes. With one last scrutinizing turn, *they might pass inspection*, she thought.

“You look lovely.”

Startled, Emma spun around toward the voice behind her.

“God, Prudence,” Emma said holding a hand to her chest. “Thank you. Is it too casual?”

Prudence was in her early twenties, Emma would guess, with shoulder length mousy brown hair, stunning hazel eyes, and a curvy youthful body.

“I’ve never been to an auction,” Prudence said with a half shrug. “But the top is very cute.” Prudence smiled and untwisted the strap on Emma’s blouse.

“I’m like a damn puppet,” Emma muttered, wiping a smudge of eyeliner from her eye.

“Excuse me?” Prudence said.

“I’m sorry. I must sound like a whiny, spoiled rich girl to you,” Emma said as she turned to face Prudence. “Well, what do you think?”

“Very nice, ma’am. Pretty as always.”

“Just the way he likes it,” Emma said, scowling at her reflection before turning to the door.

Emma thought only of last night’s conversation with Craig while she rode to the auction house.

“I can’t let him destroy me,” she whispered to herself, nibbling on a fingernail as the car approached the parking lot. “What is life without love?”

“Pardon?” the driver said.

“Oh, nothing, just talking to myself,” Emma said as the car stopped.

Scattered throughout the parking lot were groups of spoiled socialites engaged in superficial conversations shrouded with plastic smiles. *I am not like them*, she thought as she walked toward the mass of people being herded into the auction house like sheep. Once inside she immediately felt the twinge of regret and looked for a way to avoid the woman meandering down the first aisle. Andrea Norton couldn’t be a day older than Prudence, Emma guessed, as she stared at the thin beauty admiring a hideous zebra print chair. But Joe didn’t marry her for her personality. Everyone knew that. Andrea is a former Playboy Bunny - Miss July in fact.

“Oh my God! Emma, I’m so happy to see you!” Andrea squealed when she spotted Emma.

“Andrea, what a pleasure,” Emma said as they exchanged a hug.

“I have been trying to get a hold of you, you naughty thing!” Andrea smiled and smacked Emma on the arm. “I was just saying to Joe today how I just can’t get you on the phone.”

Masterfully hiding her disgust for the black-haired Bunny, Emma smiled and said, “Well, with Craig running for—”

“I tell you, if Joe was only half as sweet as him, I’d never let him out of my sight!” Andrea said with a wink. “I don’t know how you can pull yourself away from that man.”

Suddenly sickened by the admiration for Craig, Emma hoped to change the conversation. “So, what brings you to the auction today?”

“We’ve just bought a house in the hills. It has this terrible country motif,” Andrea said with a curled lip. “I told Joe, I can’t possibly vacation there until it’s *completely* remodeled.”

“Oh, yes, how terrible.” Emma’s tone dripped with sarcasm.

“Come on, let’s see what goodies we can find,” Andrea said, wrapping her arm around Emma’s.

Andrea giggled and squealed as she poked fun at the others in attendance. “God, what a mess. Look at her dress,” Andrea chuckled, nodding to a woman by a few paintings. “Deserves a closer look, don’t you think?” she said as she pulled Emma with her.

As Andrea heckled and teased, Emma drowned out her squirrel-like giggles and bent over for a closer look at the paintings.

“It’s quite nice, don’t you think?” Emma said, stretching to admire the pastel scene behind the velvet ropes.

“Ugh, old and *ugly*,” Andrea said.

“You think so? I think it’s quite nice.”

“I thought you had better taste than that,” Andrea snickered. “Oh, hold that thought,” she said, held her index finger up to Emma, then bounced away to greet a handsome man across the room.

“It’s the Victorian era I believe,” said an attendant to Emma’s interest in the collection.

“Who’s the artist? I can’t make out the signature.”

“The owner says it’s a Shivley painting?” The attendant nodded toward a man in the back chatting with the manager.

“Shivley you say? Hmm.”

“Just a moment, I’ll get him to clarify,” he said as he scurried toward the owner of the painting. He gestured at Emma as they spoke, then the small group walked toward her.

“It’s a very old piece. Lovely palette for its time,” the manager said, extending his hand to Emma. “I’m Charles Hubert, auction house manager.”

“It’s interesting yes.” As Emma shook the manager’s hand, her heart sped to an eager thud as she stole a look at the quite man standing just behind them. He was much taller than Craig, *must be at least six and a half feet*, she thought.

“The artist is relatively unknown. Only a handful of his paintings can be found today. Probably because of his color choices

at the time,” the man said with a smile and reached to shake her hand.

His slender face had a cute notch in the chin she wanted to press her finger into. He had a handsome, boy next door kind of sweetness about him.

As they held their stare, he realized he still held her hand. His eyes flickered embarrassment as he jerked his hand back and tucked it in a pocket.

She fidgeted with a piece of her skirt pinched between her fingers and wiggled on her feet on the heels of her shoes like an awkward, self-conscious teenager.

The two seemed to forget the manager still stood there. “If you have any further questions, feel free to ask the staff,” he said before excusing himself.

“How you did?” Emma pressed a hand on her forehead. *I sound like an idiot.* “How did you, ugh,” she smiled, glanced at the floor and tried to catch her breath. “Where did you find the painting?” she managed.

He blushed being caught in her gaze and fidgeted with his already straight tie. His stubble covered cheeks bent to a faint smile. “I’m sorry, what?”

Emma’s flushed cheeks raised to a smile. “I said where did you find it?”

“A farmhouse in Arkansas, if you can believe it.” He rubbed the back of his neck and cleared his throat. “I’m sorry, I don’t usually go to these things, my partner does. He’s better with people than me.” Two faint dimples appeared as a boyish grin lit up his face. “I, uh...” his voice cracked through a nervous chuckle.

“You, um.” Emma smiled and tried to look away, but couldn’t pry her gaze from his. “We must have met before,” she said.

He grinned. “I think I would remember that,” he said.

“Are you sure? It feels like—” she blushed, realizing she was staring again.

“I know, but I don’t think—”

“Perhaps at another auction?” she said.

“No, I don’t usually—”

“Go to these things, your partner does,” she interrupted with a nervous laugh.

Emma found herself stepping closer to him and wanted to wrap her arm around his.

He stood motionless, taking in every feature of the woman before him. “Stunning,” he hushed.

“Pardon?”

“Nothing. I’m sorry,” he said, a rosy hue covering his cheeks. “I can’t help but—”

“Come on, let’s get good seats. I want to watch that one,” Andrea said as she stepped between the two, nodding to a woman by the zebra print chair. “She’s eyeing my stuff,” she said, not acknowledging Emma’s conversation and pulled her away.

“It was nice chatting with you,” Emma said, smiling over her shoulder as Andrea continued pulling her.

Four

Emma peeked over her shoulder throughout the auction searching for the strange man, but saw only excited, spoiled faces celebrating their win. Now back in the seclusion of the car she resisted smiling as she thought of him. The rush of his presence was something she hadn't known before, yet felt guilty letting it overrun her thoughts. She glanced down the street through the window. Her excitement of the forbidden flirtation was quickly subdued by the sight of Craig's building.

The town car pulled up to the white stucco building's side entrance where an attendant helped her out of the car. As she walked through the grand halls busy interns and secretaries scurried about around her clutching stacks of files wearing flustered looks and hurried steps.

As Emma approached Craig's office, his secretary sat filing a snagged nail with her head cocked, and resting a phone on her shoulder.

"Yes, I understand the dilemma. But Mr. Beckett has several meetings today and simply cannot move the appointment," Shelia said into the phone.

Emma cleared her throat to gain Shelia's attention.

Shelia glanced at Emma with a hint of annoyance and spun her chair to turn her back to Emma.

"Well, flip through your little calendar to see what you can move then, Carrie," Shelia said.

"Excuse me, Shelia," Emma whispered.

Shelia raised a hand over her shoulder to hush Emma without looking at her.

Emma waited for a moment. "I'm sorry, Sheila, but—"

Shelia whipped her chair around, snickered at Emma and pointed to the phone resting on her shoulder.

Emma hoped she wouldn't intrude into a meeting, and quietly opened the door.

Craig was perched on the edge of his desk with one leg casually propped on a side chair. His face flushed a warm peachy color as he

spotted Emma in the room. He seemed to glide in slow motion; his dark eyes sparkled like polished onyx looking at her and still made her heart pound a little faster. The man was handsome; even she had to admit that. His tender grin almost made him tempting, until she felt the coldness of his lips pressed against hers.

“Hello, my love. I’m so glad you could make it,” he said, then cupped his hand on the small of her back and leaned in for a hug. “Don’t screw this up for me,” he whispered into her ear.

“Emma, gorgeous as always,” said a raspy voice beside her. Craig stepped to the side, and there sat Richard Daminski, sipping coffee in the corner chair. He was in his late sixties, short, and balding terribly with an oil slicked comb-over. Richard was filthy rich, eerily creepy with his crooked smile, and one of Craig’s biggest supporters.

“Oh, Richard, I didn’t see you hiding there!”

The fat old man grunted trying to push himself out of the chair. He panted shuffling to Emma and kissed her on the cheek. “Such a beauty you are—”

“Don’t go getting any ideas there, Rich. There’s plenty of interns for that.” Craig chuckled and pulled Emma closer to him.

Emma chimed in with a pleasant smile. “Now, you two behave.”

“Well, shall we?” Craig suggested and gestured to the door.

During lunch Emma learned grotesque eating habits would be a vast improvement for Richard. He chomped on his lobster as if it were his last meal, letting little bits of meat flick off his tongue and land on the tablecloth. Richard broke into obnoxious laughter. “Woops, looks like that one got away from me!” he said as he picked up the hunk of food and tossed it in his mouth.

After the main course and two deserts Richard seemed to have his fill. He leaned back in his chair and not so nonchalantly loosened his belt. “Now, for the business at hand,” he said, picking at his teeth with a fingernail.

Craig squeezed Emma’s knee underneath the table; his cue that she was to turn on the charm.

“Seems that *preservation fund* we thought might be sending some funds our way could be on the chopping block,” he said, picked a piece of food off his teeth and flicked it at the floor. “Damn auditors, always got their noses in other people’s business.”

“Would that affect the—”

“Might have an impact on contributions. If ya’ catch my drift,” Richard interrupted.

“Would it be helpful if I called in a few favors?” Craig asked.

“Unless your friends are Regan himself, probably ain’t going to do a damn bit of good!”

Craig dug his fingernails into Emma’s kneecap.

“Oh, Richard, don’t be so dramatic,” she said with her gentle, well-trained tone.

“Ain’t drama, sweetheart. It’s politics.”

“I’m sure someone as intelligent as you can figure out a workaround,” she said, flashing a charming grin at the round-faced businessman.

“Honey, I love your enthusiasm, but I know when not to put my dick in a noose.”

“Richard!” she teased and swatted his hand. “Now, Richard, if we let Rumbart win that will be the end of us all. You know how those types are.”

“Look, I hate that brown-nosed Democrat as much as the next guy but—”

She knelt back in the plush chair, crossed her arms, and shook her head with solemn disappointment. “If he manages to pull ahead of Craig and wins the spot, you know the first place he’ll start looking when he gets elected Richard.”

“I’ll have time to tidy the books up before he—”

“Look what he’s done to Wakefield. Ruined him already,” she said. “He sees no place for businessmen like yours - and Craig’s - *type*, in politics.”

Richard started gnawing on a toothpick and fixated his stare on the drab beige tablecloth. She could see his crooked wheels turning, envisioning legislature rejections, tax increases, and millions falling out of his pockets.

Craig tapped her leg, a small gesture of approval she supposed. Emma had softness about her, a gentle likeability that swayed people in the direction she wanted them to go. She was a priceless commodity for Craig’s endeavors.

They shared a few minutes of lighthearted chatting back at the office before Richard politely excused himself to another meeting, leaving her and Craig alone. The dark stain of the massive wood

accent furnishings made the room feel cramped and suffocating. The sleek chocolate brown chairs echoed his forceful masculinity. Emma stood in the center feeling minuscule and worthless in the refined office.

She hesitated before sitting in the stiff leather chair as her timid mouth opened, “Well, that ended well, didn’t it?”

“That fat old bastard, trying to back out on me like that!” Craig said and threw his jacket at the sofa.

She flinched as the balled up fabric whooshed by her head.

“Stupid old prick better grab ahold of his balls.”

She took a deep, quiet breath. “He won’t pull out. He has as much riding on this election as you. Well, more actually,” she said, almost wincing in reluctance.

He grunted, whipped his chair around, and faced the sage green wall covered with his prized awards.

The faint ticking of the gold clock seemed to mock her as she sat in silent agony. *Am I supposed to leave*, she wondered, watching his chair turned away from her. She almost yelped as his chair spun around but caught her poise moments before he eyed her.

“I suppose you might be right. This time. If he doesn’t find some other way to filter it, it’ll hurt him more than me. I can find another source, but few lawyers will do for him what I have,” he said with a cocky tone of assurance.

“Yes, of course. There are plenty of avenues.”

He bent over his desk and started to thumb through a file. “That’s it, you can go,” he said, nodding at the door. “Oh, wait—”

Pausing for a half a second, she almost expected him to say thank-you.

“We’re going to a fundraiser this weekend that’s not on your schedule. There are several people attending and it would help us if your smiling face is there with me. Particularly Sharon McCormick - I have a meeting with her husband and it would do us well if she came home with happy tales to tell,” Craig said, not looking up at her.

“Craig, I don’t mind doing some of these things to help you, but you know how I feel about lying like—”

“I won’t hear it, Emma. I need his backing, so it needs to be done and that’s it.”

“Craig,” she said, softening her tone as she took a step forward to catch his look. “I know you had good intentions with this election business—”

“*Business?*” he repeated with a raised a brow.

“But, I think that...perhaps your plans have veered off a bit. Don’t you think?” her voice cracked with hesitancy.

“How the hell do you figure that? We’re right on track.”

“It just seems, well, your drive as a lawyer was to give us a comfortable life. And it has,” she said, taking his stiff hand inside hers. “It just seems that this election and all, it goes above wanting a good life, seems a bit... a bit greedy, perhaps.”

He shook her hand off. “You think I’m greedy?”

“I’m concerned this avenue you’re exploring, with Richard and the people like him. Maybe it’s clouding your judgment a bit.”

“Perhaps you’re just too weak willed for the challenge.”

“Craig, I have only good intentions here—”

“I thought I rid you of that southern trash honesty. I see now that I haven’t,” he said, scooting his chair back and eyed Emma.

“I am not southern trash, Craig. Damn it, why do you—”

“Look at you, one unkind word and you’re all flushed and cursing like a hillbilly,” he said with a smirk.

“It’s dirty money, Craig,” she said through clenched teeth.

He shot up from his seat, arching his back like a lion ready to pounce on its prey as he pressed his face against hers.

Her breath stuttered as she resisted the urge to slap him.

“You go with me. You smile. Be charming. Win people over like I taught you,” he whispered in her ear. “Or I’ll have no more use for you.” He stood back, adjusted his tie, and tucked a pile of files under his arm as he began walking to the door. “We’ll go to the fundraiser, happy and smiling, okay?” he said and reached for the doorknob.

“I won’t be your puppet, Craig,” she said, spinning to face him.

“I’ve done all of this for you, because I love you. Now I need you to do something for me. Or you’ll force me to come to other...measures, we’ll say,” he said, his smirk stretching to a full smile as he left the room.

This is the last time I’m doing this, no more, Emma thought as the huge front door creaked open. The swift clatter of sudden footsteps filled the mansion as employees scattered with pretend busyness.

Edward appeared from the study with his hands clasped behind his back and an unsettling grin stretched across his face. “I trust you enjoyed lunch?”

“Yes, of course,” Emma replied, quickening her pace toward the stairs.

“Would you care for a beverage ma’am?” he hollered after her.

“Wine, have it sent to the office please.”

A throbbing headache squeezed her head as she rummaged through file cabinets in Craig’s office.

“If he refuses to change, well, then that will have to be it,” she said to herself, riffling through papers. “There has to be something in here,” she said, tossing a file to the side and pulled out another one. “God where does he keep it all?” She took a deep breath as she clutched a pile of papers against her chest. “I can’t believe my name isn’t on any of it. Not a single account?” She rubbed her temples. “How can I get out?”

Emma continued scouring bank statements and investment summaries, hoping to find any way to hide money for herself. As she moved to another filing cabinet, a black blob of uniform sprinting across the yard caught her eye outside the window. A winded maid whispered something to Prudence who was embraced with a young man under a tree. Prudence turned to run inside. The young man tried to reach for Prudence, but she spun her head back and said something over her shoulder as she continued to run.

Minutes later the hurried swishing of Prudence’s skirt came jogging down the hall. She barged into the room, sweating and almost panting.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Beckett. Which wine would you like?” She appeared almost panicked, and her fearful hazel eyes avoided Emma’s look.

Emma bent her head to the side. “Who was that boy?” Emma asked, surprised by her bluntness.

Prudence’s guilt filled eyes shifted to the floor as she tucked her nervous hands in the apron pockets. “One of the landscaping crew, ma’am.”

“Emma, please, call me Emma,” she said with a warm smile. “Are you two close? Dating?”

“I, well, I know it’s against policy.” Her fearful voice cracked like a boy in puberty. “We, I mean he and I, well, we—”

“That’s a yes then?”

“Yes, ma’am, err, Emma.”

Emma turned back to the young man still waiting by the tree.

Prudence's look grew painful and cautious. "Am I going to lose my job now?"

Emma pondered the question, and then nodded her head with a faint smile. "My usual wine, only a small glass please."

"Oh, ma'am, I mean, Emma, thank you so—" Prudence's body lit up with gratefulness, making her smile stretch like someone had pulled her cheeks back with hooks. She bent her head in repeated nods of thanks as she backed out of the room.

It had been so long since Emma was sincere in her motives; she had forgotten what it felt like. She sat on the corner of the desk, kicked her shoes off and relished the moment of doing something she alone wanted to do.

The wine almost sloshed out of the filled glass as Prudence rushed back into the room.

"Come, sit with me while I look for some papers." Emma smiled and motioned to the chairs across from the desk.

The young maid was reluctant to sit down, but obliged her employers wishes.

"Now, tell me about that cute man out there. He looks lost without you." Emma pointed to the gardener who still waited, kicking dirt at the tree.

"Well, I guess it started last summer..."

Uncertain if Craig would join her for supper, Emma instructed the chefs to start serving without him. She felt ridiculous sitting at the enormous birch table with thirteen empty chairs around her. Three grand chandeliers lit the luxurious room with a subtle, romantic glow, and cast a soothing stream of light on the Helen Allingham oil paintings lining the longest wall.

She drummed her fingers on the table, looked around the big empty room, and tugged on her earlobe. Even after this many years it still seemed strange calling for someone to collect her dishes. So she waited, twirling the cloth napkin in a circle, and listening to the soft sizzle of wax melt off the candles.

A quiet chuckle snuck out as she remembered the man from the auction, his sweet grin, so nervous and fidgety around her. *I can't remember the last time a man smiled at me like that*, she thought. As she held back a grin a loud thud resonated through the silent halls.

Emma jumped suddenly hearing Craig's voice. "God, he's in another mood," she said and shifted in her chair.

Craig threw the doors open and swiftly walked to the head of the table. He glanced at her distastefully. She felt small and worthless again, as if the room grew around her trying to swallow her whole.

"You don't even seem happy to see me," he said.

"I, uh, I'm just surprised to see you dear," she said. "With the Daminski meeting today I thought—"

"Don't get me started on that fat slob," his sharp tongue snapped. He waved an impatient hand in Prudence's face while she set a bowl of soup on the table.

Anxious, Emma twisted the napkin around her finger until it was plump and purple. She could feel his rage brewing across the table and she scrambled for a response. "No, of course. I'm sorry." She glanced at Prudence from the corner of her eye and motioned in warning to exit quickly.

"I called a few people. They're going to help *persuade* Richard into riding it out," his jagged voice spouted as he bent to slurp his soup.

"I'm sure you're pleased by—"

"This is ice cold! Do they actually expect me to eat this shit?" he said and dropped the spoon in the bowl.

His anger frazzled her, causing her thoughts to fumble over each other and squeeze her heart into pounding panic. *I should let him rant. No, I should distract him, change the subject.*

She sat straight with phony confidence. "Craig, I, I was thinking about our reservation tomorrow."

"Oh for the love of God, Emma," he said and slammed back against the chair. "You're really going to bother me with babble right now?"

Her jaw clenched and she looked down at her empty bowl on the table.

"Well?" He crossed his arms and locked an impatient glare on her.

"Please don't take that tone with me, Craig. I'm not one of your employees."

"I've had a terribly long day, you didn't even greet me, and I can't even stay home because I have to meet someone for drinks," he said, taking a deep breath in self-pity. "So excuse me if I'm a little short. I'm running myself ragged for you."

“You’re not doing this for me anymore, Craig. Quit putting that burden on me.”

“Why on earth would I go through all this for myself? I want to do great things for people, why do you hate that so much?”

“Why can’t you just be great for me?”

“Damn it, Emma. I’m too tired for this tonight.”

“Then stop talking to me in that tone!”

“Fine. What was it you wanted to say?” he said, leaning back in exaggerated attention.

“I, I was just going to see if you needed to cancel.”

“Cancel what?”

“Never mind. It’s not important,” she said, throwing her napkin on the table and crossed her arms. “You’re clearly not in the mood. So forget it.”

He threw his hands up. “First you snap because you want to talk, now you don’t want to talk. What *do* you want Emma?”

She tightened her arms, raised her brows and stared back at him. “We’ll discuss it later, when you’re not so...edgy.”

As dinner dragged on, she listened to his furious ranting about Richards’s stupidity and lack of gumption. He collected his wits and bid her goodnight before vanishing to another late meeting. As the front door slammed shut, she could sense the entire house exhale in relief.

She inhaled deeply trying to let go of tension from his whirlwind appearance. A light sound ruffled behind her, she looked back as Prudence peeked out from behind the kitchen door.

“He’s gone,” Emma said.

“I wasn’t sure.” Prudence wheeled out a cart to collect the dishes from the table.

Emma sank in the chair as the flickering flames on the candles pulled her deeper into an almost catatonic state.

“Are you all right, Emma?”

“How could anyone be all right like this?” Emma said.

“Is there something I can help you with, ma’am?”

Emma’s somber empty eyes met Prudence’s puzzled stare. “If you’ll excuse me,” Emma said as she stood and left for her bedroom.

Emma paused in the bedroom doorway, surveying the medieval cell.

“How did we get like this?” she said to the darkness, walked to the bed and crawled in without even bothering to undress.

THANK YOU!

I hope you enjoyed reading this exclusive sample Love Unfinished. If you would like to continue reading, you can **[purchase a copy here](#)**. If you like to be notified of new releases by Darian Wilk, please **[click here](#)**.

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I live in ‘the burbs’ in the Detroit Michigan area with my husband and two children. When not writing, I enjoy spending time with my family and friends, reading, doing book reviews on my blog, crafts, and watching the 1980’s movies that are so terrible – they’re awesome. I’m an all around dork and wouldn’t change a thing about my life.

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OTHER TITLES

Reinventing Claire

First edition: August 2012

ISBN-13: 978-1477430057

ISBN-10: 1477430059