

Foolish Pride



Donna Marie Rogers

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By Donna Marie Rogers

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Chapter One

Danny Jamison sat through a few innings of the Brewer's game, but his heart just wasn't in it. All he could think about was Emily and the terrible way they'd left things the night before. Which was mostly his fault, if he were being honest. He could be a real ass sometimes and he knew it. Especially when his jealousy got the better of him.

Which seemed to be more often than not lately.

Sara had been right, though he'd never actually admit it to her. His sister knew him better than anyone, and if he'd listen to her once in awhile, maybe he wouldn't put his foot in his damn mouth so often. But it was like Uncle Luke always said—when God was handing out pride, Danny had gotten in line for seconds and thirds.

Giving up on the game completely, he slipped out the back door and sprawled out on the wooden glider, hands linked behind his head. Christ, he'd really screwed up this time. No way in hell Emily would forgive him again. Not that he blamed her after the humiliating way he'd treated her, and in front of her friends no less.

So what the hell was his problem? He cared for Emily, no question about it. They'd been dating for more than a year, and Danny'd never felt this strongly about a woman before. Not that there'd been all that many. Before Emily, he'd been in exactly three relationships, and only one he would've considered serious.

He'd started dating Kimberly Adams during his junior year of high school. Kimberly had

been considered the most popular girl in school. So when she'd cozied up to him at a party, Danny couldn't believe she wanted to talk to him, let alone date him. Kimberly had been his first lover, but he certainly hadn't been hers, and she'd become bored with him within six months. And honestly, Danny hadn't been all that broken up over her either.

Carrie Vandenberg caught his eye senior year and had been the complete opposite of Kimberly. An Emo with a wild streak, she'd sported more piercings than anybody he'd ever seen, wore black lipstick, and kept her naturally blonde hair dyed black as well. But this time it was Danny who'd gotten bored, and he'd broken things off after only a few months.

After high school he'd gotten a job driving a forklift, thanks to Uncle Luke, and moved in with a couple of buddies who'd had their own apartment. That's where he'd met Sharla Burke. Sharla had been a friend of one of his buddies' girlfriends, and for Danny it had been love at first sight. Or so he thought. They'd dated for more than two years before he realized he just wasn't in love with her anymore—if he ever had been. He'd broken things off, and she'd lashed out by keying the word 'asshole' on his car.

Luckily, it'd been a piece of shit beater, he thought with grin.

About a year later, he'd been at the casino with his brother, Nicky, and Uncle Luke when he first laid eyes on Emily. After some rotten luck at the blackjack tables he decided to go find himself a slot machine. Emily had been sitting at the machine to his left, chatting with a friend.

He'd tried to get a good look at her, but with her friend facing his way, he hadn't gotten more than a few casual glances. He'd liked what he could see, though. Light blonde hair cut short, just barely brushing her shoulders with a lock tucked behind her ear. A pair of silver hoops hung from her ears. Incredibly full lips that always seemed to be smiling, with a tiny little mole just above the right side.

But it'd been her eyes that hammered the nail in Danny's coffin. The first time she'd looked him straight-on, it was if he'd been sucker-punched in the gut. The clearest blue eyes

he'd ever seen, surrounded by long, thick sooty lashes.

What a beauty, he remembered thinking.

She and her friend had eventually drawn him into their conversation, and after an hour he'd worked up enough nerve to ask her out. They'd been together ever since.

Until last night, that is, when he'd made a big honkin' fool of himself at Shady's, the nightclub Emily and her friends hung out at.

Danny sat up and stabbed his fingers through his hair in frustration.

He missed her something fierce and it'd only been one night. He couldn't even imagine how he'd feel by tomorrow let alone a week from now. Or a month. Already, he was picking fights with everyone. How long would it be before he became so impossible to live with his family bounced him out on his ear?

Christ, just remembering the look on Emily's face was enough to break his heart.

He'd called her a '*goddamn whore*' and she hadn't done a thing to deserve it.

There wasn't a chance in hell she'd take him back after that. Emily never cheated on him, and he knew it. She'd never given him any reason to doubt her other than being at the same place, at the same time as her ex-boyfriend.

Which is why Danny had started acting the fool in the first place, accusing Emily of all sorts of ridiculous things, trying to control her every move. He'd told her she couldn't hang out with certain friends, forbade her from going to any of the places her ex might show up. When had he turned into such a fricken tool?

They'd been fighting and making up for months, but Danny knew this was it. He'd be lucky if Emily didn't spit in his face the next time he saw her.

If there even was a next time.

Emily Harris blew her nose before stuffing a huge spoonful of Ben and Jerry's Phish

Food ice cream into her mouth. She'd been watching tearjerker movies all day and had never felt more drained. If she didn't get to bed soon, she'd be completely worthless tomorrow at work.

Only she knew she wouldn't be falling asleep anytime soon. She'd just have to cry herself into exhaustion like she had the night before. Because every time she closed her eyes, Danny's face swam before her and his hurtful words spewed from his mouth.

"Goddamn whore!"

How in the world could he have called her something so vile? Let alone in the middle of Shady's, in front of a crowd of at least fifty people? She'd been mortified. But more than that, she'd been heartbroken.

Because she was head-over-heels in love with the jackass.

And last night he'd proven he didn't give a damn about her.

Emily sniffled as she scooped out another huge spoonful of ice cream and stuffed it in her mouth. Danny'd always been a hothead, but she'd never imagined he could be so cruel. He'd grown increasingly jealous lately of her ex-boyfriend, Rob, though she'd repeatedly assured him he had no reason to be. But Danny was bound and determined to think the worst of her.

And Rob didn't even want her back, of that she was sure. The idiot was just having a ball driving Danny insane, for some unknown reason.

Or maybe there was a reason. Emily dug around for the little chocolate fish in her ice cream as she considered something she'd been avoiding until now. Lately, she'd become a little suspicious of her friend, Gina, who'd never much cared for Danny. Knowing how deeply Emily cared for him, though, Gina kept most of her thoughts to herself.

Until recently.

It seemed right around the time Rob started coming around again, Gina became more vocal in her dislike of Danny. So maybe it wasn't such a stretch to suspect Gina and Rob of

working together to break her and Danny up.

Emily's spoon scraped the bottom of the ice cream carton. "Shit." Between the two pints of ice cream today and the entire pack of Double Stuff Oreos she scarfed down yesterday, she'd wiped out her entire stock of comfort food. With a curse, she dragged herself off the couch and headed for the bathroom, tossing the ice cream container and the spoon in the sink on her way past.

Catching her reflection in the mirror, Emily stopped cold. Her eyes were red and swollen, with last night's mascara smudged all over her cheeks. Her hair, a matted nightmare, mashed to her scalp on one side, and stuck out like porcupine quills on the other. She ran her tongue over her teeth—which she hadn't brushed all day—and grimaced. A quick sniff revealed she needed a bath—and badly.

Fresh tears sprang to her eyes. Angrily swiping them away, Emily swore then and there she'd cried her last tear over Danny Jamison. And Gina and Rob could both rot in hell, too.

She stripped off her clothes—an old Van Halen T-shirt that had belonged to her father, a pair of sweats and her panties—then knelt over the tub and turned on the faucet. Nothing made a girl feel better than a nice hot bath.

Except maybe bringing a steamy romance novel into the tub with her.

Unfortunately, she hadn't bought a new book in months, so she'd just have to make due with some music. She grabbed a clean washcloth from the cabinet and flipped on the radio before stepping into the tub.

Sinking down until submersed to her neck, Emily bent her knees and closed her eyes, letting the steaming water work its magic. It seeped into her bones, relaxing her from head to toe as her worries seemed to melt away.

By feel alone, she grabbed her two-in-one shampoo, squeezed a small amount onto her head, and scrubbed like a mad woman. Once rinsed, she reached for the washcloth and bar of

soap. She lathered up her face first, washing away her dried tears and every trace of make-up. She ran the washcloth over her shoulders, under her armpits, over her breasts and stomach. She moved the washcloth between her legs—

“I’d be more than happy to take over for you.”

Emily squealed and sat up in a rush, splashing water all over the floor. When she realized it was Danny leaning against the doorframe, she threw the wet washcloth at him.

“Dammit, you scared me half to death!”

He pushed away from the door and strode forward. “Sorry. I knocked, but you had Metallica blaring so loud you couldn’t hear me.”

“I find Metallica extremely relaxing!” she snapped. “Now give me back my key and get the hell out of my apartment.” She held out her hand.

Danny knelt beside the tub, but instead of handing her the key he brushed his knuckles down her cheek. “Look, Em, I know you’re royally pissed at me right now, but if you’d just give me a chance to explain, I—”

“Are you kidding me? ‘Royally pissed’ doesn’t even begin to describe how I feel.” Suddenly more angry than upset, she crossed her arms over her breasts and brought her knees up in an effort to preserve a little modesty. Which she knew was ridiculous since they’d been sleeping together for more than a year.

“You have no idea how sorry I am for what I said. It was completely inexcusable. But...if you could just give me one more chance...” He grabbed her hand and brought it to his lips, holding it against his cheek as he said, his voice raw with emotion, “Em, I love you. And I know you love me, too.”

Her eyes filled with tears. Damn him! Now? He waits until things are over between them to finally say those three little words she’d been waiting so patiently to hear him say? But...as much as she wanted to believe him, she couldn’t, she just couldn’t.

She jerked her hand from his. “I’m sorry too, Danny, but I can’t do this anymore. Your jealousy has gotten crazy lately and that temper...sometimes I’m afraid...”

Shock twisted his face into a mask of incredulity. “My God, I would never hurt you. How could you even think—”

“I don’t know! That’s the problem. It’s like I have no idea who you are anymore. You’re angry all the time, you’ve become so possessive.” She reached up to swipe at her eyes. “It seems like the only time you’re in a good mood anymore is when we’re in bed.”

“Then let’s crawl in bed right now and stay there forever.”

“Danny, please, just go. I can’t do this right now. Please.”

With a deep sigh, he pushed to his feet, head hung low, and turned to leave. Looking back over his shoulder, he said, “Fine, I’ll leave. Give you a couple days to get over your anger. But eventually we’re going to talk about this. Because there’s no way in hell I’m just going to just let you go. ”

Chapter Two

Curled up in the corner of the sofa, feet tucked beneath her, Emily watched a new episode of her favorite reality show while **reading** her newest romance novel during commercials. She wore an old pair of denim cut-offs and a red halter top, and both clung uncomfortably to her clammy skin as the temperature outside soared to over ninety degrees. And of course the stupid air conditioner had conked out yesterday. She knew from past experience it'd be weeks before her landlord dragged his lazy ass up there to fix it, so basically she'd have to take a cold bath if she wanted to cool down.

Though with her luck Danny might show up again, and she wasn't sure she had the strength to resist him again. She missed the jackass more and more every minute, and she had a few drinks in her belly, which always made her putty in his hands.

Someone knocked at the door just as Emily reached for her half-empty wine cooler. She scowled. For crying out loud, couldn't a girl sulk in peace? She climbed to her feet and padded barefoot and tipsy to the front door.

"Who is it?"

"Gina."

Emily's scowled deepened. She hesitated, her hand resting on the doorknob.

"Come on, Em. I know you're pissed at me, but don't I get a chance to defend myself?"

"What's to defend? You betrayed our friendship and we both know it."

“But I didn’t *do* anything. Look, I can’t help the way I feel about Danny. But that’s a moot point anyway, isn’t it? Come on, open the door so we can talk about this.”

Emily bit her lip. They *had* been friends for a long time, and it certainly wasn’t Gina’s fault Danny was a jealous distrustful fool. She unlocked the door and swung it open...then tried to slam it shut when she saw who was standing behind Gina—Rob.

Gina walked quickly through the door, but Rob braced his hand on the doorframe and smiled that loathsome arrogant smile of his.

“Hey, baby. Man, you look hot in those daisy-dukes.” His eyes roamed over her, making her skin crawl.

“What the hell are you doing here?” She turned her full wrath on Gina. “And what the hell are you doing bringing him here?”

Gina went straight to the fridge and helped herself to one of Emily’s wine coolers. “Come on, Em, we’re not the enemies here. I think your anger is slightly misplaced, don’t you?”

Rob moved past her into the small apartment and plopped down on the sofa. “Yeah. I mean, it was Danny who called you a goddamn—”

“I know exactly what he called me, thank you very much.” Shaking her head in hopeless resignation, Emily wobbled back to the sofa and curled up in her corner. She snatched her wine cooler off the table and tilted it to her lips.

“Hey, could I get one of those?” Rob asked over his shoulder. Gina walked around the front of the sofa past Emily and handed Rob a wine cooler. He slid over toward Emily while Gina curled up in the spot he’d vacated.

Emily flicked a disgusted glance their way, but said nothing. Maybe if she concentrated real hard, they’d get bored and leave. She took another swig of her cooler, feeling as if the top of her head would explode.

“Why in the world are you so mad at me?” Gina finally demanded to know. “I mean, it’s

not as if I can control Danny's actions."

"No, but you've been egging him on for weeks. Both of you have. Do you think I'm such an idiot I wouldn't eventually figure it out?"

"Okay, I admit it *was* sort of fun to push his buttons," Gina admitted. "But I just wanted to prove to you I was right. The guy has a bad temper, Em. It would've only been a matter of time before he hit you or something. And you were so head over heels for the guy, you couldn't see him for who he really is." Gina got up and headed back into the kitchen. "Got any chips?"

Incredulous, Emily swung her head around and eyeballed her supposed friend. "How can you even say something so absurd. Danny's got a temper, yeah, but he'd never hurt me. He just...runs off at the mouth sometimes."

She knew, of course, that she'd been just as frightened of Danny's unpredictable anger as Gina, but chose to keep that information to herself. "And the reason his temper's been out of control lately is you." She turned to glare at Rob. "And you. You've been purposely trying to make him think there's something going on between us. Why?"

He shrugged. "Gina was worried about you. She was afraid your boyfriend might turn violent, if pushed. So we pushed. And she was right. All I had to do was flirt a little bit and he lost his damn mind. Hell, Em, you should thank us."

Emily polished off the rest of her cooler before scowling her disbelief. "Thank you? *Thank you?*" All at once, her face crumpled and she burst into tears.

Rob wrapped his arm around her. "Hey, I didn't mean to make you cry. I'm sorry, baby. I really am."

More than a little tipsy, Emily didn't have the strength to push him away.

After a minute, she disengaged herself from his arms and raced for the sanctuary of the bathroom. She needed to splash some cold water on her face and brush the nasty taste of booze from her mouth. She should never have started drinking tonight. In her frame of mind she

should've known it would hit her like a ton of bricks—which it had. Then the nauseating scent of Rob's cologne had penetrated the liquor-induced fog surrounding her brain, and she couldn't climb off the sofa fast enough.

Emily brushed her teeth so hard her gums bled, then she gargled with mouthwash twice for good measure. She didn't care if she ever saw another drop of alcohol again for the rest of her life.

Okay, she thought with a small smile, maybe that was a bit of an exaggeration. But she definitely wanted to be sober when Danny decided she'd had enough time to get over her anger, as he'd put it. Because she *had* gotten over it, at least toward him. Gina and Rob, however, were another story.

She examined her reflection in the mirror. Her eyes were slightly red and puffy, but not nearly as bad as yesterday. She ran a brush through her hair and pulled her compact out of her makeup bag to blot her face. Just in case Danny did show up, she thought. Which she hoped was soon because she was starting to miss him something fierce.

She headed for her little alcove of a kitchen, filled a cup with tap water and stuck it in the microwave. A cup of tea was just what she needed to clear her mind and calm her nerves.

That, and to kick Gina and Rob the hell out of her apartment. "I'd like to be alone. Can you both please just leave?"

Gina popped a Dorito into her mouth. "Come on, Em, I thought we were past this nonsense. Rob and I were just looking out for your best interests."

Rob, whose eyes were glued to the television, nodded. "Yeah. I mean, we couldn't just let the guy hurt you, could we?"

Not wanting to spend any more time arguing with them, Emily tried a different tactic. "And I appreciate your concern. Really, I do. But I feel like I need to be alone tonight. I'm sure you both understand."

Gina set the bag of Dorito's down and stood up. She held out her arms and said, "Of course we do. Now come give me a hug and tell me all is forgiven."

With an inward sigh of disgust, Emily did as asked.

Looking suspiciously smug, Gina said, "Come on, Rob, let's go. Em, I'll give you a call tomorrow after work."

By the time they reached the car, Gina couldn't hold her laughter back any longer.

"What's so funny?" Rob asked as he slid in behind the wheel.

"Guess who showed up and got an eyeful while you and Em were practically groping each other on the couch?"

Rob's brow furrowed, and then understanding dawned. "No shit? Jamison?"

Gina nodded, rather pleased with herself. While she'd had no idea Danny was on his way over to Em's, things couldn't have worked out better if she had. Gina had been out of view, looking for something to snack on, when she'd glanced up and saw Danny standing in the doorway, looking ready to kill.

Although she hated what this was doing to Emily, Danny had to pay for what he'd done to her cousin, Sharla.

Danny had broken Sharla's heart. And now Gina had broken his.

"Hey, can I get another beer here?" Danny slammed his empty on the counter and leaned back in the bar stool, arms crossed.

Without looking up, the bartender opened another bottle of the imported Danny was drinking and set it down in front of him. He took three singles off Danny's stack of bills and moved on to serve someone else.

Danny tilted the bottle back and took a long pull. Man, he felt like shit. Why hadn't he

listened to his gut and left well enough alone? Hell, all his suspicions had been true. The only question left was why she'd denied it in the first place? Danny would have told her she could have the prick. He may have tracked him down and beaten the shit out of him. He may have shed a few tears over her. But eventually, he'd have gotten over it. So why had she continually insisted there was nothing going on between her and her ex?

It just didn't make goddamn sense.

He took another swig of his beer. A bowl of pretzels sat on the bar, and he considered grabbing a handful. Then the thought of how many nasty hands had been digging in there damn near turned his stomach. He'd eaten a big supper, so it wasn't as if he'd get drunk off a few beers.

He pulled a cigarette from the pack he'd purchased on the way in, stuck it in his mouth and lit it. He'd quit smoking for her, fool that he was. He'd pretty much done everything possible to make her happy. But fuck it all now, he'd smoke if he goddamn wanted to.

He studied the burning cigarette in his hand. "To think, I gave you up for her. You've certainly been more loyal to me than she has, haven't you? Make me feel better when I'm in a bad mood, calm me, relax me. And I dropped you like a bad habit for her...ha-ha, bad habit. Did you see what I did there? I made a funny."

Great. Now he was talking to his cigarettes.

Growing bored, Danny's gaze scanned the semi-crowded bar, amazed by how busy they were for a Monday night considering it wasn't even football season yet.

His eyes landed on a familiar looking dude perched on a stool all the way at the end of the bar. Danny took a sip of his beer, squinting as he tried like hell to place him. He looked to be somewhere between thirty and forty years old, with a receding hairline and a beer gut. Hmm, he was almost sure he knew the guy, but couldn't remember where from for the life of him.

Frustrated, Danny polished off the rest of his beer and motioned to the bartender for

another. He'd just tilted the bottle to his lips when the bandage across the familiar guy's nose jogged his memory. With a start, Danny swung back around and narrowed his eyes. Jimmy Montgomery, the rat bastard. After what they'd recently discovered, what that sonofabitch had done to Sara and Mike all those years ago, he had a lot of damn nerve showing his face around here.

Danny stabbed his cigarette out in the ashtray, ready to go confront the asshole, when he caught sight of another familiar figure out of the corner of his eye. Officer Jason Thomas, Garrett's new partner. Huh, wouldn't big brother be interested to know about this little meeting. Especially since Jason had recently started dating Sara.

He watched with growing curiosity as Jason made his way to the end of the bar. He took the stool next to Jimmy and motioned for the bartender.

Danny paused. What could Jason possibly have to talk to that lowlife about? And how did he even know him? According to Jason himself, he'd only been in town a few weeks.

He started to rise, ready to tell Jason exactly what kind of man Jimmy Montgomery was, when he felt a thump on the back. Danny spun around so fast his money flew off the bar. His shoulders slumped in relief when he saw Mike standing behind him. "What the hell are you doing here? Shouldn't you be spending time with your son?" He leaned over to pick his money up off the floor. Okay, so that was a cheap shot. Because of Jimmy Montgomery, Mike only discovered yesterday that he and Sara had a seven year old son together.

"I just left there. Didn't want to overstay my welcome. Besides, I'm taking them out for ice cream tomorrow after supper. So, what's your excuse? Thought you were heading over to see your girl." Mike's eyes narrowed slightly as they fixed on someone behind him, and Danny realized he'd located Jimmy.

"Man, I gotta give you credit, you must have some incredible self-control. I'd have done a lot more than busted the dude's nose."

Mike's grin was devoid of humor. "I got some of my frustrations out the other night."

Danny took a pull off his beer, then nodded toward the end of the bar. "See that guy talking to him? I don't want you to blow a gasket or anything, but Sara went out on a date with him Saturday night. His name is Jason Thomas and he's a cop. In fact, I was just about to go have a little chat with him about the company he keeps."

Mike put a hand on his shoulder. "Not a good idea; Jimmy could be his snitch. I'll look into it tomorrow. No sense alarming the family till we know for sure, so let's keep this between us for now."

"Makes sense." Danny spared Jason and Jimmy one last glance, then shrugged. "Jason seemed like a decent enough sort, but now I don't know what to think."

Mike cleared his throat. "Sara mentioned she was seeing someone. Is she...serious about him?"

"Hell no, Garrett just introduced them Saturday. They've only been out the one time."

"Well, Garrett better let him know she's off the market. 'Cause if this Jason doesn't keep his distance, he'll find himself at St. Mary's Hospital getting my boot surgically removed from his ass."

Danny laughed. "Yeah, and they say us Jamison's are hotheads."

"Just protecting what's mine, Danny Boy."

"Man, I hate that nickname."

"I know."

Danny sucked down the rest of his beer and set the bottle down on the bar. "I think it's time for me to head home. I've got almost three years in at work without missing a single day. Don't wanna screw up my record."

"You have a good head on your shoulders, Danny."

"Thanks. See you tomorrow, Mike."

Chapter Three

Desperate for another woman's opinion, someone who cared about Danny and not despised him, Emily decided to pay Sara a visit at the bakery she owned in town. And since Sara's Bakery happened to make the absolute best double chocolate chip muffins on the planet, Emily planned to pick up a dozen just in case she needed something to drown her sorrows in later.

Recognizing Sara's son Ethan playing on the swing set in the fenced in yard behind the shop, Emily detoured over to say hi. She loved the spunky little bugger and hadn't seen him in more than a week.

"Hey, Ethan!"

"Hi Emily!" Ethan waved, then pumped those little legs as fast as he could, swinging higher and higher with each pass. Like his uncle Danny, Ethan loved to show off—a trait more cute on a seven year old boy than a twenty-six year old man. Though it had been hilarious when Danny claimed he could do five hundred chin-ups in an hour, then couldn't fully unbend his arms for almost three days.

Ethan leapt off his swing, landing on his feet, then falling to his knees as momentum carried him forward. Without missing a beat, he jumped up and raced over to meet her. "My mom's got the fence chained. You're a girl, or I'd just tell you to hop it."

Emily barely held back a grin. "Stand back, little guy, I'm about to make you eat those

words." Those big blue eyes grew round as saucers when Emily flipped herself over the fence in record time.

"Man, that was awesome! I didn't know girls could hop fences."

She sat on one of the swings and winked at him. "Now you know."

"Hi Em!" Sara called out as she made her way across the yard. "Wow, you scared me half to death," she added when she reached them.

Confusion knit her brow until she realized from a distance, Sara must have thought she was a stranger and panicked. Emily jumped to her feet. "Oh my God, I'm sorry! I didn't even think—"

Sara walked right up and gave her a hug. "Don't worry about it. It's just...did you actually jump the fence?" Sara glanced at the gate, and sure enough the padlock was intact.

With a sheepish grin, Emily admitted, "Yeah, I did. Again, I'm so sorry, but when I pulled into the parking lot and saw Ethan I had to run over and say hi. Then he asked me if I could climb the fence, seeing as how I'm a girl and all." She laughed. "So I decided to prove to him that girls can climb fences, too."

"That was very mature of you," Sara teased.

"Wasn't it, though?"

"Mom, you shoulda seen her! She flipped the fence faster 'n anybody!"

"Sorry I missed it. So, what brings you by the bakery?" She frowned. "Shouldn't you be at work?"

Emily nodded and her face sort of fell. "I just couldn't face anyone in my present frame of mind, so I burned one of my personal days. Which is why I'm here. I was hoping to talk to you about Danny."

"I kind of figured. He's been walking around with the same lost puppy look on his face you have. I really thought you two would've worked things out by now."

Emily glanced at Ethan who had moved on to the monkey rings. “I just don’t know what’s happened to him, Sara. I mean, he’s always been the jealous type, but not to this extreme. And I know Rob and Gina have been pushing his buttons; they admitted it the other night. They claim they were trying to save me from an abusive boyfriend, but I get the feeling there’s more to it. Gina’s had a real hate-on for Danny since the moment they met.”

“Rob is your ex, right? I think I may have met him Saturday night when I stopped up at Shady’s. He was with Gina, who didn’t have anything nice to say, let me tell you.”

“I’m sorry they were rude to you.”

Sara shrugged it off. “I’m just worried about you. And Danny. When he headed over to your place the other night, I thought—”

“You mean Saturday night?”

“No, Monday. He took a shower and raced off to your place. Right after supper.”

Emily frowned. “He never showed up. Do you remember what time it was?”

Sara thought about it. “I guess sometime between seven and eight. Why? What’s going on?”

“I was having a private little pity party with a few wine coolers when Gina and Rob showed up. I was pretty tipsy. If Danny showed up while they were there, he’s probably convinced himself there *is* something going on between Rob and me.”

“So I assume there’s not?” Sara asked, and though the question bothered her coming from Sara, Emily understood why she felt the need to ask.

“Of course not. I *love* Danny. I don’t want anyone else.”

Sara smiled her relief. “Glad to hear it. So I guess you’re going to have to tell him that, over and over again until he gets it through his thick head. That is, if you still think he’s worth fighting for...?”

“He’s definitely worth fighting for,” Emily said. “I guess I’ll give him a call when he

gets home from work.”

“Not a great idea, trust me. He’ll just hang up on you. But if you happen to be at the house when he gets home, he’ll have to talk to you.”

A small smile played about Emily’s lips. “You know him so well.”

“As it turns out,” Sara smiled ruefully, “we’re a lot alike.”

Emily and Sara were having coffee at the kitchen table when Danny walked through the front door. He looked grubby and tired, and Emily wanted to run over and throw her arms around his neck. But he made it clear by the disgusted look on his face that he was less than thrilled to see her.

“What the hell is she doing here?”

“Danny, be nice,” Sara warned.

Scowling, he stalked past them, poured himself a cup of coffee, and headed downstairs without so much as a glance in her direction.

Emily’s eyes filled with tears and her vision blurred.

“Come on now, you knew he wasn’t going to make this easy on you.”

“I know. It’s just...did you see the way he looked at me? Like I was dog poop stuck to the bottom of his shoe.”

Sara waved that off. “He’s an idiot, Em. You know that. But you also know he’s in love with you, and because of your friend and ex-boyfriend, he’s hurting pretty bad right now. He thinks you’re in love with someone else.”

“But I don’t know what to do. He won’t even look at me.”

“I’ll tell you exactly what you’re going to do. You’re going to follow him downstairs, sit on his lap if you have to, and tell him exactly what Gina and your ex have been up to. Then you’re going to tell him how much you love him and drag his stubborn ass back to your place for

some long overdue make-up sex.”

“We have nothing to say to each other,” Danny declared as Emily descended the stairs.

“Well, *I* have plenty to say, Danny, and you’re going to listen.”

He flicked a glance her way, then returned his attention to the television with a dismissive shrug.

She walked over to the couch and stood in front of him. “I know what you think you saw the other night, but you’re wrong.”

“I’m not blind. And if you came here to feed me a line of bullshit, you can get the hell out right now.” He brought his arms up and linked his fingers behind his head.

Emily stepped forward, placed one knee on the couch beside his thigh, and straddled him. He looked up at her, his gaze hostile. “Go home, Em. There’s nothing here for you.”

She lowered herself until she was sitting directly on his erection, then leaned forward and rested her forearms against his flannel-clad chest. “I don’t know. Something tells me this is for me.”

“What are you trying to prove, Em? That I want you? Hell, that’s not the problem and we both know it. It’s *you* who can’t make up your fucking mind.”

“Don’t you dare talk to me that way!” She leaned back to glower at him. “There is absolutely nothing going on between Rob and me. He and Gina have been pulling your chain for months, and you’ve been letting them.”

“I saw his goddamn arms around you! Do you think I’m an idiot?”

“That’s exactly what I think. And the reason Rob’s arms were around me is because I’d been crying over *you*. He isn’t even interested in me, Danny. I told you, he and Gina have been trying to break us up for months. They both admitted it to me.”

Some of the hostility faded from his eyes. “But...why? If Rob doesn’t want you back,

why the games?”

“Gina hates you—has since the moment she met you—and I honestly have no idea why. All she ever says is she’s afraid for me, like she knows something about you I don’t.”

“We didn’t even know each other until you introduced us. What the hell could she have against me?”

“You believe me, then?”

His gaze lowered to her lips. “I don’t think I could handle it if you’re playing me, Em,” he said, his voice low and husky.

She leaned forward, gliding her hands up to his shoulders and resting her breasts against his chest. She rocked her hips ever so slightly, dragging a strangled groan from him. “I love you, Danny,” she whispered.

Danny reached up and cupped the back of her head, pulling her down for a passionate kiss. He teased her mouth open with his tongue while his hands kneaded their way down her back, pressing her against the hard ridge beneath his zipper. She moved against him, slowly, back and forth, smiling when he crushed her in his arms.

Without warning, he tore his mouth from hers. “We have to stop. Ethan could come down here any minute.”

Emily ceased movement, her breath coming out in ragged pants. She dropped her face into the crook of his neck and heaved a deep, shaky sigh. “You know, we could be lying naked in my bed in less than fifteen minutes.”

Danny stood so abruptly Emily nearly fell to the floor. She laughed, wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist.

He grinned. “I may need to carry you out of the house like this.”

Chapter Four

Sprawled out on the couch, waiting for Emily to come join him, Danny glanced back over his shoulder and sighed. “Come on, Em, finish those dishes later.”

“Keep your pants on. I have a couple of forks left, then I’m done.”

“But that’s the problem, I don’t want to keep my pants on. In fact, I was kind of hoping we could both get naked.” He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

“Danny, you are insatiable.”

“If that means I can’t get enough of you, you’re damn right. Now get your sweet little butt over here and show me again how much you love me.”

Emily laughed. She strolled over to join him and draped herself across his lap. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she leaned in and nuzzled his ear.

“Now that’s more like it,” he murmured, cupping her backside with both hands.

She nipped playfully at his ear. “Danny? Why don’t you move in with me? I think it’s about time, don’t you?”

He sucked in a surprised breath and let it out slowly. Damn, she’d really caught him off guard with that one. “Don’t you think it’s kind of soon for us to be moving in together? I mean, things just finally got back on track. Why put a strain on our relationship with something as stressful as moving in together?”

Emily slowly extricated herself from his embrace. She curled up in her corner of the

couch and swiped her soda off the end table. “I didn’t realize falling asleep next to me every night would be so damn stressful.”

“Come on, now. That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

“No, Danny, I don’t know it. We’ve been dating a long time. Certainly long enough to consider moving in together. Hell, a lot of couples move in together after dating only a few months. Even weeks.”

“Yeah, and most of `em end up on Judge Judy fighting over the bedroom furniture and the cat.”

“Why the hell are you so cynical about commitment? You say you love me—”

“I *do* love you.”

“—yet you cringe at the thought of moving in with me.”

Danny’s mind conjured up an image of Sharla Burke. They’d lived together for a mere two weeks before Danny realized he’d made a huge mistake. And since she’d refused to leave, he’d had to move back home with his family in order to get away from her.

“I just want to be careful, Em. I love you and I don’t wanna mess things up by moving in together before we’re ready.”

“Well, I’m ready. So I guess we’re waiting on you now.”

Danny reached over and tugged her stiff form back into his arms. He kissed the top of her head. “Please don’t be mad at me.”

“I’m not mad. I’m scared.”

“Of what?” He lifted her chin so he could look into her eyes.

“I...nothing. You’re probably right anyway. I must be crazy to want to share my one small bathroom. I guess all the fighting we’ve been doing lately has made me a little paranoid.”

He kissed her on the lips. “So we’re good?”

Emily smiled. “Yeah, we’re good.”

Her reply was hardly convincing, but they'd been fighting so much lately he decided to take her at her word. Emily clung to him as he rose and carried her into the bedroom.

A faint, oddly familiar sound penetrated Danny's sleep-fogged brain. Realizing his arms were empty, he rolled to the side, propped his head on his hand and listened. Was that...Emily crying?

Alarmed, he swung his legs over the side of the bed. Then it struck him just how softly she was weeping—as if she didn't want to be heard. Frustrated and angry with himself, he lied back down and clasped his hands behind his head.

Son of a bitch. He knew exactly why she was crying and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it. Well there was, but Christ, he wasn't ready. Why the hell was it so important for them to move in together? Because he knew exactly what kind of thoughts were going through that beautiful head of hers. That if he isn't ready to move in with her now, he never would be.

And nothing could be further from the truth. There wasn't a single doubt in his mind that if she'd have him, Danny would spend the rest of his life making her blissfully happy. Which is exactly why he's been so adamant about waiting to move in together. What if, after living with him for a few weeks, she realized she'd made a terrible mistake? Like he had with Sharla? He didn't think he'd be able to take it if that happened.

He heard her turn the faucet on, the water run for a few seconds, then shut it off. He listened to the tread of her bare feet as she padded down the hall toward the bedroom. He turned onto his side, and when she slipped back into bed, he reached out and pulled her against his chest.

Please, God, he thought as he held her tight, don't let me screw this up again.

Emily and Danny were on their way back to her place a few nights later when they decided to stop off for a nightcap. “How ‘bout Shady’s?” Emily suggested, unable to hold back a grin.

“Gina and Rob will probably be there,” Danny warned, casting her a quick glance.

“I hope they are. I want to shove our happiness down their throats. I swear, I’m never talking to that witch again.”

Danny made a right into Shady’s parking lot. “Except to ‘shove our happiness down their throats?’” he replied with a smirk.

“Exactly.”

Danny laughed as he killed the engine. “All right, my blood-thirsty little pirate, let’s go. But we’re only staying for one drink, whether they’re here or not.”

“And one dance. A slow dance. We haven’t done that in months.”

He reached over and gently ran his knuckles down her cheek. “And one dance,” he agreed.

Shady’s was busy, but not busting at the seams, so they were able to find a booth close to the bar. Danny ordered a couple bottles of imported beer, then said loudly enough to be heard over the music, “I’m gonna run to the john, I’ll be right back.”

Danny hadn’t even been gone thirty seconds when Gina strolled up to the table with a girl Emily had never met before. “Please tell me you haven’t forgiven that jerk for what he did to you. Em, where’s your self-respect?”

Emily tilted the bottle to her lips and took a long pull. Then she nailed Gina with a look that could freeze lava. “Danny and I are in love, Gina. Maybe if you could keep a guy’s interest longer than the time it takes him to pull his pants back up, you’d have a life of your own and could stay the hell out of mine.”

Gina’s eyes narrowed and her hands flew to her hips. “I can’t believe you just said that

to me. You not only let Danny come between our friendship, you've let him turn you into a royal bitch as well.”

“Don’t you dare blame Danny for this! You’ve been using Rob for months to sabotage our relationship. And you already admitted it the other night, so don’t try and deny it now.”

Gina crossed her arms over her chest and stuck her tongue in her cheek, as if she were deliberating something. Finally, she said, “This is my cousin, Sharla. If you want to hear the truth about your boyfriend, you can just ask her. Sharla dated Danny long before you did, Em. Hell, she even lived with him for a while.”

Emily stared at Gina’s cousin in shock. She shook her head slowly. “No way. Danny would have told me if he’d dated your cousin.”

Gina’s smile was smug. “Well, he didn’t. Now why do you suppose that is?”

“Because I had no idea you and Sharla were related,” Danny replied from behind Emily. He braced his hands on her shoulders and gave her a reassuring squeeze.

“Hey, Danny. Long time, no see,” Sharla said with a toss of her hair.

“Not long enough,” Danny muttered.

“Is it true?” Emily asked, her voice raw, unable to mask her pain.

Gina and Sharla both looked up at Danny expectantly, neither attempting to hide their twisted delight.

Gently, Danny turned Emily around to face him. “Baby, they’re just trying to upset you.”

“Believe it or not, I managed to figure that out all by myself. But that doesn’t answer my question, Danny. Did you and this-this *person* live together or not?”

Danny glared down at Gina and Sharla, then returned his gaze to Emily. “Yes, for like two weeks. Which was all the time it took for me to realize not only was I *not* in love with her, but I didn’t even like her very much.”

Sharla gasped.

“So that’s the reason you won’t move in with me? You’re afraid as soon as you do, you’ll realize that you don’t love me, or even like me very much?” Tears swam in her eyes.

Danny cupped her face with both hands. “Emily, I had no idea what love was until I met you. And the reason I’ve been afraid to move in with you has nothing to do with how I feel about you. I love you, more than I ever thought possible.”

He cast a smug look down at Gina and Sharla. “Hell, maybe we should thank these two. Because of them, I just realized what a fool I’ve been. Emily, I not only want to share space with you, I want to share my life with you.”

He climbed up onto the bar, and suddenly all that could be heard in the entire club was a lot of hushing. Even the music went dead. But Danny’s voice was strong and clear when he said, “Emily Harris, I love you. And though I don’t have a ring right now, since this *is* sort of spur of the moment,” there was some light-hearted laughing at that, and Danny’s smile widened, “I’m going to ask anyway. Emily, will you marry me?”

My God, the man had gone crazy. This wasn’t her Danny. Danny rarely did anything spontaneous. Emily didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. She’d never been happier in her entire life!

“Yes,” she said, gazing up at his beautiful face.

Danny reached down and hauled her up onto the bar. He grinned. “Could you please repeat that? I don’t think the two young *ladies* in front here heard you.”

Emily laughed and threw her arms around his neck. “Yes!” she shouted. “Yes, yes, yes! I’ll marry you!”

Bending her over his arm, Danny kissed her breathless, much to the delight of everyone in the club—with a couple of exceptions.

After more than two hours of dancing and well-wishers buying them drinks, a slightly

tipsy Danny pulled a very tipsy Emily from the cab and tossed the driver two twenty-dollar bills. “Keep it,” he said as he slammed the door shut and escorted the love of his life up to the apartment they’d be sharing from this night on. Well, at least until he could afford to buy them a house.

He unlocked the door, swung it open, and insisted on carrying Emily over the threshold. She giggled as he effortlessly picked her up in his arms, cradled her against his chest and made a big to-do about stepping over the threshold.

“You’re supposed to carry me over the threshold *after* we get married,” she said, nibbling on his earlobe.

“I’ll do it then, too. Hell, I’ll carry you over it every day for the rest of our lives. Or at least until you’re too fat to pick up anymore.”

“Hey!” She pinched his neck.

He laughed. “Okay, how about, until I’m too old and decrepit to lift you anymore?”

“Much better.” She went back to nibbling on his earlobe.

Danny carried her into the bedroom and laid her on the bed. Emily stretched out and gazed up at him, the invitation in her eyes unmistakable.

She began unbuttoning her blouse, slowly, a seductive smile curving her lips. Danny peeled off his shirt in one smooth motion. Emily unbuttoned the last button and playfully shimmied it off her shoulders. She reached behind her and unclasped her bra, and Danny reached out to help her remove both garments.

“Danny?”

“Yeah?” He laid down next to her and tried to take her into his arms, but she put her hand on his chest to deter him.

“I want you to know...if you only proposed to me to get under your ex-girlfriend’s skin, I won’t hold you to it.”

Danny had a pretty good buzz going, but her words were like a dousing of cold water in his face. “Are you trying to get out of marrying me?”

“Of course not,” she said. “I’d marry you tomorrow, and you know it.”

Smiling, he gently ran his thumb across her cheek. “I asked you to marry me because I love you, and I want us to spend the rest of our lives together. I want you to sit across the dinner table from me every night, wake up next to me every morning, and have my babies. Lots of ‘em. Like six.”

Emily laughed. “Six? And do you plan on helping me change diapers for all six of these kids?”

“Of course not. That’s women’s work.”

He caught her hand before she could pinch him again and brought it to his lips. “You know I’m kidding. I changed plenty of diapers when Ethan was a baby. Garrett, too.”

She cocked a brow as if impressed. “I would’ve thought Nicky and Uncle Luke were the diaper changers.”

“Are you kidding? Nicky gagged the first time he saw a poopy diaper, and Uncle Luke swore he’d never change another one after Ethan, um, initiated him.”

“Initiated him?”

He grinned. “Yep. Got him right under the chin. I’ll never forget that for as long as I live.”

Understanding dawned and she giggled.

“Now,” he lay down on his side and propped his head on his hand. “Enough talk about diapers. It’s making me wilt.”

Emily giggled again and glanced down at his crotch.

“If you’re trying to will him back to life, it won’t work. He needs hands-on attention.”

Once again he reached out to take her into his arms. This time she went willingly.

Danny made love to her slowly, wanting her to understand just how much he loved and needed her. By the time they fell asleep in each other's arms, exhausted and satiated, Danny was positive he'd loved away every last doubt in her mind.

And there were no midnight trips to the bathroom to cry alone in the dark.

THE END

I hope you enjoyed the story!

Donna Marie Rogers

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