

Southern
Charm

Meg Queenz

*To my parents,
who put up with my relentless writing.*

Prologue

Not thinking about it is the hardest part of losing someone close to you. If you think about it, you'll inevitably break down again, and doing that in public isn't the best goal to have going into your junior year.

That's why, as I walked through the doors leading into the sweat-ridden prison that I would "learn" in for the next two years, I shut all thoughts of my mother away in the part of my mind that held the secrets that I could never let out. Not that there were many in the first place.

I was a social butterfly, or so my dad had told me early on in my life, but I was also what everyone called a goody two-shoes. My conscious kept me from doing too many bad things, so my dad never had to worry about it when I came home later than what my suggested curfew was. It was just always that way.

"Hello," I was greeted as soon as I walked through the glass doors that lead into the school office.

I smiled at the secretary. "Hello! I'm a new student here; Emalie Jacobson."

She nodded and started typing into the computer. "Oops. There it is!" She said cheerfully, clicking enthusiastically on the mouse and looking up to smile at me. "You have an interestingly spelt name!"

I smiled at her again. "My mom liked interesting things, I guess."

"Well," she said, swiveling the chair over to a metal filing cabinet on the other side of the small room. She opened it with a *clunk* and got out a piece of paper after rifling through it. She spun back around to the desk she previously was and handed the paper to me. "Your schedule and school map is on there. If you have any trouble following it, I'm sure you can ask the nearest upperclassman to help you out. We're all friends here!"

I smiled yet again at her enthusiastic tone and thanked her before walking out of the door, holding the paper in one hand and my messenger bag strap with the other.

The day dragged on slowly and by the time I was at fourth period, I was about ready to curl up into a ball with a tub of ice cream and watch some *NCIS*. I tried comforting myself with the thought that that's exactly what I would do when I got home, but I knew Dad would want me to unpack the rest of my room before I actually did that. Frowning at the thought, I walked into my Math class with a grim face.

"Take a seat where it's available."

Great. Not only was I in Math class, but my teacher had a boring voice. This was bound to be my least favorite class of all.

I looked around the room for any available seats. Quite honestly, it looked like everyone got to class early so they could sit by their friends. Well, I had none, so I took the closest empty seat to me, a seat next to a black haired girl with freckles on her nose who was looking down at her

desk.

“Hey,” I said, extending my arm to the girl. “I’m Emalie.”

She looked up to smile at me, shaking my hand. I waited for her to tell me her name, but she just went back to the paper on her desk, this time picking up a pen and scribbling on it.

I shrugged and looked out the window on the other side of the room. Mentally sighing, I realized I should’ve sat next to the window.

A tap on my shoulder drew me out of my thoughts and I glanced back over to my seat partner. She was smiling at me and holding out a piece of paper. It took me a moment to realize she was holding it out to *me*.

I grabbed it out of curiosity and read what she has scribbled into it.

Hi! I’m Melissa. Sadly, I can’t actually tell you this because I can’t talk. I just wasn’t born with the ability to.

I looked over at her. She was smiling at me with a sad expression on her face as she handed me another piece of paper.

I understand if you want to sit somewhere else.

I looked at her, my face distorting into displeasure. “Why would I do that?”

She shrugged and pointed to the piece of paper with a gesture of her tiny fingers. I handed it back to her.

A couple seconds of scribbling later, she handed it back to me.

Everyone else does. I wanted to warn you before you were labeled a freak by sitting next to me.

I frowned at her. “We’re friends now, so I don’t care if I’m labeled as a freak. Though, I have no idea *why* I would be. You’re not anymore a freak than I am already.”

In that case, do you want to come to the library with me during lunch?

I smiled at her. “Why not? It’s not like I have anywhere else to go.”

She smiled at me, a joyous kind of smile I wasn’t used to being the insinuator of. I smiled back right as the boring math teacher started talking.

“Hello, class. I’m Mr. Jonas, and welcome to Hell.”

I stand corrected. The *satanic* math teacher it is then.

“Is he *always* like that?” I asked, wide eyed as I walked out of the classroom.

Melissa nodded next to me.

“Then is there any way to make him in a *good* mood before I come to class?”

She shook her head, smiling apologetically at me.

“This sucks.” I groaned, praying that I could find *some* way to make his day before I got to class. Maybe I could find him a lady friend.

“How long is the walk to the library?” I asked.

She shrugged and showed me a two sign.

“Two minutes?”

She nodded.

“I guess that’ll work.”

“So, that year we went to nationals and won for Ohio.” I was cut off as I ran into a wall, causing me to tumble onto my butt.

I looked up, only to be confronted by a pair of light green eyes adorning a masculine face.

“Sorry. I wasn’t looking where I was going.”

He shrugged and stepped away from me, continuing his own trek down the hallway without even bothering to help me up.

I huffed, grabbing onto the hand that Melissa so graciously offered.

I shook my angered thoughts of the jerk away from my head. I couldn’t let one rude person ruin my day. I smiled and stopped right before we reached the library doors.

“You go ahead in. I need to go to the bathroom.”

Melissa nodded and I went in search of said bathroom.

As I hummed, I walked through the library doors that I had seen Melissa go into before going on my little expedition.

“Melissa?” I called.

“*Shhhh!*” a voice said from my right.

I turned to see a small woman behind the front desk looking at me disapprovingly.

Oops. Library.

“Sorry, ma’am.” I whispered. “I’m just looking for my friend.”

“So I heard.” She shook her head. “Melissa was in the back near the Realistic Fiction section last time I saw her.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” I said, smiling at her apologetically and going off in search of Melissa.

On my way to the end of the isles, I passed a Paranormal Romance section. I stopped purely out of curiosity and bent down to see the books on the bottom shelf.

“Curiosity killed the Emalie,” I whispered, smiling to myself and I scanned the shelves for anything that sounded interesting.

I scrunched my nose up when I saw *Twilight* and quickly stood up. Nothing in there for me.

I made my way down the aisle yet again and heard the voices for the first time.

“You worthless piece of crap, you shouldn’t-“ The sound of flesh hitting flesh caused me to break into a sprint.

I turned right as he raised his hand again. The only thing I saw was black hair against the white walls and I took off, running directly at him. I knocked him down as he his hand was being brought down.

He yelled out as he fell. “Ah!”

I looked at his face, trying to take in every aspect of it; strong jaw line, brown eyes, brown hair. To others, he may have looked handsome. Right now, though, all he looked like to me was a bully.

“The-“

I cut him off before he could say anything else. “I would re-think what you were about to say. I’m going to use *everything* against you.”

He glared at me. “You’re not a cop, are you? What are you going to do about it?”

I got close to his ear and whispered. “I’m going to make sure you can’t ever hit anyone again when I push you down the stairs.” He gulped. “Leave her alone, or I’ll be sure to make it look like an accident. Got it?”

He nodded and I got up.

Not bothering to help him up, I went over to Melissa and grabbed her hand, which was lying limp

on the ground and hoisted her up. Before she could hug me, I got a glimpse of her red, hand-printed face and winced. But before I could elaborate my search for injuries, she buried her head into my shoulder and cried.

Melissa insisted that I don't tell anyone and that she could take care of herself when I told her that we needed to tell the Principal about what had happened. It didn't *look* like she could take care of herself, but then again, what did I know?

Still, while I was running past the local grocery store, my messenger bag thumping against my hip, I couldn't help but think about ways to keep the bullies away from her. She didn't deserve the treatment she got; it's not like it was her choice to be born the way she was.

Shaking my head, I turned onto Lilly Drive, leaving the grocery store behind me as I began trekking up the hill that lead to my street.

I frowned when I saw an unfamiliar black Camry next to my father's own black Cadillac Escalade. Even though we had moved here a little over a week ago, we hadn't met that many people yet due to the fact that we didn't actually leave the house, so I had no idea who the car belonged to.

"Dad?" I called as I entered the house, the screen door clanging against the door-frame behind me.

"Living room!" I heard his familiar voice call back to me.

I made my way through the long hallway until I reached the living room, my curiosity peaking more and more until I couldn't stand it. Who was here?

I found them sitting on the couch, watching the latest Tennessee State game, the orange jerseys streaking across the screen of out decently sized TV set.

They both turned to look at me when I cleared my throat, my eyes immediately meeting the unfamiliar ones from across the room.

I smiled at him and turned my gaze to my father's. "Who's this?"

The stranger stood up and advanced towards me. "You look so much like your mother."

I frowned, my gaze meeting my dad's again. "Dad?"

My eyes shot to the stranger's when he spoke again. "I'm Jim Mason, your mother's best friend."

"I'm Emalie, my mother's daughter."

He smiled. "I can see that. Emalie, what a beautiful name for a beautiful girl."

I smiled back at him. "Thank you, sir."

He shook his head. "Call me Jim. Sir makes me feel old."

I smiled at him. "Well, Jim, thank you."

"Hey, Dad, we better get going. Logan wants us to pick him up from his place."

I turned around to face the origin of the voice.

My breath caught in my throat. "You!" I pointed an accusing finger at him.

He looked around comically, looking back at me after a couple of seconds. "Me?" he mouthed.

I strode over to him. "Yes, you!" I said, poking his chest with my finger. "You didn't help me up!"

Realization dawned on his face. "You're the girl who ran into me!"

"You're the wall that was in my way!"

He laughed sardonically. "What an amazing reply!"

I huffed out a breath and looked to my Dad for help, but he was just watching me with slanted eyes.

"Emalie, this is Drew Mason."

I grinned at Drew sarcastically. "What a pleasure to meet you."

Drew looked to his Dad, who was giving him the same look mine was.

"Charmed."

I sighed and walked out of the room. Before I turned the corner, I gave him the universal gesture for "I'm watching you" and walked out without a second glance.

Dyersburg just got a whole lot more annoying.

Are You Alright?

I say you just ignore him.

I shook my head at Melissa. “I *can’t!* He’s *everywhere!*” As if on cue, Drew walked out from a classroom near us and I glared at him. He smiled sarcastically back and went to his football buddies.

It was only two days after my encounter with Drew at my house and in that time I’d learned way more than I ever wanted to about him.

I had asked Allison, a girl in my English class, who he was and she launched into a detailed story of his entire life. Let’s just say we aren’t *friends*.

“Did you know that he got seven touchdowns last game?”

Melissa shook her head at me, her head cocking to the side as if to ask me why *I* knew that.

“Neither did I until I heard his life story.” I sighed. “I need track to get my mind off of this jerk.”

Melissa grinned at me and grabbed my arm.

Today we weren’t at the library because it was closed every Thursday because Mrs. Ludwig had a doctor’s appointment in the afternoon and it wasn’t worth the trouble to open it for five hours before her appointment. I had to admit that Mrs. Ludwig didn’t look anywhere near her real age. She looked about sixty when in actuality she was about seventy-five, or so I was told.

She pushed open doors that looked suspiciously like gymnasium doors and yanked me out. The unusual sweltering heat caught me off guard and I put a hand over my eyes until they adjusted to the light, but Melissa just kept on going.

By the time my eyes had adjusted to the light, she had marched me over to stand next to a red-haired man wearing a grey tracksuit with the name “Coach Gaffigan” embroidered on it.

“Hello, Melissa. How are you today?” he asked her kindly. She smiled at him and gestured towards me.

Coach Gaffigan looked over at me with a raised eyebrow and I looked over at Melissa, who handed me a piece of paper. You’d think she had a paper factory in her pocket by the way she kept coming up with more.

He’s track coach. Tell him.

Her butchered English didn’t bother as the pressure to impress my hopeful coach weighed down on me.

“Hello, Coach. My name is Emalie Jacobson and I’d like to try out for your track team.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Really now? Well, let’s see if you can beat my best. Valerie!” he turned to shout.

A girl with blonde hair and an easy smile on her face raced over to us.

“Yeah, Coach?”

“We have a hopeful here. Show her how it’s done.” He brought out a stopwatch out of nowhere

and Valerie immediately took off on the track surrounding the large football field. The players on the field weren't my concern as I watched Valerie run.

She had good technique and I could see her pacing was like it should be, and she was fast. I would've compared her to my quickest runner, Zachary, back in Cincinnati. He won us by far a lot more meets than I did.

She got back to us, placing a hand over her heart as she breathed in and out deeply. I smiled. So that was her weakness. She didn't run over the summer and was going on what she knew from last school year. It was imperative to keep running even when there are no meets.

"You ready Miss Emalie?" Coach Gaffigan asked as I took my place on the track.

I nodded at him, thankful that I always wore my running shoes to school because I ran here and back.

"Go!" he shouted and I took off at the speed I didn't normally go for. I was more of a slow runner typically, a leisure runner if you will, but now was the time to impress.

One. Two. One. Two. One. Two.

I repeated as my feet slapped against the pavement of the track. Before I knew it, I was back at Coach Gaffigan and everyone around me was applauding.

I looked up from trying to calm my heartbeat to see a grinning Coach Gaffigan.

"Time?" I gasped out, opening the water bottle a very flabbergasted Valerie gave me.

I quickly took a swig of it and placed it back into her hands before looking up again.

"1. 13." He said, exasperated.

I smiled. "My best time yet."

"I say you have a spot on my team."

I smiled at him. "Thanks, Coach. I have to go back to class though."

Melissa clasped me on the back in a congratulatory greeting and I smiled at her.

"I'll have to go change your schedule at the end of the day so you have gym with us all. We have practice then and after school on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. I'll need your phone number so I can contact your parents and ask for their permission."

I quickly rattled off my dad's cell phone number, which hadn't changed since the move and moved towards the school doors again.

"Bye Coach, Valerie," I called over my shoulder as I opened the door.

"Bye, Hotshot!"

"Bye."

I smiled. That went way better than what I had anticipated.

"So, I got a call from your new coach." Dad said while I picked up another slice of cheese pizza.

I nodded, my mouth now full of deliciousness.

"Are you sure you want to take on another team? It took you a year to get the Cheetahs into gear."

I nodded again, swallowing and taking a sip of my Pepsi before answering. "The best part of joining something like this is that I can help them get better. Even if it takes a year."

"And you remember the stress and drama you had to deal with?"

I smiled at him, glad for his concern. “Dad, the drama I had with track was just helping people with their problems. For pete's sake, my nickname was The Doctor. I'm ready for the stress and drama again; it'll be refreshing.”

He nodded. “Then you can go to practices and meets. I'll have to call Coach back and tell him that.”

I leaned across the table to give him a hug and then sat back down with a smile on my face.

“Thanks, Daddy!”

He nodded and picked up another piece of pizza. “Oh, Jim and Drew and Drew's friend Logan are coming over Sunday night for Game Night.”

I sighed. “Dad, Drew is a jerk.”

He shrugged. “He's Jim's son. You'll have to deal with it.”

I glowered at him, but then had a change of heart and sighed. He'd been through a lot, and all he wanted was a couple of friends. “Fine. How much chips and dip should I make?”

He smiled at me gratefully. “A lot.”

“Do you want to come over tonight?” I asked, handing my essay to Satanic Math Teacher.

She nodded, handing her own essay over to him and walking close to me to our seats.

“Well, we'll have to walk after track practice. You could watch, or just hang out around here.”

She handed me another piece of paper. *I can run with you if you'd like.*

“During practice or going to my place?”

Both.

I nodded. “Okay,-” my reply was cut short when Satanic Math Teacher started talking.

“Faster, faster!” Coach Gaffigan yelled as my heart pounded in my chest, my feet slapping against the pavement of the running track, my mantra continuing in my head.

One. Two. One. Two. One. Two.

Sweat slipped down the back of my neck and I grimaced. The one bad thing about running was the sweat.

I glanced next to me and, surprisingly, Melissa was still next to me. She had written down a long note on the way to practice explaining that she was Coach Gaffigan's niece and that running was in the family.

“I guess I have a running buddy,” I had commented, and from the way she was keeping up it seemed like I did indeed have a running buddy.

When I looked back up, I had only a second to react. There was a huge guy in front of me.

Quickly, I put my arms up and tried to avoid hitting him as I turned around. His eyes were wide as I passed directly in front of him and I vaguely realized that he was carrying an athletic bag with him as I turned back around to run straight forward. I thought about yelling something back at him, but decided to let it go when I realized I was close to Coach Gaffigan.

I finished the lap with a smile on my face as I grabbed the water bottle from my drawstring bag.

As soon as I had arrived, Coach Gaffigan was yelling at me to run. So I had dropped my drawstring bag and started on full-speed. I was glad nothing had fallen out.

“Go change, girls. By then the rest of the team should have arrived.” Coach Gaffigan told us. We both nodded and I grabbed my bag from the ground as Melissa started towards the women’s changing room.

When we got back, I took notice of the people on the field running and hitting the dummies on the field. Immediately, I knew they were footballers. I’d watched too many football games and practices to count due to my dad’s infatuation with the sport.

“What’s the name of the team?” I asked no one in particular.

“The Jaguars.” Coach Gaffigan answered offhandedly, watching the boys on the field with a newfound interest. “Looks like Mason’s back as quarterback.”

That peaked my interest. “Mason?”

He looked down at me then back up to watch again. “Yeah, Drew Mason. He was injured last season and we all weren’t sure if he’d be back.”

I nodded, now very interested. “What about Logan?”

He looked down at me again. “You know Logan?”

“I know *of* him.” I shrugged. “Drew’s dad was my mom’s best friend, so I know him. Sadly,” I added quietly.

His eyes were wide. “You’re Kayla’s daughter?”

My eyebrows furrowed at the frantic sound of his voice. “Yeah, that was my mom’s name.”

He squatted down next to me. “Emalie, you need to listen to me. Don’t speak of your mother or Jim to anyone. Go home and look up the Dyersburg Legacy and you’ll understand why.”

I was even more confused now. “The Dyersburg-”

“Legacy,” he finished for me. “Yes.”

“Uh, okay.” I raised an eyebrow. “You alright, Coach?”

He nodded, swallowing. “Yeah, I just didn’t think the Emersons would be back.”

“My last name is Jacobson.”

He looked caught off guard. “So it was true,” he whispered.

“What?”

He shook his head. “Nothing.” His gaze moved to the door leading to the track field when it swung open. “Looks like Christina is here.”

I looked as well. Standing there was a girl with ginger hair and blue eyes, coming towards us with a smile on her face. Behind her were both men and women coming out with track outfits on.

“Hi! I’m Christina and I take it you’re Emalie?”

I nodded. “That would be me.”

“Well, it’s so nice to finally meet you. Dad has been talking about you constantly.”

“Dad?” I looked at her confused.

“Yeah, Coach is my Dad.” she laughed. “I guess that means I get more practice in!”

I laughed along with her. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“Ladies and gentlemen! I have an announcement to make.” Coach said, making everyone look up. “Today, we’ll be working with the Jaguars to work on their speed. Emalie, you’re our fastest so you’ll be working with Mason.”

My face dropped. Seriously? Did Coach *have* to pair me up with Drew?

“Christina, you’re with Ferguson and Melissa is with Jones. Valerie, you’re with Derek. Lilian? You’re with Grayson.”

I slowly looked up from where I was sitting, my head upright as I picked up grass and started ripping them out of habit.

Drew stood there, arms crossed over his chest as he looked down at me curiously. I raised an eyebrow in a silent question and his gaze immediately turned hard.

I shrugged and looked back down at the blade of grass that my fingers were currently cutting in half.

“You know,” Coach’s voice caught me off guard from the closeness of it and my eyes widened as I looked up into his eyes. He was crouched down in front of me, an amused look on his face.

“Tearing up grass,” he gestured to the now destroyed grass in my hand. “isn’t considered ‘working’, Emalie.” He smiled at me, the humor in his face still there. “Come on now,” he stood up and offered me a hand.

I sighed and grabbed it, surprised when I practically flew up and into Drew. I made a small *eeep* sound when I realized that Drew’s arms were locked around my waist and he was teetering backwards. I closed my eyes as he lost his balance and we tumbled to the ground.

I heard him groan as we hit the ground and I hung on for dear life.

“Are you alright?”

I was momentarily stunned when he asked this. He was the guy who left me on the ground as he walked away, and the first thing out of his mouth when I fell *on him* were ‘are you alright’.

“Emalie?” his voice held slight panic now.

“Sorry,” I squeaked out.

He chuckled. “It’s fine. Are you okay though?”

I nodded and then realized that my nose was scraping against his chest. I could feel my cheeks get red as I scrambled off of him.

“I’m fine.” I looked at the ground, trying to get my cheeks under control.

From the corner of my eye I could see him huff as he stood up and my cheeks reddened more as I remembered that *I had fallen on top of him*.

“Come on then.” I looked up at the sound of his voice, which now sounded amused.

He was looking at me with the same amusement Coach had only a minute ago.

I nodded and crossed my arms over my stomach as I followed him across the field.



Look for it here when it comes out!

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