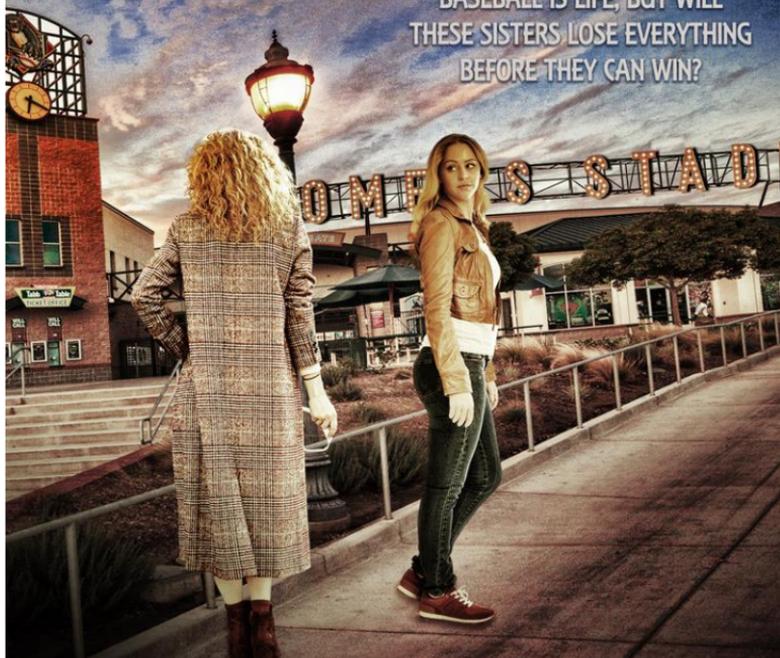


C.E. HILBERT

SINISTER SECRETS • FAMILY BETRAYAL • A FORTUNE AT RISK

GIRLS OF SUMMER

BASEBALL IS LIFE, BUT WILL
THESE SISTERS LOSE EVERYTHING
BEFORE THEY CAN WIN?



Girls of Summer

C.E. Hilbert

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication

To God...Thank You.

Other books by C.E. Hilbert

From Scratch

Life of the Porcelain Edge

Merry Christmas, Savannah!

1

Keep moving. Don't look.

With the steady pace of a metronome, Charlotte Dixon's pointed-toe, four-inch heels clicked against the dusty concrete floor. Swiping through emails with each step, Charlotte maneuvered the maze of cars, orange pylons, golf carts, and piles of sand in the underground walkway that connected the Beaufort Bombers executive parking to the offices of Watershed International. Straining to stay absorbed in the far-reaching demands of her new job, she refused to allow the controlled chaos in the garage to tug her backwards in time to when her five-year-old self raced through the place in sneakers and a stained Bombers T-shirt. Back then, her hand had been always snugly locked in her father's wide, rough grip.

Tightening her fingers around her phone, she artfully avoided the burn of happy, sun-soaked days that tried to lure her into deeper memories. She had neither the time nor the inclination to wallow. No longer was she the little girl who thought her father walked one step behind God. Today, she was a full-grown woman running into a future with Watershed Industries, and her father's God would have to catch up to her.

Like a well-timed ballet, the doors to the elevator opened. Sliding into the rectangular box, she pressed the button for the fifth floor. With a jolt, the elevator chugged upward. Charlotte's eyelids immediately sealed tight. Breaths came in short spurts as she braced her hands on opposite carpeted walls. Pressing her left palm firmly into the coverings, she clutched her phone in her right hand, burrowing the overpriced metal and plastic into the seventies shag. Counting backwards from one hundred, she fought against the rising bile in her stomach. *Eighty-seven, eighty-six, eighty-five...*

The pace of her counting was steady. Counting was a salve to her hatred of small spaces designed for death. The elevator shuddered. Her knees buckled, almost tumbling her forward. As the doors creaked open, Charlotte sucked in a lung-filling breath. With a whistled exhale, she strode down the hallway, shoulders locked, back straight—her focus on the wide, glass reception desk at the opposite end of the hall.

Work waited.

Work was a gift.

Work pressed out fear.

Work equaled escape.

No Pain. No memories. Just the daily grind of running a multi-national company and a Double A baseball team.

Easy.

"Good morning, Miss Dixon."

"Good morning, Bridget." Offering the perfectly polished twenty-four-year-old assistant a quick nod, Charlotte reached for the neatly bundled stack of mail

in the letter tray. With a rapid sift, she recognized most were in plain envelopes forcing her to open each one before discarding. *Ugh!* She hated dealing with the details. If she could only trust her assistant to eliminate the unnecessary, but in the last six weeks, Bridget had appeared to be more interested in gossiping in the break room than deciphering a priority.

After too many heart-wrenching break-ups with former employees, or what her MBA cohort referred to as “firings”, Charlotte created a self-imposed rule. Every new hire had two months either to rise to the challenge or self-exit. Until the associate reached the eight week mark, Charlotte purposely remained aloof to avoid emotional entanglements during the evaluation period. Bridget had two more weeks. Sadly, Charlotte could almost feel the pink slip sliding through her fingers onto her assistant’s desk.

Intent on sorting her mail, Charlotte barely lifted her gaze as she closed the few steps to her office.

“Miss Dixon,” Bridget’s soft southern drawl stopped her.

“Yes, Bridget?”

“There’re two gentlemen waiting to see you.”

Charlotte glanced towards the low white leather chairs in the reception-waiting area. Both were empty. *Ten...nine...eight... Breathe, Charlotte. Patience is a gift you can always give.* “Bridget, where are they?”

“Oh, since you were late, I thought they’d be more comfortable sitting in your office.”

Charlotte nodded and continued toward the cracked door to her office. Pressing open the frosted

glass door, she found two black suits waiting for her.

The first suit, wrapped around a man with a nearly shaved head, sat in one of the chairs. His ankle was propped against his opposite knee and his lips curved into a subtle smile. Despite the austere black suit, his soft and rounded ruddy cheeks—enhanced by the twinkle in his eye—calmed her agitated spirit. No harm awaited her with him.

Suit number two barely contained a significantly taller and leaner man than his counterpart. He rested a broad shoulder against the bank of windows spread across the length of her office. His black suit stretched across his wide back. His vision was likely filled by the view of the ball field dressed for winter. Whether she was in danger with suit number two was too soon to tell.

“Gentlemen,” she plopped the mail on her desk. Sliding onto the white leather, high back chair, she crossed her arms loosely around her middle. “I hear you wanted to chat with me.”

Suit two turned.

Charlotte’s stomach tumbled. Reflexively she clutched her flat waist, hoping to stop the fall. *Danger ahead.*

He was more than a tall suit with a wide back. He was nearly perfect. Military short, high and tight haircut. Shoulders so thick they stressed his jacket to near-ripping as he placed a hand in his pocket. Almost black, wide-set eyes locked with hers. His square jaw could use a razor.

Her tummy splashed to a puddle. *Stupid weakness*

for a sprinkle of stubble.

“Miss Dixon, my name is Special Agent Dylan O’Neal.” The balding gentleman reached his hand across the desk, offering her a smile and a flash of his shiny badge. “This is my partner Special Agent Murphy. We’re with the FBI.”

Every hair on the back of Charlotte’s neck stood at attention. Her stomach rolled on a wave of nausea, washing away the tingle of attraction. “FBI?” She hoped her voice hadn’t quivered with the three little letters. Those three letters had caused her to wake in a cold sweat five out of seven nights a week for the last eight months.

“Yes, ma’am,” Special Agent O’Neal answered. “We were hoping to ask you a few questions regarding your art gallery.”

“The gallery?” *They knew. How could they know? Had Remy turned her in? Had her mother?*

She glanced toward Special Agent Murphy who was leaning his Olympic-swimmer-worthy shoulders against the window. With his arms linked across his chest and gaze narrowed, his body seemed to scream accusation. She swallowed against the threatening reemergence of her breakfast of black coffee and steel-cut oatmeal. Yanking her focus from Murphy, she forced her breath to slow. *In. Out. In. Out. You’ve got this. You’ve been breathing since the doctor slapped you on the bottom and called you a girl. Breathe, Charlotte.*

“Miss Dixon,” O’Neal tugged a small leather notebook from his pocket, flipping several pages, his kind smile pouring through her.

She latched on as if it were a lifesaver thrown from a sinking ship.

"You opened your gallery five years ago; is that correct?"

"Yes. I opened the gallery a few months after I finished graduate school."

"MBA from Stanford?"

"I received both my graduate and undergraduate degrees from Stanford."

"Kind of a long way to go for a New Yorker, don't you think?"

Charlotte shrugged. "Stanford has one of the best business schools in the country."

"But your undergraduate degree is in Art History."

"Yes. I like art. That's why I opened the gallery. Combined two of my passions. Business and art." She reached for the bottle of water on her desk. Tipping the drink against her lips, she fought against consuming the whole bottle in one swallow. She set the half-finished bottle on a leather coaster shaped like home plate and shifted her gaze to Special Agent Murphy. "I'm sorry, but do you mind telling me why you're here? I can't believe the FBI is this interested in the education of a U.S. citizen. Hundreds of students graduate from Stanford every year. Are you interviewing all of them?"

Murphy shoved away from the window, closing the distance to her desk in two strides. Wide palms stretched against the glass surface. He leaned forward until only a breath separated them. "Why did you have

Remy Reynard audit your books eight months ago?"

Charlotte's heart hammered, the beat reverberating through her body. Her tongue transformed into a piece of wet cardboard. All the moisture evaporated in her mouth. Reaching for her water, she tried to recall the prescribed answers, prepared months ago when Remy gave her the report on her business, but her mind was a clean sheet of paper. She closed her eyes and wished the God her sister spoke of so highly would show up and snatch her from the chair.

Save her from the FBI.

Save her from her mother.

Save her from the lonely, self-imposed, isolated life she had to lead.

Opening her eyes, she stared straight into the deep gray, maybe green—but definitely not black—eyes of Special Agent Murphy.

Time was up.

All the plans concocted over the last few months were for nothing. With the FBI involved, she'd never know the truth. She'd never be free. Never be safe. She opened her mouth to answer, but the ring of her cell phone halted her confession. Glancing at the screen, her heart warmed. "Excuse me one moment, gentlemen." She swiped the screen to answer the call. "Hello."

"Hey, darlin'." The slow, southern drawl of Remy Reynard washed over her clearing away her initial fear that her best friend had turned her into the FBI. She could trust Remy.

But only him.

"Haven't heard from you in a while."

"Darlin', you know me. I've got too many irons and not enough fires."

She smiled.

Remy was always...well, Remy. Ever the charmer, Remy was her only friend from her childhood years in South Carolina. Her true confidante. And in more ways than she could count, he was her savior. She loved him. He loved her. "So, what can I do for you?" She swiveled, forcing the agents to watch the back of her office chair and giving her some of the precious space she craved.

"It's not what you can do for me, but what I can do for you."

"Naturally."

"Darlin', have you had any unexpected visitors?"

"Yes, in fact, I'm afraid I have company in my office at the moment."

"Well, we always like company in the South, don't we? Do you think they'll be visiting long? I was hoping you might join me for lunch at that delightful little fish house along the river you like so much."

Remy knew she hated fish.

She'd become violently ill when she was six years old, and the last meal she'd eaten was his mother's fried catfish. It was the last time she'd eaten anything from the water.

His news couldn't be shared over the phone. "Why sure. I do love that little fish spot. I don't believe my meeting will take too much longer. How about we

meet around 11:30?"

"Sounds good, darlin'. You have yourself a good meeting. Don't talk too much. You know how men hate to hear you drone on and on."

"Yes, dear. I'll see you at 11:30."

"Bye."

She swiveled the chair to face the agents. The few minutes reprieve built her wall of courage and determination. The FBI wasn't about to stand in the way of her getting to the truth. She needed to remain detached. Being reserved wasn't a federal offense. Other measures she intended might be, but she would cross those bridges if and when she had to take action. "I'm sorry about that interruption. Now, you were asking why I had Remy review my books." She shifted her focus to Special Agent O'Neal whose tender heart shined in his eyes. "Remy's an old friend. We've known each other since we were children."

He nodded to her. "You were born here, in Beaufort County."

"My father lived his whole life in South Carolina. As did every other Dixon since Colin Shaunessy stepped off the boat in Charles Town centuries ago."

"But you were raised in New York by your mother?" Murphy asked, his voice returning to an intense neutral as he slid onto the chair beside O'Neal.

If you could call it being raised. "Yes, but I spent most summers in South Carolina until I was a teenager."

"What brought you back to South Carolina, now?" O'Neal asked.

“My father passed away two months ago, and left Watershed, and all its interests, to my sister and me. I needed to relocate to fully understand the business and adhere to the terms of the will.”

“But you hadn’t spoken with your father in several years; isn’t that correct?” Murphy’s eyebrow lifted. “Why would he leave you a multi-billion-dollar business?”

“I don’t believe my relationship with my father is any of your business.”

“I disagree.”

She tore her gaze from Murphy and settled on the cherubic face of his partner. “If you don’t have any other questions, I have to ask you to leave. I have a very busy morning.”

O’Neal nodded. “Unfortunately we do have a few more questions, Miss Dixon. But we shouldn’t take up too much more of your time.”

She sighed. Waited. And, hoped the face of non-interest she’d perfected throughout her early adulthood reflected the complete opposite of the nervous dance party twisting in her belly. *Just a little bit longer, Charlotte. You can do it. Stay cool. It’s best for everybody.*

“Back to your gallery. As you said, you asked your old friend Mr. Reynard to audit your accounts. Why?”

“I needed an audit. I trust him.” The subtle encouragement and open kindness she saw in O’Neal’s eyes, stirred her deep seeded need to share even a little of her burden. “The gallery started very small. I barely made enough to pay my mortgage on the building, let

alone eat more than peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. But, two years ago the gallery hosted a show for Lex Markov the same month he was tapped to design the cover of *Sibling 5's* latest album. The publicity of designing for the hottest group in the country caused his show to explode. Everyone in the city wanted a ticket. The gallery went from being an unknown to *the* place to find the most cutting edge artists. I had more business than I could handle on my own. I was turning away truly talented artists because I didn't have the time or the room to show their work. I had to hire some additional hands. Within six months of Markov's show, my staff was nearly a dozen people, including stringers who scouted different artists. I bought the building beside the original gallery so I could expand. Everything moved so fast, I wasn't able to properly keep track of accounts." She gave O'Neal a soft smile. "I went to business school, I should've known better, kept better records, but everything expanded beyond my capacity. I called Remy and asked him to audit the books, as a favor, to be certain I was covered. I was worried I had missed some taxes or something. Accounting was never my strong suit."

"An old friend completing your audit doesn't sound very official," Murphy said.

She ignored the pull of Murphy's gaze, keeping her focus on O'Neal. "No, I imagine it doesn't. But I was embarrassed. When I started, I was determined to run the gallery without any assistance. I wanted to prove to my family I could do it without any help, but I was drowning in my own hubris. I knew Remy would

be discreet. And he'd be honest. I figured any uncrossed 't's' could be fixed without my family being aware."

"You didn't want help from your family?" Murphy challenged.

More than he could ever know. "That's correct."

"But your mother started working at your gallery two years ago. Didn't she refer Markov to you?"

Heat burned a path up her neck. Her exposed collar bone felt like a flashing red neon, "*Guilt Lives Here*". "Yes, she did. But I'm not certain that is relevant. Her husband passed away, and she needed a distraction from the pain she was enduring over the loss of her spouse." The partial truth almost sounded whole to Charlotte's ears. Almost.

Murphy leaned forward in his chair causing the metal frame to creak. "You don't think the timing is a bit odd? Your business skyrocketed at the same time your mother came into your employ?"

"No, I don't." Or at least until eight months ago she hadn't.

"Your mother is first generation American, correct?" Murphy continued with the questions.

"Yes, on her mother's side. However, my grandfather's family has ties to the Mayflower, but what does my mother's lineage have to do with Remy's audit?"

"Your grandmother immigrated to the U.S.."

"Yes, but again, I'm not sure why you want to know about my grandmother. As I said, my family was not financially involved with the gallery." At least she

hadn't intended for her mother to be connected. Remy had discovered her mother's potential intimate connection with the gallery's finances—the non-paper trail kind.

“And your grandfather owned fifty-one percent of Beckford Mercantile at the time of his death, correct?”

“Yes, but again, what does Remy's audit of the gallery have to do with my grandfather or grandmother?” Charlotte's stomach twisted into a pretzel. She refused to think her grandparents had any connection to the irregularities Remy had uncovered. Mama, on the other hand...unfortunately the connection was too easy to assume.

Agent Murphy rested his elbow on her desk. “And, you're also aware after your grandmother's death, fifty percent of your grandfather's holdings will go to your mother and fifty percent to you.”

She nodded. “And, again, Agent Murphy, what does that have to do with the audit of the gallery's books?”

Murphy leaned closer. His eyes narrowed.

A knock sounded on her door. Before she could respond, the door swung open.

Filling the doorway was all six-foot-three inches of Mac Taylor—the undeniably handsome thorn in her side for the last two months. And she'd never been happier to see him. “Mr. Taylor, did we have an appointment?” She hoped he would demand her presence in whatever meeting, stand-up, or round-up he had scheduled for the morning. She deplored meetings, but this morning, she would give her

favorite designer jeans and heels for one of those painfully depressing stock-ledger reviews he forced her to attend.

He barely glanced at the two FBI agents, before shifting his dark brown gaze to her. "We have a stand-up in Arthur's office to discuss the progress of the systems conversion on the West Coast, and then we have the scouting report to review from last week's winter ball round-up. The coaches and scouts are meeting in the team conference room at ten-thirty, but if you're too busy to care about the team, or the business, please continue on with your little conversation." His top lip twisted to a snarl. "Wouldn't want to distract you with real work." He pivoted and strode out of her office.

"Gentlemen, I am sorry to cut this discussion short, but as you heard, I'm apparently late for a very important date."

O'Neal closed his notebook. "Miss Dixon, I'm sorry we've disrupted your morning." He reached inside his jacket and pulled out a business card. "Special Agent Murphy and I'd like to continue our conversation at a later time. Would you be so kind as to have your assistant call us with a convenient day?"

She hoped she hid her shocked relief. She didn't care what made them stop their questions—even if it was Cranky-Pants Taylor. Reaching for the card, she stood and then walked to the door. "I'll have Bridget set up time in the next week or so. With the holidays, it may not be until the new year."

O'Neal shook her hand. "That'll be fine. If we have

any urgent questions, we'll get with you sooner."

They walked to the elevator. With a swish of the metal doors, they were gone.

The tension twisting at her shoulders released. She glanced at Bridget, handing her Special Agent O'Neal's card. "Tell Mr. Taylor I'll be a few minutes late to the stand-up and please contact the agents to set up time to finish this um...meeting." She closed the door. Her body felt like mashed spaghetti as she slid to the floor. Tears raced down her cheeks. Breaths puffed through her lips in short spurts.

Time was running short.

She had to know the truth. Or die trying.