

Life on the
Porcelain Edge

C.E. Hilbert

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Dedication

To God, Who makes all things possible - even the dreams of a pudgy little girl from Ohio.

To my early readers - Mom, Jen, Paige, Leslie, Navin, Alabama Ashley, Utah Ashley, Taryn, Brenda, Zoe and Elise - you are a true gift from heaven.

And to the wonderful men in my life - Daddy, the Uncles, and my BFF - who honor my dream by reading romance novels.

About the Author

C.E. Hilbert lives in a 110+ year-old fixer upper with her dog Daisy and she believes that life goes best with Jesus, a cute outfit and SportsCenter!

1

Tessa Tarrington's life was in the toilet.

Job? *Fired.*

Dad? *Heart attack.*

Current residence? *Childhood bedroom.*

Love life? *Non-existent.*

Her life was swirling in the bowl, just waiting for the ultimate flush.

Until a few months ago, everything was tripping along at a wonderful pace. Great job. Fantastic apartment. Friends. Not a toilet bowl in sight. After graduating from college nearly one thousand miles from her childhood home of Gibson's Run, Ohio, she'd landed a job as a writer with Evanston and Evanston, a specialty publisher located in New Orleans.

The small print house specialized in untold stories and memoirs. But they had a dirty little secret: none of their authors wrote a single word, except their names at book signings. E&E relied almost solely on ghost writers.

Four years into her career as a ghost writer, Tessa's assignments were far-reaching. She'd written about a politician's wife's story of cancer survival and a bestselling song artist's memoir about rising from poverty in Canada. She'd shared stories that needed to be told while remaining neatly tucked away in the shadows—the credit for her beautifully crafted words resting on the stars of the stories themselves. The

number one goal of a ghost writer: remain a ghost. And she performed her duties flawlessly until...*the terrible, awful day*.

While away at her college homecoming, her apartment was robbed. Notes for two current pieces and four future contracts were stolen—sold to the highest tabloid bidder. Her anonymity went from walking down a street unhindered to hiding from paparazzi. No longer the writer of stories, she *was* the story. Clients dropped her like a hot branding iron, leaving her unemployed and a pariah in the world of publishing.

While her professional life was falling apart, she received the phone call she'd dreaded since her mother's funeral three years earlier. Her father was in the hospital with a suspected heart attack.

One flight to Columbus and seventy-two hours later, she'd accepted a long term substitute position at her alma mater. She returned to New Orleans long enough to pack up her coupe and head home to the town she'd left in the dust. Being near her father was necessary. The lone bonus for returning to her hometown of nearly three thousand residents was that the publicity about her came to a screeching halt.

And now, the one threshold she'd promised to never cross again was about to become her daily purgatory for the foreseeable future. She was back in high school. Her years of matriculation in the Gibson's Run Local Schools were a series of embarrassments, humiliations, and harassments. All beginning with her sixth birthday when Ryland Jessup gave her "Days of the Week" panties.

Holding the seven pairs of egg-rolled undies in their long rectangle box, with embarrassment she had

pidled in her white overalls from *Suzi's On Main*. From her sixth birthday through the seventh grade, she'd been known as Pee-Pee Tee-Tee. Thankfully, when she'd entered McKinley Jr. High, the taunt became too long for the cool kids, but the ever clever Ryland shortened the dreaded nickname to T.T.

Throughout her Ryland-tortured adolescence, she sought the simple comfort of blending into the halls, the back row of class, and the loser lunch table for one. She'd been an above average student who only received knocks for shyness, and lack of class participation.

The one bright spot was Joey Taylor, the starting centerfielder for the GRHS Grizzlies and the center of her tiny universe. He was the lone reason she shoved the comforter from her face every morning. Not that he knew she existed beyond the praise band at church, and when the Grizzlies won the state baseball championship Joey Taylor had swung completely out of her orbit along with the last good thing about Gibson's Run.

Despite vowing never to return, she had a reoccurring fantasy of coming back to town to be honored as a Hall of Fame alumna. And, maybe she'd imagined Joey Taylor giving her introduction speech. And maybe, just maybe, she'd envisioned Ryland Jessup fifty pounds overweight and balding, sitting in the audience while she gave her acceptance speech.

"Well, as I live in breathe. If it isn't T.T. Tarrington."

A shiver ran down her spine at the sound of the voice she would recognize fifty years from now. Swiveling, Tessa locked her gaze with steely gray eyes that seemed to twinkle with a bit of the devil.

C.E. Hilbert

“Ryland Jessup.”

Full head of hair and the evidence of a flat belly
beneath his GRHS polo shirt.

Swirl. Flush.

2

Tessa's lungs burned as she sucked in a breath to keep her scream in check. Ryland Jessup. Of course her first day back at GRHS had to mirror her last with his smarmy grin and busting biceps blocking the hall. She resisted the urge to look down to confirm zero puddles. Once a piddler always a piddler.

"What brings you back to high school, T.T.?" Looping one thick, muscled forearm over the other, he leaned against the row of freshly painted lockers. His gaze raked over her body from the nothing heels of her sensible black flats to her simple ponytail before settling his overly inquisitive gaze directly on her face.

With a swipe of her hand over her forehead, she locked a stock sorority smile across her lips and spoke through clenched teeth. "I'm filling in for Mrs. Monahan while she's on short term disability for her hip."

"Huh, that puts you here for the rest of the semester."

She nodded. "I need to get to class." Without a word of dismissal she pivoted, taking long strides toward her classroom.

"Hey, wait up." His sneakers squeaked as he jogged to catch her. His hand clamped on to her shoulder and he spun her to face him. "That was kind of rude, T.T. We're colleagues now. Don't be all standoffish like when we were kids."

Her mouth dropped open.

“Yeah, kind of like this...”

A dangerous combination of twenty years of teasing and weeks of paparazzi pursuit exploded. “Are you kidding me? Standoffish? Rude? You’ve called me T.T. since I was six years old. You remind me *every* time I see you of the most humiliating three minutes of my life. You’re a rude, insensitive jock who, I imagine, returned to high school because this is the only place bullying is still tolerated in America.”

He slid away from her. His face reflected shock and maybe a little awe.

She knew it was rude. She didn’t care. She just needed to get away from him. Running the twenty feet to her class room, she slammed the door shut.

~*~

Ryland walked toward the athletic office located outside the boys’ locker room. Flipping the light switch, he ignored the buzzing of the bulbs kicking to life. His chair groaned under the bulk of his six foot, six inch frame.

T.T. Tarrington was back in Gibson’s Run. She had just gone down the hall before disappearing around the corner to the upperclassman wing. He’d seen her with his own eyes.

She was still as pretty as a fairytale princess. Corn silk hair brushed the top of her waistband and eyes the color of spring grass sparkled. But gone was the shy waif who barely peeped outside of the church praise band. Somewhere between graduation and this morning, T.T. discovered a voice. And that voice was a shrew.

Ryland couldn’t recall the last time he’d been torn

down so viciously in public. Coaches kept their yelling to offices and sidelines. His father was always more of a “teach by example” parent and only yelled when he was trying to get all six of his kids to the dinner table at the same time. Most people in his circle treated Ryland with kindness or at least good natured joking—which was what his old nickname for Tessa was. Just some good natured teasing. But when women were in the mix, good-natured and kindness were often worlds apart.

His late wife had been the master at the private cut and the public coo. When she was alive, Macy Collins-Jessup had been all about keeping private business private. Back then she was an NFL wife. He was the starting middle linebacker on a top ten team. They had an image to preserve. Macy and Ryland Jessup were the poster couple for success in professional sports; a couple with on-paper Christian values who attended church regularly, sponsored two local charities, and had the sweetest baby girl God ever created. Or at least that’s what every Macy-approved press release touted.

For too long, Ryland bought the lie. He had loved his former cheerleader wife. She was beautiful and outwardly sweet. He thought she was his ultimate supporter, encouraging him to go into the draft a year early after completing his undergraduate work in three years. His mother balked at her only son’s decision to forgo his final year of Division I ball and the chance at a graduate degree, but Macy convinced Ryland waiting for his NFL break could include a break to his body and the end of his NFL dream. At the ripe-old age of twenty-one, Ryland Tucker Jessup became the fifteenth overall pick in the draft, a husband, and less than a year later the proud father of Emma Grace Jessup.

Today, five short years after he walked on the stage and donned the hat of his new team, he was a widower, a single dad to a rambunctious toddler, and the coach of his former high school football team—his NFL career a near distant memory.

As topsy-turvy as the last five years had been, he wouldn't change a moment of them. Except the death of his wife. They had been heading to divorce court, but Emma would need her mother one day. He hoped the Lord gave him the strength and the words to help his wonderful daughter grow into the delightful beauty he knew was lying dormant inside her four-year-old tomboy frame.

He glanced out his two-by-four window—the only source of natural light or fresh air in the sardine container the school district called the athletic department head office—and his mind dropped back to Tessa Tarrington. When he was six years old he declared to his mother he would love Tessa Tarrington until the day he died. His mind replayed the day like a home movie.

Tripping over his too large feet, he ran through the back door of the four bedroom house, home to the giant Jessup family. “Momma! Momma! I just gots t-ta t-tells you something.” He yelled, stumbling over his “T’s” with his front teeth lost to the Tooth Fairy.

“Ryland, it is ‘have to tell’ you something. No one ‘gots’ anything. It’s not a word.” His mother had her PhD and taught courses on the impact of ancient masterpieces on modern literature, the early writings of C.S. Lewis, and her personal favorite, the complete works of Jane Austen. She did not tolerate poor grammar—even in her beloved youngest son, just starting kindergarten.

"Yes, Momma. Well, I have to t-tell you. I met my wife today."

She chuckled. "Really, Ryland. What's her name?"

"T-Tessa. T-Tessa T-Tarrington." He gave her a broad, toothless grin.

"You're planning to marry Reverend Tarrington's little girl? Why?"

That's what he loved most about his momma. She didn't think he was crazy even when he told her something she clearly thought was not quite right. She talked to him as if he were a grown-up. She talked to him just as she talked to his oldest sister, Elizabeth, who was thirteen and real grown-up.

"Because she's the prettiest girl I ever sawed. She looks just like a princess in one of those fairy t-tale books the t-twins have."

"The prettiest girl you ever saw."

"Yes ma'am. Prettiest next to you."

She slid a cookie onto a plate in front of him and asked him the most serious question of his life. "Pretty isn't everything, Ryland. Why else do you want to marry her?"

"She's real smart. She knew Columbus was the capital of Ohio. Who knows stuff like that?" He snatched the cookie and clumsily chomped down using his molars.

"Who knows stuff like what?" His father asked as he entered the kitchen wiping at the sweat dripping down his face.

"Stuff like Columbus being the capital of Ohio." His mother offered. "Your son has fallen in love with a beautiful and smart girl it seems."

His father nodded and ruffled the top of Ryland's curly brown head. "Well, like father like son."

Ryland chuckled at the memory and all of the days that quickly followed in kindergarten. After school, his mother would ask him about his day and he would start with a story about Tessa. Occasionally he talked about his friends Joey and Marshall but mostly his talk focused on Tessa Tarrington and his eternal love for her. When he received the invitation to her birthday party, he asked all his friends and his sisters what he should get for her.

His sister, Harper, said he should get her a doll; that way when she went to sleep every night she would think of Ryland. The twins—Marianne and Elinor—thought he should get her a football so they could play together. But his best friend, Joey Taylor, landed on the perfect gift. “Days of the Week” underwear.

“Just think Rys...she’ll think of you every day and just about my favorite things on the planet, other than my baseball glove, are my superhero underwears. When I wear them I’m never scared of the third graders stealing my lunch. You give her ‘em underwears and she’ll never be scared of nothin’.”

And so he’d ridden his first two wheeler four blocks into town and spent all his baseball card money at *Suzi’s on Main* on the pretty box of rolled up underwear. He was thrilled. He went straight home and wrapped the box all by himself. Everyone at the party was surprised by his present, but no one more than Tessa. She reacted just like his new puppy, Bennett, and peed all over the floor. He wanted to warn her and so he tried to whisper to her, “You pee-pee’d T-T...” but he was too late.

All the boys at the party heard his stuttered attempt to warn the love of his life of her embarrassing

moment. The warning devolved into a taunt. Tessa ran to her parents' bedroom and Ryland was dragged by his mother's bear claw grip from the party—out of Tessa's life. The whispered warning twisted into a nickname and the love of his life became his mortal enemy.

"Hey Coach," the soft knock and strangled voice of fifteen-year old sophomore, Jackson Murray, halted his trip down memory lane.

"Murray," he glanced at the wall clock. The school was fifteen minutes deep into first period. "Shouldn't you be in English?"

The gangly, three-sport athlete shrugged causing his overly long hair to flop in his eyes. "We got a sub. No bigs." He plopped in the chair opposite Ryland's desk.

"Major bigs, Murray." Ryland slammed his chair back to the wall with a squeak and a muffled thud. "And by the sound of your grammar you need all the time in English class you can spare. Maybe I should discuss a special reading assignment with your new substitute for you. Improve your take on the beautiful language of kings and queens. What do you say?" Without waiting for a response, he roughly guided the six-foot-two starting first baseman down the hall.

Ryland was about to see Tessa Tarrington for a second time in one day. Her response to him for round two most likely would not be improved.

3

The shrill of the bell announced the end of the school day and Tessa's eighth period Modern American Literature class.

"OK ladies and gentlemen, we'll pick up tomorrow where you left off with Mrs. Monahan. We'll be reviewing the potential titles to use for your papers on dystopian literature in the modern era. Have a wonderful evening."

The mix of juniors and seniors trickled into the hallway. The din of their conversations followed in their wake.

Her eyes flittered shut, the blessing of silence encapsulating her. Every muscle in her body felt as if she had run back-to-back marathons. Even her fingernails hurt. *How does one actually have pain in the fingernail?* With a long sigh, she pushed from her chair to wipe the giant white board behind her.

"I kind of miss chalkboards."

As if she wasn't already in enough pain. She plastered a long-practiced sorority smile on her lips and turned to find Ryland Jessup holding up the door frame of her classroom. "Coach Jessup, what can I do for you?"

"Well, Miss T., it's not what you can do for me. It's what I can do for you."

She gritted her teeth, but her smile never wavered. She had perfected the smile after three years of Rush, encountering hundreds of girls, and several sisters,

who were less than genuine. Delta Alpha Psi, her chosen sisterhood, was not one of the crazy, partying kind of sororities that ended up on the news with black slashes hiding the identity of underage girls. Her sisterhood was more subdued—filled with girls majoring in English, Elementary Education, or something with the arts. They had movie nights featuring the latest British film, and book clubs discussing the finer points of Austen's heroines. She'd found her people. Bookworms in pearls.

Not that she liked all of her sisters—life in families never worked that simply. Bobbi Ann Risdy and Joanie Lee Wilston didn't make her post-college Christmas card list. But, within the sanctity of her sorority, Tessa found her most cherished friends. For an only child, small town loner, Lily Mae Benton and Ella Donavon were the water Tessa's parched soul desperately needed. And for Lily and Ella, she'd learned to plaster a smile and give a *'God bless her soul'* to her less-than-beloved sisters.

Her sorority days taught her hundreds of lessons. Everything from what table service to use when hosting a seven course dinner, to dealing diplomatically with individuals whose presence was similar to the scraping of nails down a blackboard. She learned to be surface sweet even to the vilest of people. Ryland Jessup was nearly as low on her list as Bobbi Ann Risdy. But as with her sisterhood nemesis, her smile never wavered while Ryland swallowed up the doorway to her room.

Despite returning the errant Jackson Murray to class and forcing him to apologize in front of all of his peers, Ryland remained at the center of all of her childhood pain. Tessa wished she had some petroleum

jelly handy for her teeth when her lips dried from faking the grin too long. "Coach Jessup I don't believe there's anything I need, but thank you for asking."

He shoved away from the doorframe. With two steps into her classroom, Tessa's breathing went shallow. The man's mere presence sucked all the oxygen from the room. He was well over a foot taller than she was, with shoulders every linebacker in America envied. His hair was military short, likely to avoid the curl he'd hated as a child. His gray eyes twinkled with a smile, but she knew the devil was ready to pounce through those full lips.

"Well, Miss T., I think there is."

"Please don't call me that."

"Miss T.?"

"Yes, I buried that nickname under the fifty yard line when I was seventeen years old."

"What nickname? I've heard students all day referring to the new substitute Miss T. I think one of my football players told me that's what the 'cool lady sub whose letting us read regular stuff' asked to be called."

"Oh..." Her cheeks warmed, probably straight to fire engine red. She *had* told the students they could call her Miss Tarrington or Miss T. "I guess I did, but that was for the students. Not for the teachers."

"Well, what are the teachers supposed to call you?"

"Tessa..."

"Naw....that's no fun. You need a nickname. Everyone likes a nickname."

She lifted her dilapidated cross-body saddlebag from the floor and shoved overflowing folders inside. "Not everyone likes nicknames. Trust me."

He thrust a beefy hand through his cropped hair. "I'm sorry Tessa. I was trying to be nice. I seemed to have messed up again."

"Again?" She hoisted the near bursting bag on her left shoulder.

He yanked her coat and hat from the hook behind her, brushing her shoulder with his arm. "Yep. I've hurt your feelings more often than a rookie quarterback gets sacked."

"That many, huh?" She couldn't help the tug at the corner of her mouth.

"Yes, ma'am. It all started with a little boy who was head over heels for the prettiest, smartest girl he'd ever seen but he couldn't seem to ever get things right. And instead of making that little girl love him, he hurt her so bad, now she hates him."

Her heart warmed with the tender gloss of his gaze. Not a little devil in sight. "She doesn't hate you."

"Aww, but I think she does. And I need to start making it up to her."

She tried to slip on her wool jacket, but struggled with the balance of the saddlebag shifting sides. With his forefinger he lifted the bag, and shrugged her into her woolen coat, hooking her bag efficiently over her shoulder. Gently, he tugged the soft toboggan over her ears, scrunching her ponytail to her head.

She swallowed against the rising thickness in her throat. "How're you gonna do that?"

"Maybe we could have a coffee or something. And it's 'going to'. Just because you are from Ohio doesn't mean you should end your sentences with a preposition."

BAAM! He did it again! Ryland Jessup made her feel like an idiot. *Prettiest, smartest girl he'd ever seen.*

Bah! She stepped back, sidling around him to the door. "Coach Jessup, I don't think there's anything we have to say to one another. Good-bye." She zoomed through the door and was halfway down the back hallway leading to the associate parking lot, when the weight of five meaty fingers clamp onto her shoulder.

"What's your problem, T.T.? I'm trying to be nice. I wanted to properly welcome you back to Gibson's Run."

Pivoting to face him, she laced her arms across her chest. "And does mauling a co-worker on her way to the parking lot fall into the category of 'nice' or 'welcoming'?"

"When did you become so touchy?"

"I don't know. Maybe it was being humiliated when I was six years old in front of my entire kindergarten class—who all graduated high school with me because this town is the size of a cereal puff. Or maybe it was the years between junior and senior high when Pee-Pee Tee-Tee was shortened just to T.T. but you and Marshall Smith felt the need to remind everyone of the origins of the nickname. Or maybe it was during the praise band concert when you started shouting 'go T.T. like it's your birthday' from the back pew of church. Or maybe it was one of the hundreds of other days in the miserable thirteen years I spent in this town. Take your pick. But I can't imagine what someone as cool and awesome as Ryland Jessup has to say to someone as "touchy" as little old T.T. Tarrington. Good evening, Coach."

She spun out of his grip like a wide receiver avoiding a tackle, and for the second time in one day, Tessa Tarrington ran like an old toilet—noisy and erratic.

4

“Daddy,” Tessa hollered as she stumbled through the front door of her father’s parsonage. “I’m home. What do you want for dinner?” She dropped her bag and coat near the front door coat rack. Kicking off her shoes, she padded sock-footed to the paneled library-study her father used as his home office.

Since his heart attack four weeks ago while giving the third Sunday in Advent sermon on the shepherds being called to literally ‘go and tell it on the mountain,’ Thomas Tarrington had retreated to his private sanctuary every morning.

When Tessa was a child, her father’s office was a place of reverence and peace. If the door was shut, her mother would say, “Tessa you always need to knock before you barge. More than likely the good Lord is in for a sit-down with Daddy. You wouldn’t want to disturb them, now, would you?”

Until Tessa was sixteen, she was afraid to walk in too soon after her father opened the door for fear she would come face to face with The Lord. Not that she didn’t love and cherish Him—she did—she was just trying to avoid a repeat of her sixth birthday party. Once a piddler...

“Daddy...” The door was cracked and she could hear the woeful tunes of the new country band she recommended filling the tiny space.

“Come on in, sweetie.” Her father’s voice, though no longer quite the interesting mix of booming volume