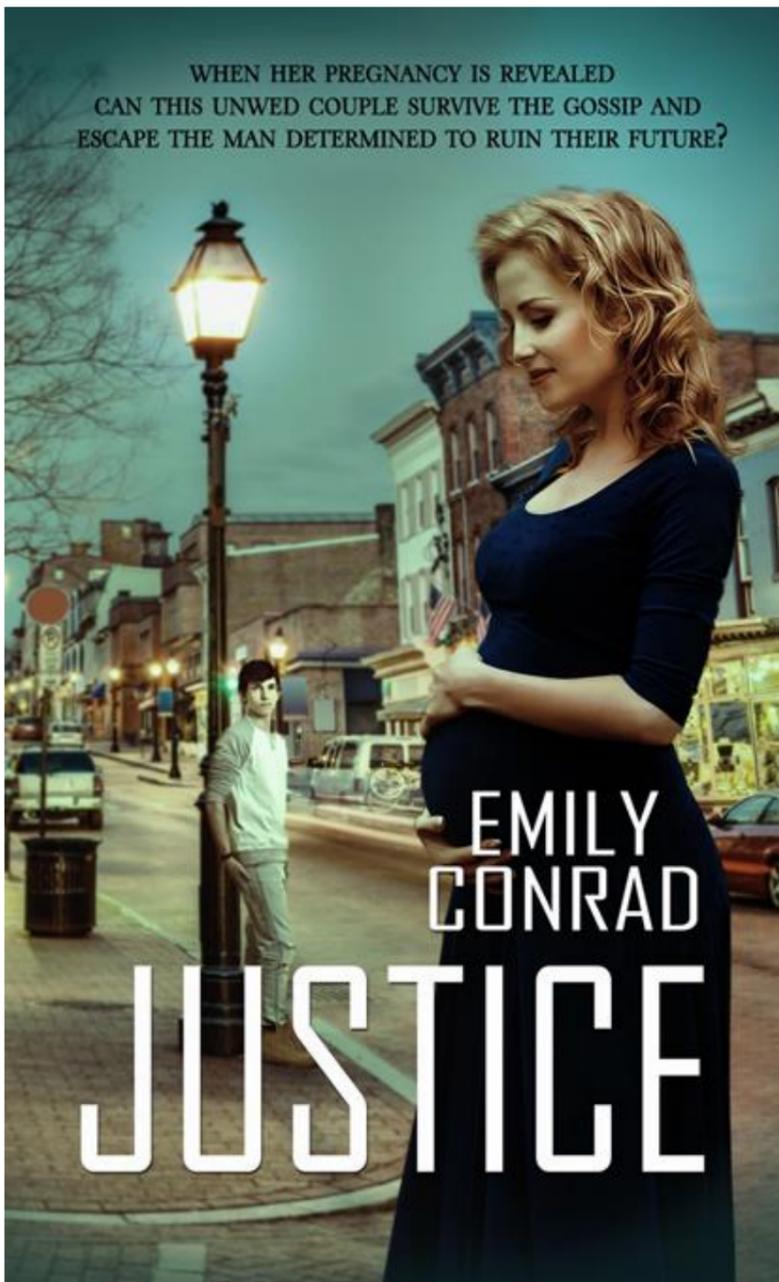


WHEN HER PREGNANCY IS REVEALED  
CAN THIS UNWED COUPLE SURVIVE THE GOSSIP AND  
ESCAPE THE MAN DETERMINED TO RUIN THEIR FUTURE?

EMILY  
CONRAD

JUSTICE



# Justice

Emily Conrad

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## **Justice**

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*Dedication*

For Mom

Thank you for believing in me and, more importantly,  
in God.





*For the Lord is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him. ~Isaiah 30:18*

# 1

Snow floated onto Main Street, each flake large enough to catch the breeze like a parachute. A miniature army, launching a surprise invasion on March first. If it kept up, Jake would have to clear the sidewalk. As it was, customers had tracked in enough to leave a puddle trail across the hardwood floor.

He hefted the tray of dishes he'd gathered from Hillside Coffee's tables and headed for the back. The bells on the side entrance jingled, announcing at least one more North Adams resident needing a coffee to warm his or her hands.

Carrie, the manager Jake had scheduled for the morning, stepped toward the register.

As he slid the tray onto the workspace next to the sink, the silverware rattled against the stack of mugs. The scent of detergent rose, but the machine was silent now. The kid on dish duty, Ronny, was nowhere to be seen. As usual.

Carrie stuck her head around the corner. "Brooklyn's here to see you."

His stomach flopped. Amazing he'd known Brooklyn since fifth grade, yet she had that effect on

him. He'd track down Ronny later.

Brooklyn Merrill stood at the end of the sales counter as if she had been about to come back to find him. She held a hat in one hand while she used the other to smooth her blonde hair. Since her business trip two months ago, she'd worn her long locks up without exception. Every time he saw her, he had to fight off the thought of kissing that spot between her spine and her ear, where her hair was soft and new. Someday, he'd coax her into giving love a chance. For sanity's sake, he had to.

He cleared his throat. "Took the day off?"

Brooklyn's mouth pulled into a tight grimace. For two months, sadness had infused her expression whenever she didn't seem to think he'd notice, but this was the first time she'd failed to tuck it away when he was obviously watching.

This could be the answer to his prayer that she would open up again. He led her a few steps away to a space by the display shelves. "You want to talk?"

A collection of tears glittered in her eyes. "I haven't been as good as I've been acting."

He would wrap her in the hug of her life, but their friendship rarely crossed the border of touch. He tried a gentle smile instead. "That's a problem. Because you haven't been acting very good."

A laugh caught in her throat.

He put his hand on her shoulder and guided her to the rear corner of the first floor, where she could sit with her back to everyone.

Even wrapped in privacy, she stared toward the wall and picked at her fingernails. "I planned what to say to you." Her voice quieted. "But I don't think I can do it."

His relief morphed into dread. What could be this bad? *Father, don't let me mess this up.* "Just tell me the script. What'd you plan to say?"

"I need a ride to a doctor's appointment." She spoke in a flat tone.

He wanted to play along and say his lines, too, but all this over an illness? If she'd been sick since her mood froze over in January and couldn't drive herself, it was serious. His dad's problems had started this way—an appointment followed by a cancer diagnosis, months of treatment and supposed remission, and, finally, a funeral.

Brooklyn searched his eyes, tense sadness weighing down her features.

He kept his gaze trained on her beautiful, worried face. Maybe this appointment was something simple. He had to believe it, or he couldn't ask. "What kind of appointment?"

Brooklyn swallowed, neck ridged. "I'm three weeks late."

"To the appointment?"

"My body. My body is three weeks late."

"Your body..." Then it hit him. *She thinks she's pregnant.* How had he not understood sooner?

"I took a test, but maybe it was wrong."

She'd changed on that business trip. An image thundered to mind, and he willed it away. But the question remained. "You and Caleb?"

"It's not like you think, Jake."

"No kidding."

She taught Sunday school. She had worn a promise ring for years, but her finger was bare now. Caleb went on the New Wilshire trip knowing how Jake felt about Brooklyn, knowing he'd ended his last

relationship to pursue her. Would Caleb have slept with her anyway?

"I can explain. There's not enough time right now, but I will explain."

He clenched his fist under the table. "I'm sure you could summarize." After all those years of pushing him away with the claim she'd never marry, never fall in love, she'd let someone else in. If it was just Jake she hadn't wanted all this time, she could've saved him years of trouble by being honest. "It's none of my business." He started away.

"Jake, please."

He turned back.

"I can't face this alone anymore." Her grip on the table turned her fingertips white.

The day Dad had died, when Jake reached home from the hospital, he'd found her waiting in the driveway. He and his mom had been together the whole time, but as soon as he held Brooklyn in his arms, he felt a million times less alone. Later, when losing Dad prompted him to question God, it had been Brooklyn who stood by him, her unshakable faith drawing him back to faith of his own. She may have brought this on herself, but he owed her company in her darkest hour. "Fine. When's the appointment?"

"I sat in the parking lot for half an hour before I worked up the nerve to come in."

He crossed his arms.

"Ten."

He checked his watch. "Fifteen minutes?"

She nodded, sighed, and stood. "I was going to talk to you sooner."

He trusted his managers, and he could leave with little to no warning. As he led the way to the door, he

braced for snowflakes. Since he lived in the apartment above the shop and had no plans to go out, he'd worn short sleeves, and there wasn't time to run up for something warmer.

As they walked to the car, his peripheral vision caught the line of Brooklyn's dipped chin and the slant of her downcast eyes. He was failing her. He put an arm around her shoulders but felt no warmth when she leaned into him.

~\*~

The seat Jake chose in the waiting area faced the door the nurse had led Brooklyn through.

She and Caleb were in the same place in life as Jake—hitting a stride in their careers, getting established. What would they do with a baby? *Do they really deserve this, God?*

One or the other would have to move if they were to be a family. If she relocated to Madison, where Caleb lived, Jake would lose touch with her. If Caleb came to North Adams, Jake would have a front row seat as the love of his life and his best friend played house.

He leaned forward in his seat. *Please, God, let there be some other explanation.* He was no expert. Maybe three weeks wasn't that significant. *Please, God, give her another chance. And show me what to do. I thought she was the one.* No one else's smile could light him up like hers, and no one else's problems made him wish he could change the world like hers. If only he could change it now. He stared at the speckled carpet, wishing for answers, but no Bible verses, no advice

from his parents, and certainly no voice from God spoke to him.

Twenty minutes passed.

“Jake?”

He sat up.

Robyn Washburn took a seat. “What brings you here? Not sick, I hope.” She was the wife of one of his church’s elders. Everyone might have sin and secrets, but he didn’t know any of Robyn’s. How would her expression change if she knew why he was here?

“A friend needed a ride.”

Caleb and Brooklyn had never shown signs of falling for each other. However, they’d stayed in the same hotel. No wonder the coward had feigned ignorance when Jake asked what could’ve changed Brooklyn on the New Wilshire trip.

Jake stretched his fingers. “How’s the new car treating you?”

“Henry can’t get over how I always get better mileage than he does. I keep telling him he needs to ease off the gas, but he just persists and then complains.” She chuckled. “If he would slow down, it might save him a speeding ticket or three.”

“You could get him a motorized scooter. They’re slower and have great mileage.”

“Oh, can you imagine?” She laughed again. Whatever her reason for visiting a doctor, it had to be routine.

The door opened, and Brooklyn ducked through. The only mascara left on her face was a faint smudge below one of her eyes. That could only mean one thing: she was pregnant.

She took an uncertain step toward him. He wrapped her in his arms, but even so, she’d never been

further out of his reach.

"I can't do this," she said against his shoulder.

"You can." He leaned his head to look at her face. Her closed eyes seeped tears. "We'll do it together."

*Liar.* He couldn't help her with a baby. That job belonged to Caleb. Yet, he had the sense that the promise answered his prayer. It was God's direction for how he should proceed. *How do You figure I can help her?*

She scrunched her eyes tighter, and he placed a hand on the back of her head as she collected herself. When she stepped away, her gaze focused behind him, and her face reddened. "Can we go?"

Robyn stared at them, forehead furrowed.

Jake lifted a hand in a wave and turned toward the door.

Brooklyn followed him out to the car and buckled herself in. "I don't want people talking."

At this point, gossip was unavoidable. The time to worry about appearances was already weeks behind them. He started the engine and navigated to the road.

She gasped like they'd had a close call with another car, but the road was clear of everything but cottony snow. "I can't do this, Jake. I never planned to get married, let alone have kids all by myself."

"You're not alone." She had God if she wanted him. Or Caleb. He wouldn't turn his back on his own kid. Then again, Jake hadn't expected him to make a move on Brooklyn either. He and Caleb had been friends since high school football. That should've counted for something.

She remained silent.

Despite everything, he couldn't stand to see her cry, so he kept his eyes on the road.

She dug through the glove compartment for a napkin, which she pressed to her face. "The doctor said the baby is the size of a BB pellet. A bullet. Who compares a baby to a bullet?"

News that the baby already took up space was at the edge of his ability to grasp, but a bullet comparison was the most sense she had made all day.

"You're angry," she said.

A black SUV pulled out of a parking lot, and he slammed the brakes to avoid it. The car slid a couple of inches before the tires gripped. He ground his teeth. Anything he said would betray just how right she was, and she hurt enough without him piling on more wounds. As he parked in his spot behind Hillside, his phone went off. He took it from his pocket and answered.

"I think I messed up." Devin, one of the youth group boys Jake mentored, rarely bothered to introduce himself.

*Join the club.* Jake rubbed his hand over his eyes. "Why's that?"

"Do you have time? We could meet up?"

This had to be about Lauren, Devin's girlfriend. Or something could've happened with the kid's alcoholic parents. Or school. Jake took his keys from the ignition but didn't open his door.

Brooklyn sat still and quiet, probably waiting to say good-bye.

"Sure. Let me wrap up what I'm working on. We can grab lunch in about an hour."

"Who's buying?"

"Who always buys? I'll text you when I'm headed over." Jake pocketed the phone before turning his attention back to Brooklyn.

She collected her purse and tugged her coat zipper up to her throat. "I should get to work. I'll need the time off later in the year." The door clunked open.

"Let me know if you need anything."

She must've picked up on his hesitance because she nodded once and got out without another word.

*You're a terrible friend, Jake.*

He couldn't imagine doing better. Not when the woman he'd hoped to someday marry was carrying someone else's child. *God, what do I do now?*

## 2

Jake headed toward his apartment, his Bible, and some peace and quiet.

Two people waited at the counter with only Carrie there to serve them because, of course, Ronny was missing. Jake could go help, but why have staff if they couldn't handle making drinks?

"Good morning, Madame Durand. I haven't seen you in weeks."

The words halted Jake. Only Harold, owner of the bookstore across the street, would speak that way. Jake altered his course and stepped behind the counter, where Harold lingered next to Rachel Durand, one of Hillside's regulars.

With her back to the customers as she pumped syrup into Rachel's drink, Carrie raised her eyebrows and frowned in exasperation. She was one of the two employees Harold had reduced to tears on past visits.

The flush on Rachel Durand's cheeks signaled she wasn't immune to Harold's bullying either.

"When I was raising my boy, I made sure he read a book a week. That's how he got into—"

"Harold." Jake planted his palms on the counter. "Slow day over at the store?"

That his business might be lagging was a calculated blow to his pride. If it didn't send him packing, Jake would ask how he ended up estranged

from the son he acted so proud of. No. That would be letting Harold get the best of him. *Love your neighbor. Even today.*

Harold slowly pivoted. "Mr. Davidson."

"That's Monsieur Davidson to you."

A laugh escaped Rachel Durand. She took her drink from Carrie and hurried off to a second-floor table.

At least he'd kept Harold from alienating one customer from Hillside.

"I came to check out the competition." Harold's voice boomed like his belly was an amplifier.

"Competition?" Their businesses couldn't have been more complementary. Though snow obscured the view of the glass and metal building now, Harold's Books stood on the corner across the street. When the bookstore had a signing, Harold's customers would visit Hillside for a latte before heading home. Jake's customers crossed the street and bought novels to enjoy with their coffee on Hillside's couches. "You're breaking into the coffee business?"

"Only seems fair if you're going to sell books." Harold's volume drew glances from customers.

Jake reviewed his shop for something that could've offended the man. Among the coffee and tea items, Jake stocked locally-made goods—caramel corn, soap, little clay dogs. A small gift book tucked in among the other products snagged his attention. There were three different books, mostly filled with pictures. "You're over here because of a frog book?"

"We had a gentlemen's agreement. A symbiotic relationship." Harold enunciated each syllable as if Jake needed to hear it slowly to understand.

He came out from behind the counter. "We have

no agreements, Harold. Last I heard, making a deal to not compete is still illegal.”

Harold’s gray eyes narrowed.

“Besides. This? Over gift books? You’ve got three stories of books in a million-dollar building across the street.”

Harold had demolished an historic bank building to erect the modern bookstore, something the city had allowed because of the pull of Harold’s brother, the mayor. Bringing it up helped draw them closer to the windows and the main exit.

“Then you know I can’t agree, either.” The man finally hushed his voice. “Keep selling books, and I’ll put in a coffee shop.”

“I’ll keep stocking them as long as customers keep buying them.”

“Your father would call that downright stupid.” Harold tugged on his belt, his puffed-up chest no match for the size of his belly.

“Next time I see him, I’ll talk it over with him.”

Harold lifted his hands, and his voice rose again as he pushed open the door. “Can’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Jake stepped onto the mezzanine along the Main Street windows. Harold wasn’t alone in the crosswalk. Vanessa, Hillside’s best manager, approached from the opposite direction. From the looks of it, she chirped a greeting to Harold.

Just after they passed each other, Harold waved his hand as if to swat down pleasantries.

Vanessa swung open the shop door and stomped the snow off her boots. Laughing, she smoothed the snowflakes from her curly brown hair. “That’s loathing if I ever saw it.” She joined Jake. “Are we glaring at the

snow or Harold?"

Jake owed the steady flow of customers during Hillside's first year to curiosity about Harold's construction project. If only the man hadn't proven to be such a difficult neighbor. "He says if I keep selling books, he's putting in a coffee shop."

"Selling books?" Vanessa surveyed the dining room then tossed him a helpless look.

"The gift books."

"Seriously? He wouldn't really open a coffee shop, would he?"

Harold, a business man, had to know there wasn't enough traffic on North Adam's Main Street to support two coffee shops. That would be the allure—the possibility he could starve out Hillside. But was Harold enough of a gambler to risk it?

"Let's say he does. He won't bring in live music like us. And he wouldn't source locally the way we do."

She raised her eyebrows. "You don't think a coffee shop would be a problem?"

He turned from the windows. "I don't know about you, but I was glaring at the snow. It's not supposed to happen in March."

She rolled her eyes. "It's only the first. Speaking of March, did you order the daffodils?"

"There's another thing Harold couldn't take from us."

"My marketing genius? Or my razor-sharp memory?" She headed for the back where employees stowed their winter gear. On the way, she said hello to every regular she passed.

Jake followed her.

She'd given away daisies on Valentine's Day with

a little card tied to each one advertising that weekend's performer. The show packed the shop. He'd put off ordering the daffodils, which she planned to give out the first day of spring, but he hadn't forgotten.

"Either way." Tying her apron, Vanessa passed him. "I'm not working for Harold. I don't care if that means working here for the rest of my life."

"You say that like it'd be a bad thing."

She laughed but skipped offering a reply. Come May, when she finished her marketing degree, he was bound to lose his second-in-command, but he didn't have the heart to pursue it today.

He checked his watch. The idea that he could somehow help Devin might be farfetched, but the kid was counting on him. "I'll be back after lunch."

She waved good-bye and turned her attention to a customer.

~\*~

Nearly an hour later, Jake and Devin lingered in a booth. They'd ordered a monster of a pizza and had managed to eat half. Jake's first guess about the teen's problem had been right. A bunch of the high schoolers had gathered for an offseason bonfire in the middle of a field of snow. Devin paid too much attention to his friends and too little to his girlfriend. Lauren, the girlfriend, was furious.

The teen took a third slice of pizza. "She says I don't love her."

Jake stopped halfway through moving his straw to his drink refill. "Do you?"

"Yeah."

He stabbed the straw in the new cup and swiped a napkin over the mess he'd made. Seventeen and in love after two and a half months. Jake wasn't qualified to help. He should've stayed at work to take his mind off Brooklyn. Not that distraction would change what she had done.

If only he could dredge up some good advice. He resorted to the question his mom had once used to help him straighten out his priorities. "Is this the kind of love you're willing to make some sacrifices for?"

Devin lifted one shoulder in a non-committed shrug, but his attention was fixed on Jake.

*Now what do I tell him, God?*

"Then Lauren needs to know that."

"How?"

*Lord, give me wisdom.* "Find a way to show her. Do something for her that you usually don't like to do. Go see a musical or a chick flick or a ballet."

Devin's lip curled in disgust, but he laughed. "A ballet?"

"Throwing it out there."

"So I go to the ballet." He lifted his pizza. "If I do that, you'll finally ask Brooklyn out?"

"Not that simple, buddy."

"We're going to die alone."

"Nah." Jake tossed his napkin on the table. "We'll always have each other."

Devin snorted, lifted his pizza as a toast, and went back to packing it away.