



*Falling for*  
**FOREVER**

Katherine Robles

A ROMANCE IN THE PARK NOVEL

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## *Dedication*

To my parents, Dan and Teresa, who met in a national park and showed me what a lifetime of love looks like.



# 1

Hillary leaned over a boulder and eyed the fifty-foot drop to rocks and fast flowing rapids beneath her. The Potomac River churned with frothy white ripples between two giant walls of metamorphic rock before curving out of sight beyond more slabs of granite topped with budding trees. Beautiful. Dangerous. Well worth the drive.

The outlook she'd chosen was like the back row at a concert, far from the action but free from the crowds. The outlooks close to the parking lot had nicer views of the waterfalls, but there was something sacred about admiring nature alone. Besides, if she detoured to those crowded platforms, she wouldn't have time to hike the loop and get out of the park before evening traffic.

Hillary carefully scooted down from her trail-side boulder perch and planted her feet on the dirt. She followed the packed earth trail as it wound down toward the wooden footbridge, hopping now and again over tree roots or dislodged stones. A couple approached her coming up the hill and she stood to the side to let them pass. The woman wore a thigh length blue pea coat and knee high black boots. New, blue, and way too nice for hiking. Who hiked on a Friday

afternoon in nicer clothes than most people wore to church? People who didn't own crappy sweatpants and long sleeve t-shirts from high school anymore, that's who.

The quality end of Hillary's closet was growing, but she wasn't wasting her nice clothes on dirt and rocks. Like the pair of black ankle boots she'd found at the thrift store two weeks ago. They'd been perfect for her interview this morning, and they were now safely tucked away in the trunk of her car along with her dress pants and blouse. Safe from dirt and safe from Dad.

She'd considered it a sign of maturity that she'd debated with herself for nearly half an hour before she bought them. On the one hand, her car needed a new battery. Her car was important for taking her to her job. On the other hand, she wanted a better job, hence the interview, and those boots made her feel as if she fit in when she walked into their swanky office. Confidence would pay off in a higher income, which would pay for the battery. Lots of batteries. She hoped the spark of life left in the old battery wouldn't die before her next paycheck.

A T in the trail led off to her left and Hillary hesitated. If she went straight, the trail looped back to the main entrance and she would have plenty of time to make it home. If she turned left and followed the river a bit more, she'd be cutting it close but have more fun. Wisps of her honey hued hair were falling from her hasty ponytail. She tucked the strands behind her ears and breathed in the scent of warm dirt and new

growth. She simply needed to have fun fast.

The trail hugged the river's curves. Soon a footbridge squatted before her, a wooden set of stairs leading down, across, and then back up the other side of a small ravine. Her interview had left her tingling with energy to burn and the straightforward bridge wouldn't cut it today. She turned to the side and jogged down the well-worn unofficial path leading to the ravine floor. A creek flowed there and joined the raging river just past a small beach. Hillary hopped from rock to rock across the creek and followed the path on the other side to the bottom of a solid boulder face, fifty-feet high.

Hillary reached up and grabbed an outcropping of rock, then lifted a foot and found a toehold. The rock face rose at roughly a forty-five-degree angle. A challenge, but not an insurmountable one. Yet another reason to wear sneakers instead of expensive boots to Great Falls Park. Sneaker wearers had the most fun.

Hard to believe it'd been a year ago that she'd climbed this wall with her college friends the day before graduation. She'd beaten half of the boys to the top. If only climbing a career ladder was just as easy. She shifted her feet a few inches to the left to reach a new toehold and pulled herself up using her hands. The manager said he would be in touch but she wasn't holding her breath. The expression on the man's face said "tough luck, girlie" no matter how polite his words were.

The only good thing about the interview being over quickly was that she had just enough time to hike



the trail—well, the coolest parts, anyway—before Mom’s surprise party. Enough time, that is, if she left Great Falls before DC traffic hit. Her biceps burned as she scrambled up the rock face. She paused to look down and grinned at the shoelace of water below her. She loved this park.

She pushed with her toes and pulled up the last few feet of the hillside to find a pair of men’s dress shoes and khaki pants standing where she needed to place her knees. Beyond the pants was a pair of strappy heels. What was with people dressing up in the park today? She straightened her legs, which pushed her chest above the rock’s curve and allowed her to lean her elbows on the rock’s flat top near the shoes. She waited a moment but the shoes didn’t move. She cleared her throat and leaned her head to the side to peer around the khaki legs. A young woman stood six feet away and was pointing a camera at Khaki Legs and Strappy Heels. Ah, yes, spring in Great Falls, a perfect time for photographs. Judging by the giggling going on above her, she’d guess it was a young couple. The dress above Strappy Heels was a classy, long sleeved knee length number. Not flashy enough for prom, so probably engagement pictures.

The photographer snapped a few photos, lowered the camera, and then leaned her head to see around the couple. She started to laugh and gesture for the couple to step towards her. She prattled away in Spanish—Hillary had learned enough of the language in high school to recognize it, even if she had no idea what the woman was saying—and Khaki Legs and Strappy

Heels moved away from the ledge. Hillary hauled her butt over the edge and planted a knee. A tan manly hand appeared in front of her, but she waved it away, planted her other knee, and then quickly stood to her feet.

"I'm so sorry about that. We didn't expect anyone to come up there."

Khaki Legs' voice was warm, and when she looked up, she noted laugh lines around his eyes. He still held out his hand as though to help her away from the cliff's edge, but she ignored it. Khaki Legs was slender and handsome with a wide flat nose, bright eyes, and tan skin that perfectly matched his shiny black hair. Strappy Heels was a blessed woman.

"You should try it some time." Hillary brushed the dirt off her knees with her hands. Handsome man, meet crappy sweatpants.

Khaki Legs stepped to the edge and leaned over to peer down. "I think I will."

Strappy Heels and the photographer were giggling together and studying the pictures on the camera. The spring sunlight glinted off the diamond on Strappy's left ring finger. Definitely engagement photos. Strappy's white dress showed off her curvaceous figure and its light green belt matched Khaki Legs' green button down shirt perfectly. Well planned engagement photos.

"If you want a real challenge, there's a steeper rock face down the trail that way." She pointed. "People bring climbing ropes and everything." Why was she still talking? She was wasting time.

"This is a cool park. I've only been on the Maryland side." He was still smiling at her. Look at that. Perfect white teeth to match the sparkle in his eyes.

"So you're one of the colored dots?"

His smile froze in confusion. *Stupid joke, Hillary.* She pointed across the river. People walking the trails on the Maryland side of the Potomac resembled small blobs of color as they moved through the trees and scrambled over the boulders. To her relief, he laughed.

"Yes, yes I am, though I usually ride my bike, so I'm not that close to the edge. Ever been to the other side?"

Hillary shook her head. "I don't think so. I live south of Leesburg, so this side is closer to home." Home. Mom's surprise party. Time to go. She waved her hand once and smiled. "I need to go. Have a nice day."

"Thanks. You, too."

She raised her hand in farewell to Strappy Heels and the photographer and jogged down the trail. When rocks inserted themselves into the path, she scrambled up them and bounded down the other side. Her mind replayed the morning's interview question and answer by question and answer. The manager had said she needed more real world experience. Her feet pounded the morning's frustration into the dirt. Sweat beaded on her forehead gave her a sense of satisfaction. Her legs began to burn and she slowed to a walk and wiped the moisture from her brow with her sleeve. There was a break in the trees where the trail turned.

Hillary got as close as she dared to the edge, and stared down at Mather Gorge. The granite walls were closer together here and the water ran faster.

There was power in that water. Power to change a landscape, to take a life. That's why hiking felt so good. She felt powerful when she conquered the terrain, even though it had been conquered by millions of feet before hers. It was a small victory after the uncertain outcome of the morning.

Hillary checked her watch and pulled away from the river. The trail continued on, following the curve and elevation of the Potomac, but she had come as far as she could today. She turned onto a path that led to a wide, flat, central trail laid out like a backbone for the park. Mules once walked the central path to pull boats up a canal and around the Great Falls. Parts of the old canal could still be viewed, though time and erosion had turned it into a wide, shallow drainage ditch.

Hillary pumped her arms and swerved around slower moving walkers. She'd had the river trail mostly to herself, but the canal path was more crowded. On a sunny Friday afternoon, thousands of people tended to have the same great idea to get outside. The park was beginning to fill up. Most of the crowd was coming towards her or veering off to the viewing platforms to gaze at the falls. She hoped Khaki Legs and Strappy Heels took pictures at the overlooks before the crowds.

When she got to her car, she pulled a bottle of water out of the trunk and drank half of it while she pulled up a traffic app on her phone. Washington DC

was a bonfire with traffic turning the roads yellow and orange with a bit of red in the center. She would be part of that action someday. The roads outside of the Route 495 loop around the city were clear. She would have time to get home, shower, and be at the restaurant before her parents arrived. Perfect.

Hillary sank into the driver's seat and turned the key. Nothing happened. She tried again, with the same silent result. She flipped on the interior lights but they remained dark.

The car battery was dead.

## 2

Hillary rested her head on the steering wheel and sighed out a poof of air. Stupid battery. Stupid boots. Stupid to choose the boots over the battery, and then not get the job. Hillary got out of the car and locked it behind her. *Think, Hillary, think.* She didn't have any roadside assistance, but if she did, what would they do? They would jump her car and tell her to drive straight to a mechanic for a new battery. Dad had jumper cables back at the house. Surely, one of the thousands of people gathered in Great Falls owned jumper cables too. She simply had to find him. Or her.

Hillary scanned the parking lot for people, and then stopped to stare at the hood of her car. The parking lot was laid out in typical fashion with rows of cars parked nose to nose down the line. She had parked with the front of her car inches from the grill of a black hatchback. Most jumper cables were maybe twelve feet long. Both cars were flanked by vehicles parked on either side, which meant that even if she found someone with cables, unless she could also find the owner of one of the five cars closest to her own, the cables would do her no good.

She opened up the camera app on her phone and took pictures of the five cars nearest to her own, and

then stuffed her keys into a pocket. She moved out behind the trunk and scanned the nearly empty lot. So many cars, so many people down at the falls or off in the woods.

Mom and Dad were both at work. Maybe they could leave work early to drive forty-five minutes out of their way to pick her up. Maybe Howard could pick her up if he was working a job in this direction. If he wasn't trying to finish a lawn to get to dinner on time. She glanced at her watch. That was a lot of ifs. She didn't want to bother them. She crossed her arms and clenched her teeth. Her car was powerless; she was powerless. She closed her eyes and prayed. Shoulder muscles relaxed. She would try to find help and if that didn't work, then she could call.

She wandered across the lot to the ramp in front of the visitor center. The center showed a video on the fall's formation every half hour or so and many visitors started their tour there. Maybe one of the cars' owners had only gotten this far. A stream of people exited the visitor center's door and came down the ramp.

"Does anyone own some jumper cables? My car won't start." Hillary's cheeks burned, but she raised her voice and pressed on. "Anyone have jumper cables?"

Most people ignored her, but a few shook their heads or made kind remarks. One man stopped to make sure she had a way to call for help. When the ramp was clear, she followed the stream of people down another ramp toward the lookout for Great Falls. Hillary repeated her request there with similar results.

Most people, if they glanced at her, didn't bother to respond. Maybe the roar of the falls made it hard for them to hear the request. Maybe they didn't have cables and were just trying to enjoy their day out. Maybe she would also ignore a crazy lady standing on a boulder and yelling about jumper cables if she were in their shoes. A few people came close enough for her to ask if they owned the cars near hers and to show them the pictures on her phone, but none of them did. She was searching for a hatchback in a haystack.

After twenty minutes, she gave up and wandered back toward the parking lot. She squeezed her arms to her chest as though she could hug away the lump in her throat. Better to wait near her car for an owner to show up. She passed the bathrooms under the shadow of the visitor center and came up the ramp into the sunshine. Just ahead of her were Strappy Heels and Khaki Legs. Khaki Legs had his arm draped across her shoulder like a brother about to pull a sibling in for a headlock. It wasn't very romantic, but they were obviously comfortable with each other. Hillary jogged to catch up with them.

"Hi." Hillary made sure she smiled at each of them equally. She didn't want Strappy Heels to think she was trying to steal her man. "I'm not stalking you, I promise. My car won't start. You wouldn't happen to have jumper cables, would you?"

Khaki Legs slowed his stride and said something to Strappy Heels in Spanish. She shook her head, no.

"I'm sorry, we don't, but we can help you find someone who does," said Khaki.



“Oh, that’s OK, you don’t have to.” The words were out of her mouth before she could stop the automated polite response unsuitable for a time of need. Khaki and Strappy would triple her searching power and she needed all the help she could get. She clamped her mouth shut and tried to communicate her desperation through her eyes.

“We don’t mind.” Khaki looked at Strappy.

Strappy smiled. “No problem.”

Strappy spoke with an accent, but that only added to her charm. Her nails were perfect, her thick dark hair was pinned in curling cascades to her shoulders, and her large dark eyes sat above fine cheek bones. Surely, men would flock to loan this woman jumper cables.

“Great, thanks.” Hillary shoved her hands into her pockets. It was her car that was broken, so she should take charge. “I already asked around down at the outlook, so should we try the parking lot?”

“OK,” said Khaki. He and Strappy chatted briefly in Spanish. “We’ll head up this side,” Khaki pointed to the rows of cars to the right, “and you head up that side. We’ll meet back here in ten minutes.”

“Sounds good.”

Hillary speed walked up the row to her left and scanned for humans. She passed two couples, a family with children, a woman with two dogs, and a man taking a selfie video as he walked. None of them owned jumper cables. She turned back towards the meeting place and looked over the rows of cars. Three-inch heels really slowed Strappy down. The woman

stood halfway down the parking lot with her phone pressed to her ear. Khaki was two rows over talking with a middle-aged woman in front of a minivan. He turned to scan the parking lot and when he saw Hillary, he waved her over. Hillary cut between the cars at a jog.

Now the woman was waving too. "I have some," she called.

Hillary had never seen someone so excited to own a stretch of wire with clamps on the ends. Maybe the woman was simply a happy person and Hillary was projecting her own excitement onto her. The back of the minivan was open and a golden retriever sat at the woman's feet, sweeping the ground with its tail. Khaki patted the dog's head. Her knight in khaki armor.

"I'm so excited that they'll finally be useful," said the woman. Not projecting, then. The woman was thrilled. "I bought them years ago." The van's trunk space was littered with backpacks, plastic grocery bags filled with oddly shaped lumps, and an assortment of soccer balls and shin guards. "My kids were little and were playing in the van. They managed to turn on my headlights." She was shifting the clutter around, digging. "It was during the day and I didn't notice. When I went to turn it on hours later, the van wouldn't start." With an exclamation of victory, she pulled a handful of thick orange cable from the bottom of the trunk and placed it in Hillary's hands. "They did it twice in six months. I bought myself these cables and have never needed them since. Go figure."

"If you hadn't bought them, they would have