
NIGHT-SILENCES

Pike's Bluff Book Two

PIPPA GREATHOUSE

Blushing Books

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*A heartfelt dedication to the men and women of law-enforcement, who put
their lives on the line every single day.*

*Also, to the personnel of hospitals everywhere, who work tirelessly for us as
patients.*

Prologue

September 30, 2018

Emmy Reece sat watching the planes come and go and glancing up at the screen next to the desk. The Denver to St. Louis flight still read *'delayed'*. Although she could see the plane from where they sat, the crew had been caught up in Salt Lake City. She glanced curiously up at Mark as she bit down on her lower lip.

In her realm of vision was a tall, sandy-haired man, sitting on the row of seats across from them, and his glare at Mark was obvious. He'd been glancing over at them throughout the afternoon on the long layover. When his eyes moved toward her, she looked away, embarrassed. His expression was almost sympathetic.

Mark had been angry with her throughout most of the trip. She wasn't exactly sure what had ignited it; she only knew it was directed at her, and she resented it. Despite his mood, however, she was determined to keep things as smooth as possible between them until they reached their destination. Then she would tell him she never wanted to see him again.

Damned man. She was actually looking forward to it.

Emmy, you're an idiot, the voice in her head lectured. *Coming on this trip was a big mistake. You don't even know him that well.*

And that was the problem. She blinked and glanced down at the puzzle on her iPad, staring at it but not seeing it. Her conscience was right. She didn't know him that well. She wasn't even sure why he'd asked.

Asked? A slight shake of her head caused her shoulder-length hair to bounce. He'd cajoled. He'd begged. He'd sweet-talked, and he'd whined when she'd said no. Finally, he'd gotten extremely angry with her and demanded she come.

"Mark, I don't know what you expect from me on this trip. I don't do one-night stands," she explained. "You know that."

Was that relief she'd seen on his face? She was totally confused.

"Let's get one thing straight. I don't expect sex, and I'll cover all the costs. Come on, Emmy. I don't like traveling alone, and I just want you to see what the other side of the country looks like."

When he saw her hesitation, he insisted even further. "Then it's settled. You're going. My meeting is sure to be short, and then we'll have the rest of the time to explore the city and relax."

Why? asked the voice. *Did he ever tell you what kind of business he's in?*

A scowl made its way across her face as she thought about it. She'd seen him come in and out of the hospital a few times when she was working, but he'd never fully explained why he was there, only mumbled something about seeing someone.

Her mind wandered back to last Friday, when she had finally agreed. But as soon as she consented to go, she knew it was a poor decision. Mark was already angry with her. When she insisted on taking Mitts, her Maine Coon, to stay with her friend, Gwen, he lectured her on her lack of trust because she had told someone else where she was going.

Emmy held her ground. But when she confided to Gwen what he'd said, her best friend had been furious. "This is a red flag, Emmy." she fumed. "If he cared about you, he'd make *sure* you told someone else where you'd be." Gwen tossed her long hair in anger. "All right," she said, at last. "But promise me you'll keep in touch, even if you have to send texts from the bathroom, and turn off the alert sounds, so he doesn't know when I send one."

The trip began badly and got worse. When they reached the airport in Phoenix, they were met by two men with rough appearances, who took them to the hotel. The way they stared made her extremely uncomfortable. Had Mark noticed at all? He didn't seem to.

A business trip? her conscience muttered in her ears. *Don't businessmen usually wear business suits?* These didn't. But Mark hadn't, either. The whole thing seemed odd to her.

Emmy sighed softly as her mind played over the past twenty-four hours. Mark had deposited her in the room as soon as they got there and told her to order room service if she was hungry. Then he had disappeared downstairs and didn't come back.

"Keep your phone by you," he demanded as he left. "And keep the door locked. Don't open it for anyone but me."

She waited, watching the clock. But when he didn't come back, she gave up and called room service for supper, after all. At midnight, she sent a text. It went unanswered.

Awakening during the night to his snoring and the smell of alcohol, she turned on the lamp next to her. Mark had fallen asleep on top of the covers at the other end of the king-sized bed, still dressed. The door was slightly ajar, and she moved quickly to close and lock it.

What a waste of her time off. If she'd wanted to stare at four walls, she could have stayed in her own bedroom at home.

The room was light when she awoke the next morning, and

Mark was just hanging up the phone. "Emmy, wake up. Get your things together. We're leaving."

She stared at him in disbelief. "*Now?* What happened to relaxing and seeing the city?"

"Change of plans. I moved the return flight to today. We don't have much time. Hurry."

He'd seemed nervous and jumpy, and every time there were footsteps in the hallway, he'd stopped and stared at the door. She'd barely had time to get her things back into her suitcase.

"Wonderful. I got to see what hotel rooms on the other side of the country look like, anyway," she mumbled, heading to the bath.

Mark didn't respond, and she began scooping her things off the vanity and putting them back into her bag, grumbling.

NOW, an overhead page brought her attention back to the present. Beside her at the gate, Mark shot out of his chair and went to the desk, speaking to the woman behind it. Emmy could hear clearly. Her voice sounded conciliatory, Mark's, impatient.

"I'm sorry sir. They're now saying you should be getting a text announcing the expected time of departure."

Emmy reached down while he was away from his seat, slipping her cell phone out of her backpack and into her pocket. As she glanced across from where she sat, however, she noticed the sandy-haired man watching her curiously. She gave him a brief smile.

Mark's eyes darted up and down the aisle outside the gate as he returned to his seat.

"Who are you looking for?" she whispered.

He didn't answer, and she didn't press. The sooner this trip was over, the better. She knew she'd never agree to go anywhere with him again. Ever.

Glancing upward at him once more, she closed her iPad and rose, setting it down in the seat. "I'll be back."

Mark's scowl was unmistakable. "Where are you going?"

She gave him a sassy glare. "To the restroom," she fumed. "Want me to go for you, too?"

She heard a chuckle from someone close by and wished she hadn't sounded so insolent. Mark's eyes were narrowed at her in anger. "Hurry," was all he said. His voice was gruff, and as she turned to leave, she noticed the gentleman seated across from them. He looked as if he was trying to suppress a grin. Seeing it, Emmy tried to keep the smile off her own face. He apparently felt the same way about Mark's treatment of her as she did.

Instead of turning left as she exited the gate, she turned right, feeling for the phone in her pocket. When she reached the restroom and closed herself up into a stall inside, she took it out and punched in buttons.

"Hey, Emmy. Everything okay?" Gwen's friendly voice answered.

"Hi, Gwen. We're waiting for a flight back. It's supposed to arrive around eleven tonight, but we'll be late. The crew's been delayed."

"You're coming back early? Is everything all right?"

"Yes. I'll explain later. See you tomorrow morning to pick up Mitts."

"Okay. Mitts is fine. Silas is even better."

Emmy paused. "Silas?"

"Dr. Silas McGuire, the doctor in the ER on weekends."

"Okay...wait!" Emmy shook her head. "Dr. McGuire? Not Dr. Brent?"

"I'll explain when I see you. Be safe."

The call disconnected, leaving Emmy holding the phone out and staring at it. "Gwendolyn Chance, I'm going to kill you," she muttered. How dare Gwen drop a bomb like that from so far away and then hang up! Emmy shoved her phone back into her

pocket and sighed. Even a few thousand miles away, it was still comforting to hear her friend's voice.

Finishing up, she blew her hands dry and went outside, approaching the gate once again. But the closer she was to where Mark sat, the more disturbed she became.

His phone emitted a tinkling sound announcing an incoming text just as she sat down, and he yanked it out of his pocket. Emmy leaned over a bit to try to see it, thinking it was probably the airlines. But she didn't have time before he snapped it closed.

Mark stood to his feet suddenly, reaching for his laptop and carry-on. "I'm going to get something to eat."

As he turned to leave, she reached for his hand. "I'll watch your things for you, Mark, you don't have to carry them."

The scowl he gave her was not difficult to read as he removed his hand from her reach. "If the crew gets here before I get back," he said, a corrosive tone to his voice, "take it. You have your ticket."

He was gone before she could speak, leaving her feeling totally confused. Was he not coming back? When she looked up, the man seated across from them was frowning at her. He wore an honest look, and she jumped to her feet, sending a plea toward him.

"Please keep an eye on my things?" She didn't wait for him to answer but ran to try to catch up with Mark.

She wasn't fast enough. She watched his retreating shoulders grow further and further away. "Mark?" she called after him, hoping he would turn back.

He didn't. Instead, he walked faster.

"Mark!"

He turned back to look over his shoulder but only once.

"Go back," he growled. "You'll miss your flight."

Emmy kept him in her sights but only until he disappeared around the curved hallway.

She stepped up her pace. But as soon as she rounded it, she

gasped and reached out to catch hold of the corner for support. The men they'd come to meet in Phoenix were standing just beyond it. What were they doing *here*? She stood, frozen, staring blankly from one to the other.

Mark was running now at a rapid pace, well beyond them.

The tallest of the men stepped toward her, and she shrank back.

Suddenly, she felt hands descend on her shoulders, and she took in a sharp breath. She looked up into the face of the man she'd asked to watch her things. Up close, his large, muscular frame was imposing. His firm hands moved her quickly behind him, and she was immediately grateful for the intervention.

It was a standoff as the two men glared back at him, but he didn't back down. Emmy could see the reflections of their faces from the mirror on the kiosk that sold hair gadgets nearby. The girls working there were watching with guarded faces. But her attention was drawn to the countenance of her rescuer. His expression was formidable now. He didn't appear to be one *she* would want to trifle with.

His large left hand still grasped her arm behind his back to hold her there. When she tried to move away, it tightened.

The men stood there for ten or fifteen seconds; every single second was terrifying. She was shocked when one said something in a low voice to the other, and they turned away and began walking quickly toward the area in which Mark had disappeared. Within seconds, their walk had turned to a sprint and then to a run.

Emmy didn't realize she was holding her breath until they were a good distance away, and the man who'd rescued her turned back to face her. His hands once again grasped her shoulders.

"Emmy? Is that your name?"

Stunned, she hadn't realized how large he was until he was up close. She nodded, her red hair bouncing and her eyes wide.

"My first question. Are you all right?"

She was staring at his massive chest and took a deep breath. Forcing herself to raise her gaze to his face, she met blue eyes the color of azure butterflies but hard as steel. The scowl they held made her unable to avert her eyes.

Her voice was a whisper when she answered, "I think so."

"And my second. Who are those men?"

She looked away. "I-I don't know their names, but they were in Phoenix yesterday."

He stood, a frown etched deep on his face, staring down at her. Finally, he took her by the shoulders and turned her to face the way she had come.

"Go back and sit down," he said firmly. "*Before you fall down.*"

Afraid to argue, she did as she was told. But she couldn't help wondering where Mark had gone. Was he in danger? Following him was no longer a possibility. She knew she could get on the plane without him. Would she ever know what happened to him? She turned to look back, but her rescuer was close behind her, and the look on his face made her turn around and walk back toward the gate as quickly as she could.

Reaching her seat once more, Emmy leaned forward to pick up her backpack so she could locate her ticket.

The backpack was gone. So was her iPad.

"Call security." She heard the voice of her rescuer. "Two men are chasing a young man named Mark. I don't know his last name. And thank you for watching these." The deep voice she heard barely registered, but she looked up to see him retrieving her belongings from the woman at the desk.

"Here are your things." His voice had a brooding quality to it.

Her own voice was almost nonexistent when she found it. "Thank you." Weak, she sat down in the chair she'd vacated earlier, acutely aware of the stares of the other passengers at the gate.

Night-Silences

What had just happened? Her shoulders drooped, and tears pricked the back of her eyes, partially from worry, partially from embarrassment and anger. Mark had been a jerk to her, that was true. She knew she was glad to see him go, even if he never came back. Emmy shook her head.

One thing she knew; a small-town girl had no business being *here*.

Chapter 1

Waiting...

Sergeant Jackson Collins cursed himself as he followed the tiny young woman back to the gate. He'd vowed not to get involved; it was none of his business. But when he'd seen the two motley-looking men from the corner staring in the direction of the couple across from him, he couldn't take a chance on letting her go in their direction alone. He was probably lucky the plane hadn't taken off without him. Where the hell was security?

He'd been watching the girl and her boyfriend—if he could even be called that—all afternoon, wondering what was going on with them. *Something* sure as hell was. She looked like the typical 'girl next door' with her red, bouncy hair and pale skin. Faint freckles marched across the bridge of her nose, giving her a look of innocence. Not like the sort of girl one would expect to take off with a loser like him. He found himself with a terrible urge to smack her butt for getting involved in this type of situation. If she'd been one of his sisters, he'd have done it.

He glanced at the screen as he spoke to the woman behind

the desk. He'd shoved the bags and laptops toward her when he took off in pursuit. He was destined for the St. Louis Airport, as well, and about to start his new job in Pike's Bluff, one hundred fifty miles south. He'd been in Kirkwood for nine years now, and he had to admit he'd longed for a smaller city. St. Louis was just too big.

His first day at his new troop would be Tuesday. Even so, he'd have to show up at Jefferson City on Wednesday, giving him only a day to rest. The opportunity to transfer had come up in a flash, with a need for someone from the Division of Drug and Crime Control. He'd gotten few details but enough to know something was going on with one of the hospitals down there, and it wasn't good.

He'd visited Pike's Bluff twice recently. The first time, it had screamed *home*. It seemed the perfect place to settle down, marry and raise children. After seeing it, he'd come back and put in for the transfer. The second time, he'd gone down to rent an apartment and meet the people who worked at headquarters, including the captain. Thad Emmons had seemed like a good man, although he didn't seem inclined to put up with much bullshit. And Jackson had managed to find an apartment out on W Highway, not far from the station. It was roomy enough for his family to visit and had a garage attached. The windows let in plenty of light. And he could almost walk to work if he wanted, another plus. He'd rent until he found the right house. This was indeed a place he could settle down and, hopefully, find the right girl.

But he was having difficulty concentrating on his transfer right now. He found himself wondering what kind of crap the innocent-looking girl in front of him had gotten herself into. There was something about the situation that met the '*JDLR*' requirement. '*Just don't look right*' was a term he'd learned at work. It often tipped off a trooper that something was amiss. The girl, on the other hand, seemed to be totally clueless about

what was going on. Or was she? She certainly looked miserable enough.

Truth was, he'd wanted to go over and slug the jerk she was with for the way he was treating her. She appeared cheeky at times. Then, when he responded with a look that said he might eat her alive, she'd backed up and tried to appease. Jackson had seen the anger well up in her at times throughout the day, but she never seemed to know where she stood with the man next to her. It was obvious she had an innate fear of him.

A phrase from his late grandfather crossed his mind suddenly, out of the blue. An old WW II vet, he often spoke his mind. Jackson sat at his grandfather's feet as a boy, listening to his stories and watching as he smoked a crooked-stem pipe. "Churchill was right. The appeaser *might* feed the tiger, hoping the beast will eat him last. But, eventually, he *would* be eaten." Jackson's face adopted a frown as he thought of how much he missed the man who'd had such a prominent place in his life as a kid. He wondered if he'd ever have grandkids that adored him that much.

In order to have grandkids, you have to have kids first. And you don't seem to be going in that direction. He could hear his father's voice speaking in the back of his mind. Shut up, Dad, he mentally threw back.

He heard the name Mark Johnson called out over the loud-speaker again, and his gaze moved to the young lady across from him. She was listening, her big blue eyes wide and scared. She was turned toward the last place she'd seen her significant other. For some reason, Jackson found himself with a protective urge toward her. He shook his head.

Stop it, Collins.

Hearing the sound of running, he swiveled to his right and looked up to see what appeared to be the long-lost crew in uniform, approaching the desk.

The young woman saw them, too, and turned to look in the

direction from which her guy had disappeared. Jackson wondered briefly if she would take his advice and get on the plane without him. His gaze dropped suddenly to her left hand. There was no ring there. Good.

Uncertain why he should be so pleased about it, he found himself hoping she'd get on the plane, after all. It would probably be the smartest thing she ever did.

"Flight 492, Denver to St. Louis, now boarding at Gate 83. Class A passengers may now board." The loudspeaker interrupted his thoughts, and he leaned forward to pick up his laptop. Glancing over at Emmy, he frowned. She was staring at the floor, in complete dismay.

He moved toward her. "Emmy? Is this your flight?"

She blinked and glanced up at him, startled.

"Excuse me?"

He grinned. "I just didn't want you to miss your flight."

She scrambled in her bag for her ticket and pulled it out. "Thank you."

He waited as classes B and C were called for. Noticing her carry-on looked slightly heavy for her, he waited to make sure she could lift it. "Do you need some help?"

Averting her eyes, she shook her head but didn't speak.

Still, he hung back as she lugged it toward the gate and got into the *class C* line. She was fighting tears and keeping her head down.

Jackson made it a point to stay behind her in case she needed help. She made it to the desk and held her ticket up to the scanner by the entrance, then pulled her carry-on with her onto the plane.

He lost sight of her after that, shaking his head. St. Louis was a big place. He might not see her again. The line wasn't long, but people were taking their time loading their things in the overhead compartments. He caught sight of her red hair way ahead of him. She was near the back of the plane now.

He glanced down at his ticket and located the aisle seat in business class, putting away his bags and hoping she was all right. Stretching out his long legs as far as he could, he relaxed.

EMMY FOUND her seat without difficulty; she'd memorized the number as she sat uncomfortably in the airport listening to Mark grouse at her all afternoon. According to him, she hadn't been able to do anything right.

What a fool she'd been to agree to come. They'd only been seeing each other a few months, and his treatment of her seemed...she had trouble describing the word. Aloof? Her friends had told her there was something strange about him, although all they knew was what she'd told them. She should have listened.

A business trip? If that was a business meeting, she was the Queen of Sweden.

Emmy, you're an idiot. This isn't like you. She'd trusted him. And after bringing her halfway across the country, he'd disappeared.

A dreadful thought hit her suddenly. When she arrived in St. Louis, without Mark—and his car—how was she going to get home? Her eyes widened in alarm as she realized she had no way to get the last one-hundred fifty miles of the trip back. Gwen was her first thought, but she was working tonight and wouldn't get off until seven in the morning. Mentally, she ticked off the rest of her friends, but all of them worked or had families. She thought of Maggie from church, but she had a child and her husband worked nights, and Sam, more of an acquaintance than friend, who worked with Gwen at the ER. She had just recently married a lieutenant from the Highway Patrol, but Emmy knew she would have come if she were called. Becky was out of the question; she had four children, all under five years old. Her gaze lowered to the back of the seat in front of her as

the splash of a tear landed on her arm and trailed its way down.

Stupid, stupid, *stupid!*

When Mark tried, he could seem like such a gentleman. He'd managed to gain her trust. He'd, at first, been eager to please, eager to spend money on her, eager to take her places. His red hair had resembled hers, and he'd remarked on it. As she looked back, however, on the times he'd been so charming, it had always been in exchange for something. Every single time. But it wasn't sex. Sometimes, it was information. Other times, it was getting her to give up something. She'd distanced herself from her friends because he wanted her to. She'd stopped calling her parents as much.

She looked down and closed her eyes, realizing her shoulders were shaking in silent sobs. Turning toward the window, she hoped no one could see her tears.

JACKSON LEANED BACK in his seat as the plane became airborne, waiting until the gravitational force of the ascension lessened before turning toward the back of the plane. He frowned as Emmy caught his eye. She was turned toward the window, and her shoulders were shaking.

Damn.

He sat there a moment, trying to decide what to do. There were two seats on her side of the plane, three on his, and the seat next to her was empty, as well as the seats next to him nearer the window. He knew without doubt she wouldn't agree to come up here and sit. The stewardess began the routine of demonstrating the use of the oxygen apparatus, and he waited until she finished before looking back again.

Emmy still had her face turned toward the window. A second

later, he flipped his belt open and unwound his long legs, moving back to sit down in the empty seat.

Leaning over slightly, he spoke in a quiet voice. "He's not worth it."

She gasped, realizing he was close to her, and glanced over her shoulder to see him. Their faces were close, and she gulped and looked away. Dashing back tears with the back of her hand, she whispered, "I know."

"Jackson Collins. Can I get you something? A soda? They'll be by to pass out snacks in a moment. I could ask for you a drink, but you don't look old enough to pass the ID."

"I'm old enough," she retorted with a hollow laugh.

"And if you'll promise you aren't driving when you get there."

It would have been funny had it not been so ironic. She shook her head. "Emmy Reece. I don't drink. And I'm definitely not driving. We were supposed to go back home in his car. But since I don't have a key, I guess I'm hitchhiking." She waved her hand suddenly. "Wait—I'm so sorry! That sounds like I'm begging for a ride, and I'm not. Please forget I said that. But thank you for asking. And thank you for rescuing me from those men. It was nice of you."

He frowned. "It wasn't nice. It was necessary. How far do you have to go? I have to drive to Pike's Bluff when we reach St. Louis. If it's not too far out of the way, I can drop you somewhere."

When her eyes widened, Jackson realized she probably thought he was being extremely forward. This time, it was he who raised a hand. "And although I know it sounds like a pick-up line, it isn't. Honest, I'm just trying to help."

She sighed and leaned back. "I believe you. It's sweet of you to offer, but thanks anyway."

He stared. "Then I hope you have someone to call. Hitchhiking in St. Louis is an extremely unwise thing to try. They'll

find your body somewhere in a ditch." He dug his billfold out of his pocket and opened it to show her his Patrol ID. "At least you could trust me to get you there in one piece."

She blinked and stared at it but didn't speak, and he finally shook his head and put it away. "Have it your way, young lady. But whatever you do, don't accept rides with strangers. The ones who stop for you might be the same two men I rescued you from."

Her eyes became huge as she gulped and nodded her head. "Thank you."

Jackson rose to his feet and returned to his seat, muttering under his breath, "*Stubborn females.*"

EMMY WATCHED HIM GO. He was going to Pike's Bluff? For the fourth time in as many minutes, she mentally called herself an idiot. She could have had a ride all the way home! What was wrong with her? She loosened her seat belt slightly and leaned back, checking behind her to see if there was anyone in the seat. There wasn't. The plane had several empty seats. Of course, the one next to her would have belonged to Mark.

She looked down at the lights of Denver from the window, seeing how beautiful it was in the dark. The airport looked like a bunch of Indian tee-pees lined up one after the other with lights inside. Glancing back upward to see if Jackson was still in his seat, she sighed. If she could come up with someone to give her a ride home tomorrow, perhaps she could get a shuttle across to one of the nearby hotels for the night.

She glanced once again at her ticket. One hour and thirty-eight minutes until arrival at St. Louis.

Leaning back, she closed her eyes and slept.