

EMILY'S EXCELLENT VACATION



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By

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Emily Crandall had just stepped out of her Park Service vehicle at the Devils Garden Trailhead, intent on checking out the area around the toilets for vandalism, when a familiar sound alerted her to look up.

“Watch out!” She yelled as fist-sized rocks cascaded down the cliff wall above two unsuspecting hikers. The young women jerked around and stared at her, startled into glassy-eyed immobility by her unexpected warning.

“Run! *Now!*” she screamed, silently cursing their lack of comprehension.

After what seemed like an eternity, they finally looked up, realized the danger they were in, and took off running down the trail. The smaller, shorter woman was too slow and was quickly overtaken by the mini avalanche.

Emily heard the woman cry out in pain and fear as she was pelted by chunks of rock, some the size of softballs. One glanced off the side of her head and another hit squarely on her right shoulder, while others hammered her arms and upper back. She collapsed in a heap and lay still.

“Oh, *crap!*” Emily muttered as she grabbed the first aid kit from her truck, then ran to the fallen hiker and quickly checked the pulse on her neck.

As the dust settled, the hiker who had been in the lead spun around and saw her companion motionless on the ground.

“Chloe! Oh, God, Chloe!” she cried as she rushed back up the trail towards her injured friend.

“She’s alive, but unconscious,” Emily informed the woman who had thrown herself down on her hands and knees at Chloe’s side. Emily pressed a gauze pad firmly against the wound on Chloe’s head and eyed the distraught hiker.

“What’s your name?” she asked, hoping to distract the woman.

“Huh? Oh, it’s Beth. My name’s Beth.” She was beginning to hyperventilate and could hardly speak.

“Okay, Beth, thanks for telling me. I’m Emily. I’m a park ranger and I’m here to help. But I need you to try and calm down, or you and Chloe will *both* need medical attention. Can you do that?” Speaking with authority, she also exuded calm reassurance, which she knew from past experience helped to defuse the reactions of others.

“Yeah, I think so, but look, she’s *bleeding*! Oh, God, oh, God.” Beth wrung her hands nervously.

“Beth, please sit down next to Chloe. Do you have a clean handkerchief with you? Great. Apply it to the wound on the side of her head.” Emily removed the temporary bandage that was already soaked through, and showed the hiker how to make a pad out of her handkerchief and secure it. Em wanted to keep Beth focused on something other than her own fear. “Okay, that’s good. She’ll be all right. Head wounds always bleed a lot.”

Beth complied shakily with the instructions.

Em took a breath, then keyed the mike clipped to her uniform and radioed the entrance station for help. She was in luck. There was another ranger close to her location and an emergency vehicle would be dispatched immediately.

Less than ten minutes later, she heard her name called and looked up in relief.

Thank God, she thought, as fellow law enforcement ranger Derek Colburn, who also happened to be her best friend, appeared on the trail.

The injured visitor was taken away in an ambulance, with Beth following in her Jeep. Emily drove her vehicle back down the hill to the law enforcement office at the visitor center, grateful that no other hikers had been on the trail during the rockslide—which was unusual, considering that Devils Garden was one of the park’s most popular hiking destinations.

As she pulled into the staff parking lot, she noticed Derek’s park vehicle. He had beaten her there, but not by much.

She walked into the office and sank down in her chair with a groan. Derek looked up from where he sat at his own desk.

"It can't be that bad, Em." Derek leaned back in his chair with his hands behind his head.

"This is the third emergency situation this week, Der, and I'm sick and tired of it." She sighed and removed her iconic, flat-brimmed National Park Service hat, her hair molded in place by sweat and the tight fit of the inner band.

"You have hat-hair," Derek said straight-faced.

Emily shot him an evil look. "Gosh, thanks."

"You're welcome, I'm sure." He smiled impishly.

She frowned fiercely and turned to start on the incident report.

"Oh, come on, Em. I was just teasin' ya," he said plaintively, his slight Southern accent more pronounced than usual.

She narrowed her eyes and clenched her teeth, refusing to be distracted from her work.

Derek's sandy-brown eyebrows drew down slightly in concern as it dawned on him that his friend and colleague was seriously perturbed. And not due to his tactless comment alone.

"Why don't we get a beer after work, relax a bit, maybe play some pool?" he suggested quietly.

She ignored him and he kept staring at her.

Emily finished the report, sent a copy to her supervisor and saved the file. Then she finally glanced at Derek and relented with a sigh. "Sure, okay, a beer would be nice. I don't feel like playing pool, though."

She noted the time on her watch. "And technically, we're off the clock now, so let's go." She logged off and shut her computer down, then grabbed her purse and stalked out the door.

"Okay, works for me," Derek muttered, and followed her, locking up the office on the way out.

When Derek got out to the parking lot, Emily was waiting for him next to his brand new silver Chevy pickup truck.

"I'm sorry I'm so grumpy, Der."

He shrugged. "It's okay, Em. I get it, you're feelin' kinda overwhelmed."

She sighed, relieved that he was able to overlook her bitchiness. He was easy-going and understanding, as usual.

They chatted for a few more minutes, then decided to meet at Moody's Tavern in an hour, to give each of them time to go home, clean up and change clothes. Emily refused to go out for beers with hat-hair, and besides, it was better not to appear in a bar in a Park Service uniform.

They parted and headed for Moab in their separate vehicles.

Ten minutes later, Emily pulled up under the old fruitless mulberry tree whose branches overhung the end of her mobile home and shut the car off. She hurried in through the back door, placing her purse and her holstered weapon on the dresser in her bedroom. Then she kicked off her shoes and stripped out of her filthy uniform and sweaty undergarments, leaving everything in a pile on the floor. She dug through the clean laundry on her bed and found a bath towel, then went to take a much-needed shower.

As the warm water sluiced over her, she lathered her long, golden-brown hair with her favorite lavender shampoo. The scent relaxed her and her mind wandered to her plans for a garden that included many of the herbs she favored—not the least of which was lavender. She certainly wasn't an expert when it came to herbs, but she knew what she liked. Unfortunately, she'd always had a hard time growing things here in the trailer park; the small yard adjacent to her home couldn't sustain anything but a few irises and a sparse lawn full of weeds. She'd have to wait until she found a house she could afford to buy, but that prospect didn't seem likely in the current economy. She felt depressed at the thought and hurriedly shook it off, refusing to give in to negativity.

Emily finished her shower and swiftly dried off, then smoothed on facial moisturizer and body lotion—both a necessity in the dry air of Moab's high desert environment. She walked naked into her bedroom and dressed in clean underwear, a blingy, long-sleeved T-shirt and new jeans, then went back into the bathroom to blow-dry her hair and apply her makeup.

After brushing on mascara and using a light brown eyebrow pencil, she applied a bit of medium pink lipstick. She paused as she capped the silver tube, wondering why she was trying to impress her long-time friend. Instead, she should be trying to discourage him, since he was in love with her and she wasn't interested in being more than good friends.

She sighed. It was a shame, really. He was everything a woman normally desired: tall, handsome, intelligent and a genuinely nice guy. She wished she could love him the way he loved her.

But she couldn't help comparing his stocky body, tawny coloring and down-home country boy openness with the vision she had of her ideal man: slender yet muscular, dark-haired, mysterious and sexy. This perfect specimen of a man would also be powerful and self-assured, yet gentle and kind, at least to her.

The problem was that, several years ago in a moment of weakness and need, while commiserating with Derek over his divorce from Chris, she'd had sex with him. Several times. So it wasn't his fault that he'd assumed she felt the same way he did.

Em had enjoyed the sex—how could she not with a man who looked like Derek?—but it wasn't as mind-blowing as she imagined it would be with the right person.

So when she'd come to her senses and insisted that they could no longer be lovers, she had been relieved and he had been hurt.

But they'd remained friends, thank goodness.

Emily was still staring at her reflection when she shook off the reverie. It was a beautiful March evening in Moab and she was looking forward to a night out. She paused to gather up her dirty clothes and shove them into the hamper.

She quickly pulled on socks and athletic shoes, grabbed a sweater, and headed out the door. It usually took only a few minutes to walk from her place to Moody's on Main Street, and it felt good to stretch her legs. She breathed deeply of the clean, cool air and found that she was able to put the day in perspective. But it didn't change the fact that she needed a vacation.

She crossed the footbridge over Mill Creek and noticed that it was getting chilly as the sun went down behind the Rim. She paused to slip her sweater on, and then took the dirt path behind the motel, ending up close to City Diner. The scent of frying food made her stomach growl, but she resolutely continued on to the bar. She'd have a beer or two with Derek and they could get a bite to eat later.

As she entered the dim interior of Moody's Tavern, she heard Derek call out and waved in acknowledgement. She threaded her way through the already crowded room and joined him in a high-backed corner booth.

"Hey," Em said breathlessly as she slid onto the bench seat across from him.

"Hey, yourself," Derek replied with a smirk.

"What's that look for?" she asked suspiciously, as she took a few pretzels out of the bowl on the table and began to munch on the salty snack.

"I just came up with a hell of an idea for ya, to get your mind off of work. Ya know how you've been spendin' a lot of time researchin' your family tree online?"

"Yes. And?"

"And I think ya should take it a step further and go to England. Check things out in person." He beamed, proud of himself for coming up with a solution to her problem.

Before she could reply, a server brought two bottles of beer to the table and Derek handed one to Emily, then got out his worn wallet. He paid the tab and said, "Keep the change."

"Thanks, Der."

He shrugged. "No problem. It was my turn to buy."

They clinked their bottles together in a silent toast and each took a deep, satisfying swig.

Em swallowed the cold brew and allowed herself to relax. "Going to England seems a little extreme. How did you come up with that notion?"

"It just makes sense. It's obvious ya need a vacation. Why not go to the land of your ancestors?" Derek grinned excitedly. "Besides, ya could also go to Stonehenge, Glastonbury, and Tintagel and check out Merlin and King Arthur's old stompin' grounds while you're there."

"Ah, *now* the truth comes out. You just want me to go to places to 'find' Merlin and Arthur."

He looked sheepish. "Well, I know Camelot isn't really there anymore..."

"If it ever was..."

"I'm sure it was. And I believe that Merlin and King Arthur were real people. A legend that's lasted for more than a thousand years must have some basis in reality. Did ya know that King Edward I was a King Arthur fan?"

She looked stunned. “Really? I didn’t know that. He was one of my ancestors. Huh, maybe I *should* go.”

They discussed the pros and cons of a trip to England over several more beers, until Em’s stomach rumbled loudly.

Derek grinned. “I can’t believe you’re still hungry after eatin’ all those pretzels. I have some leftover spaghetti and a green salad we can share. And I just happen to have a copy of Lonely Planet England. We could start plannin’ your trip. What do ya say?”

She gave him a long-suffering look. “As a matter of fact, I’m very hungry, so let’s go to your place. Then I suppose we can plan my trip.”

They took the last few swallows of beer and left the booth.

A month later, Emily was sitting on the bed in her hotel room in Glastonbury, reflecting on what she had accomplished in the eclectic little town. Among other things, she had hiked up Glastonbury Tor, the steep hill that was touted to contain the entrance to mythic Avalon. She'd seen nothing that could be construed as an opening to that legendary place, but she'd seen a sign for Avalon Orchard on the north slope of the hill, and had snapped a photo of it with her phone.

Once she'd reached the flattened peak of the Tor, she'd experienced a breathtaking 360-degree view. A large brass compass pointed in the direction of various landmarks in the area—including the general location of Camelot.

Sure thing, she thought cynically, then remembered the plaque she'd seen in the impressive ruins of Glastonbury Abbey denoting the resting place of King Arthur. According to the guidebook, the monks had found a grave of Celtic origin in the year 1191, near which was a lead cross with an inscription claiming that it contained Arthur's body. In 1278, King Edward I had witnessed the ceremony as the remains were moved from the grave to a shrine within the Great Church of the monastery. Whether or not the body of Arthur was actually *in* that tomb, it still gave her goosebumps to stand in the very spot her ancestor might have stood so many centuries ago.

She swore she could almost feel the past intersecting with the present as she stood in downtown Glastonbury and stared at the George and Pilgrims Hotel, built in the late fifteenth century to accommodate pilgrims who had come to leave offerings at the various shrines and altars.

And how could she explain rationally what had happened to her when she'd arrived on the coast of Cornwall the week before and had walked among the ruins of Tintagel, reputed to be the birthplace of King Arthur? She was almost afraid to examine the memory of what she'd seen in the mist as she departed that ancient isle and had glanced back at its rough and craggy slopes: a tall young man with long black hair, escorting another man into a castle perched on the edge of the cliff—a castle which no longer existed.

She was starting to think that Derek should have come along on this trip—*he* was the one who was obsessed with all things pertaining to Camelot. But she experienced an unexpected jolt of excitement, nevertheless.

Ironically, as it turned out, she had discovered very little about her ancestors during her allotted time in England, although she had seen the effigy of a medieval ancestor in Winchester Cathedral and a copy of the Magna Carta signed by King John in Salisbury Cathedral.

She had spent most of her vacation visiting the locations connected with King Arthur and Merlin, and truthfully, she didn't regret a moment of it. In fact, she had had a strange, prophetic epiphany as she stood gazing up at the ancient monument of Stonehenge: magic was real and she was destined to be a part of something that would ultimately change the world.

As she boarded her flight from Heathrow back to Salt Lake City, Utah, USA, she realized that she was relaxed and content with the experiences she had had in England, even if she hadn't done and seen everything on her list. She was ready to go home.

She finally found her seat and got her carryon bag stowed in the overhead compartment. And she got a good look at the man who occupied the seat next to hers. He was tall and slender, with muscular arms, straight, shoulder-length black hair and the greenest eyes she'd ever seen. He glanced at her and smiled as she got settled and adjusted her seat belt. He was gorgeous.

Emily smiled back warmly. Oh, yes, things were definitely looking up.

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