

#1 New York Times bestselling author

EMILY GIFFIN

THE SUMMER PACT

A Novel

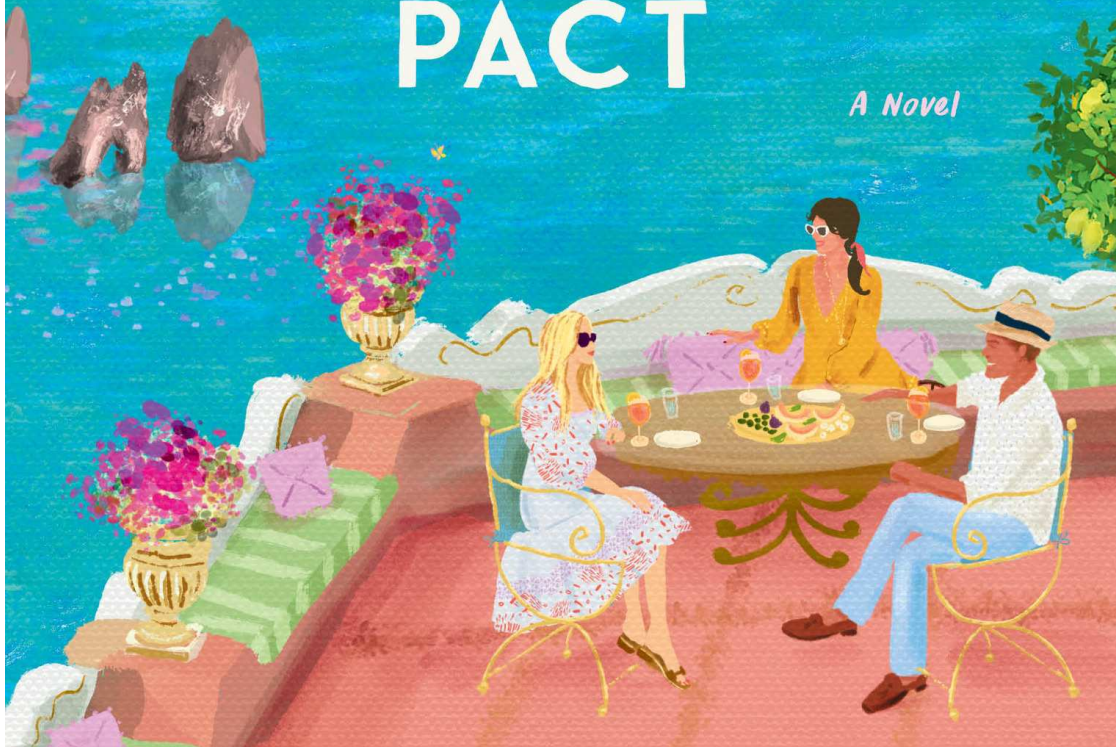


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THE SUMMER PACT

A Novel



BY EMILY GIFFIN

Something Borrowed

Something Blue

Baby Proof

Love the One You're With

Heart of the Matter

Where We Belong

The One & Only

First Comes Love

All We Ever Wanted

The Lies That Bind

Meant to Be

The Summer Pact

THE SUMMER PACT

A NOVEL



EMILY
GIFFIN



BALLANTINE BOOKS

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The Summer Pact is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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This one is for Kate, my trusted assistant and treasured friend.

The Summer Pact explores love and loss, touching on issues surrounding alcohol abuse, mental health, and suicide. More than 700,000 lives are lost due to suicide every year, and it is the fourth leading cause of death among fifteen-to-twenty-nine-year-olds. Please read with care. If you or your loved ones are in distress, call the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline for free, confidential 24/7 support.

PROLOGUE



HANNAH

I OFTEN WONDER WHAT makes our coming-of-age friendships so powerful. I know the usual theories.... That they fill the void of adolescent loneliness. That they give us a sense of belonging. That they shape our adult identities. All these things are true, but when it comes right down to it, I think it's a simple matter of who was there by our side, bearing witness to our loss of innocence.

For me, that moment came late, during the spring of my fourth year in college. As my classmates and I studied for final exams and counted down the days to graduation, emotions ran high. We were excited about the future but weren't quite ready to part ways and face full-fledged adulthood. At least I wasn't. I couldn't imagine life without the people who brought meaning to mine: Summer, Lainey, and Tyson. My best friends.

The four of us had met in the basement lounge of our dorm our first year, just days after we arrived at the University of Virginia. It was a Thursday night, the kickoff to the weekend, but none of us was in the mood to go out. Summer was studying at a corner table, her face buried in *The Odyssey* as she furiously highlighted passages. Lainey and I sat at separate tables near her. We had books open, too, but were spending more time on our phones. Tyson was kicked back on a sofa, watching a baseball game on the muted television.

We were the only four people in the room, and for a long time, nobody spoke or made eye contact. Summer was the first to break the ice, putting her book down, standing up from her table, and walking over to the sofa. She sat down beside Tyson and asked who he was rooting for.

“The Yankees,” he said.

I watched them out of the corner of my eye, admiring Tyson’s profile. With a strong jawline, high cheekbones, and flawless golden brown skin, he was decidedly handsome.

“Are you from New York?” she asked.

“No, D.C. But I hate the Orioles,” he replied matter-of-factly, not giving her much to work with.

“So you’re a Nats fan?”

“Sadly, yes,” he said.

“I hear you,” Summer said. “I’m a Cubs fan.”

“Ah, a Chicago girl,” Tyson said.

“Well, I’m from the ’burbs. Naperville.” She smiled. “But, yeah, I’m a lifelong Cubs fan.”

“Well. At least you guys have won a couple titles,” Tyson said.

“Yeah. In 1907 and 1908!” She laughed.

“Hey, it’s better than none,” he said. “I’m Tyson, by the way.”

“I’m Summer,” she said, then looked over her shoulder at Lainey and me, repeating her introduction.

“I’m Lainey. And I know nothing about baseball!” Lainey’s smile and energy lit up the room.

“I’m Hannah,” I said, feeling a wave of my usual social anxiety.

“Where are you guys from?” Summer asked us.

“I’m from Atlanta,” I said.

“Encinitas,” Lainey said. “Near San Diego.”

“Wow. That’s *far*,” Summer said. “How’d you end up at UVA?”

“I needed a change of scenery. And somehow, I got in!” She gave us another magnetic smile, her light brown eyes sparkling. “What about you guys? Why Virginia?”

Tyson cited in-state tuition; I told them my father and grandfather were both alums; and Summer said she had been recruited to run track and cross-country. Tyson looked intrigued, then promptly launched into rapid-fire questions about Summer's events and PRs. She answered modestly, but her times were incredible. As we marveled at her 4:36 mile, Lainey quipped that she only ran when being chased.

"Do you find yourself being chased often?" Tyson deadpanned.

"Oh, you'd be surprised," she said with a smirk and a toss of her long brown curls.

She was clearly flirting, but it seemed more playful than strategic, and despite how pretty she was, she didn't seem full of herself.

Summer went on to ask about our majors, sharing that she was pre-med.

Tyson said he was debating between English Literature and Religion and would likely go to law school. Lainey said she was thinking about studio art or drama.

"Were you into theater in high school?" Summer asked her.

"I dabbled," Lainey said. "But I'd rather be a screen actor than do stage stuff."

"Very cool," Summer said, shifting her gaze to me. "What about you, Hannah?"

I told her I was undecided.

"What do you think you might want to do?" Summer pressed. "Jobwise?"

My mind went embarrassingly blank, as it always did with this line of questioning. "I don't know. Maybe interior design...or something in education."

Summer nodded, remarking that teaching was such an admirable profession, as I decided that I liked her. I *really* liked her. She had such a down-to-earth, genuine vibe, exactly the way I'd always imagined people from Illinois—and all the *I* states, for that matter. She even *looked* wholesome, right down to her freckles and strawberry-blond pigtails.

"Yeah. Plus I love kids," I said, thinking that what I wanted more than any career was to get married and have babies and be the kind of stay-at-

home mother who bakes cookies and does crafts.

But that wasn't something you could really admit, so I changed the subject, asking if they planned to rush in the spring. For me, Greek life was an absolute given. Many of my high school friends were already in the process of pledging at Georgia, Alabama, and Auburn, where rush took place before classes began. My mother was obsessed with what they were all doing and was already feverishly gathering letters of recommendation from anyone she knew who had any sort of connection to what she called the "top-tier sororities" at Virginia.

Summer shook her head, explaining that as a student-athlete, she wouldn't have time. That made sense, but I was surprised when Lainey declared that she would rather "poke her eyes out with a hot stick than audition for friendship."

"I feel you," Tyson said. "My dad was an Alpha and really wants me to follow in his footsteps, but I kind of want to do my own thing. We'll see."

I listened intently, intrigued by their answers. For the first time, it occurred to me that there might be an alternative path to a college social life than joining a sorority. It also crossed my mind that Summer, Lainey, and Tyson might become my people. I had the strange feeling they would be.

We kept talking, covering a myriad of topics, including our families and siblings (Summer had an older brother, while Lainey, Tyson, and I were only children); our high schools (Tyson and I had gone to small private schools while Summer and Lainey went to large public schools); and our relationship status (we were all single).

Before I knew it, it was after midnight, and we had bonded in that magical way you hope will happen when you get to college. Summer said she really needed to get to bed—she had early morning practice—so we exchanged numbers and set up a group text thread. The following night we met for dinner, and in no time we'd become a foursome.

As organic as our friendship felt at the time, I look back now and see how unlikely it was. Beyond the utter randomness of our meeting in that lounge, we came from such different worlds. Lainey was raised by a single mother in a hipster surf town; Tyson's parents were part of the D.C. elite,

his father a high-powered attorney and his mother a federal judge; Summer was the quintessential Midwesterner with a sporty, apple-pie family; and I was the sole Southerner, growing up saying “yes, ma’am” and “no, sir,” going to church on Sundays, and wearing bows in my hair.

Somehow, we all clicked, though, like pieces of a puzzle, each of us bringing something different to the group. Tyson was the deep thinker; Lainey the free spirit; Summer our bright star and leader. I was never quite sure what my role was, and I sometimes wondered what they saw in me. I told myself that every friend group needed a cheerleader, and I had always been a good one. I took pride in that. I attended all of Summer’s home meets, encouraged Lainey to pursue her love of acting, and supported Tyson’s social justice efforts on campus.

Incidentally, and much to my mother’s dismay, I never ended up joining a sorority. I discovered that when it came to friendship, I preferred quality over quantity—and that my gut was right: Summer, Lainey, and Tyson *were* my people.

—

THE NEXT FOUR years flew by, and suddenly we were on the brink of going our separate ways. Tyson was headed to Yale Law School; Lainey had taken a PR gig in New York City to support herself while auditioning; and I was returning home to work in a furniture showroom at the Atlanta Decorative Arts Center.

Only Summer’s plans were somewhat up in the air. With a 4.0 in a grueling biochemistry major and a near-perfect MCAT score, she had already been accepted to several top medical schools, including Ohio State, Northwestern, and Michigan. But she’d been waitlisted at Harvard—her dream school—and was nervously awaiting a final answer. In addition to her academic stress, she was weeks away from competing in the ACC and NCAA championships, consumed with worry about a lingering ankle injury. During her college career, she had set two school records and become an

All-American three times over, but she had yet to win a title. It was a monkey on her back.

The night before her final *ever* college exam, the two of us sat together on the Rotunda steps, a few yards from her historic room on the Lawn, where only the most outstanding members of our class were granted permission to live. Nursing a Red Bull, she was a basket case of nerves. As I listened to her vent about her microeconomics class, I resisted the urge to say *I told you so*. Everyone at UVA knew that course was a GPA killer—and there had been no need for a biochem major to take it.

Instead, I told her what I'd been telling her for four years, ahead of countless races and tests. That she was going to kick ass.

She shook her head, tugged on her ponytail, and said, “Not this time, Hannah. I seriously think I might fail.”

“That’s ridiculous. Worst-case scenario, you get your first B,” I said, then reminded her that she had already gotten into three amazing med schools.

“Yes. But they’re not *Harvard*,” she said.

I sighed, feeling the slightest edge of irritation, then got to my feet, brushing off the back of my cutoff shorts. “All right,” I said. “I’ll let you get back to it.”

She looked up at me and said, “Where are you headed?”

“To dinner with Lainey and Tyson. Then to that lacrosse party.”

A fleeting look of FOMO crossed her face before she said, “Don’t you have an exam on Friday?”

“Yeah. But it’ll be easy.”

“Ugh. I’m jealous.”

“Of my mediocrity?” I joked.

She smiled back at me, then told me to have fun.

—

LATE THE NEXT morning, I woke up with a mini-hangover, regretting that last wine cooler. I checked my phone and saw a missed call and text from

Summer: OMG. I'm so screwed. Call me.

I started to call her back, but a wave of nausea overcame me, and I put my head back down on my pillow. Our usual song and dance could wait.

About an hour later, I woke up and called Summer back. She didn't answer, so I left a message, showered, and walked to Bodo's, our favorite bagel shop. I bought two egg sandwiches, then headed to the Lawn and knocked on her door. There was no answer, so I turned to go, but then decided to leave a sandwich on her desk, along with a congratulatory note. Regardless of how she'd done on her final, she was finished with college exams. It was a milestone. Knowing she usually kept her room unlocked, I twisted the knob and pushed the door open.

In what became the worst moment of my life, I looked up and saw Summer, my beautiful best friend, hanging from a ceiling light fixture. Her neck was tied with the orange silk scarf I'd given her for her twenty-first birthday. Her legs were bare and dangling. Her green eyes were open but vacant.

I screamed for help, then called 911. With the operator still on the line, I dropped my phone to the floor and scrambled onto a chair next to Summer. I reached up, frantically clawing at that tight silk knot. All the while, I silently prayed to God, begging Him to save her.

Deep down I knew I was too late, but I refused to believe it. It was beyond comprehension. She was too healthy and fast and strong. She had *just* texted me. She was going to graduate with us next week. She was going to med school. She was going to be a doctor and *save* lives. Not die young.

At some point, the quiet boy who lived in the room next door appeared in the doorway. *Holy Mother of God*, I heard him whisper before grabbing a pair of scissors from Summer's desk. He handed them to me, and as I used them to sever the scarf, he wrapped his arms around Summer, lowering her to the hardwood floor, where he immediately began CPR.

From there, my memory becomes jumbled, though certain details will be etched in my brain forever. I remember the moment the paramedics arrived and took over, and my wave of foolish hope as I listened to their calm voices and beeping gadgets and the static from their walkie-talkies.

There could still be a miracle, I told myself, as I called Tyson, then Lainey, leaving them hyperventilating voicemails. I remember the small crowd that gathered silently on the steps of the Rotunda, staring toward Summer's room. I remember the sight of Tyson sprinting across the Lawn, stumbling into my arms, gasping for breath. I remember the university security guard who held him back, telling him he couldn't go any farther. I remember his guttural sobs as he fell to his knees. I remember the sight of that black zippered bag and the panic I felt knowing that Summer's body was trapped inside the darkness. I remember the sound of the gurney bumping along the brick walkway as Tyson and I trailed behind, clinging to each other. I remember the ambulance—the thud of doors closing and the unceremonious way it pulled out of the lot. Most of all, I remember the deafening silence that followed.

—

SUMMER DIDN'T LEAVE a note. She had called Tyson and Lainey—after she called me—but they hadn't picked up, either, and she hadn't left voicemails for any of us. The only real clue we had was that final text to me.

I dutifully and shamefully shared it with Summer's parents when they came to collect their daughter's body, along with her belongings, but I couldn't bring myself to admit that I'd waited over an hour to return Summer's call. When they asked if I had any idea what she had been referring to in her text, the only thing I could come up with was that she hadn't done well on her exam. I told myself that couldn't be it, though; nobody was that much of a perfectionist. Not even Summer.

Meanwhile, the tragic news tore across campus like a wildfire in a windstorm. Everyone knew the cause of Summer's death, but nobody knew why she did it. Tyson, Lainey, and I didn't entertain those questions or conversations, but the speculation still trickled its way back to us. Some thought it was run-of-the-mill depression. Others blamed it on Summer's ankle injury and the stress of being a college athlete. Still others wondered if there was a boy or a breakup to blame. Then came the rumors that

Summer had been caught cheating on her micro exam. Several classmates claimed that they had seen their professor tap Summer on the shoulder before they both left the room.

After nearly seventy-two hours, the university released an official statement. It was eloquent, expressing the community's great sorrow, along with its deepest condolences to Summer's family, friends, and teammates. But it provided no answers. If Summer's parents were given additional information, they chose not to share it with us.

To this day, Tyson insists that Summer would never cheat. That she was too honest and ethical. But I came to believe that it was the only explanation that made sense. At that point, UVA still had a strict, single-strike honor code, so if Summer had been found guilty, her punishment would have been expulsion. She would not have received a diploma. Her school running records would have been expunged. She would not have gone to Harvard—or any other medical school. In Summer's mind, her life would have been over before she took it.

—

THE FOLLOWING YEAR was a never-ending nightmare. Guilt and grief consumed me. I couldn't go anywhere or do anything without triggering a memory of something Summer loved. Starbucks. Guacamole. Country music. Baseball. Board games. Black Labs. Eighties rom-coms. Nineties sitcoms. Four-leaf clovers. The color pink. Anything related to running or Chicago or our beloved university.

At least once a day, I had the urge to call and talk to Summer. In those moments, I'd often reach out to Tyson or Lainey instead, but they were both so busy. The first year of law school was grueling, and Lainey was caught up in a whirlwind of auditions and parties in the city that never sleeps.

Meanwhile, I felt like I had regressed to my old life in Atlanta. I went to all the same places I'd gone in high school and hung out with all the same people. Even my job felt depressingly familiar, as I spent forty hours a week

peddling overpriced furniture and lighting fixtures to the usual suspects, including many of my mother's wealthy Buckhead friends.

And then there was my mother herself. For four years, I'd managed to escape some of her daily scrutiny. The distance had been heavenly. But she picked up right where she'd left off with her backhanded compliments and relentless critique of my clothes, hair, figure, makeup, skin, and posture.

She was especially obsessed with my love life—or rather my *lack* of a love life—and bombarded me with unsolicited advice, which she called “suggestions.” I tried to tell her that I wasn't in the frame of mind to date—I was too sad—but she persisted, and I continued to jump through her hoops. It was an exhausting cycle.

—

AS WE APPROACHED the one-year anniversary of Summer's death, I texted Lainey and Tyson, asking if the three of us could schedule a visit. They agreed it was a good idea—that it had been way too long. Lainey suggested some California sunshine. She said her mother would be out of town that weekend, and we could stay at her little house near the beach. It sounded wonderful—or as wonderful as things could be without Summer.

A few weeks later, we all flew to San Diego, then drove to Encinitas. On our first afternoon together, we didn't talk much about Summer. We just strolled along Coast Highway 101, a lively street flanked by hipster bars and funky boutiques, as Lainey pointed out her old haunts.

“Hey! We should get matching tattoos!” she said, as we passed the sketchy-looking shop that had inked the small Libra scale on the inside of her left ankle. “We could get Summer's initials.”

“My mother would kill me,” I blurted out.

“You're twenty-three, *Hannah*,” Lainey said. “You don't need her approval anymore.”

“I know,” I said. “But I kind of hate tattoos, too.”

“Thanks a lot,” Lainey said with a laugh.

“I hate them for *me*,” I said. “I love yours for *you*.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she said, smiling.

Tyson chewed his lip, deep in thought. After a few seconds, he said, “I feel like we should do *something*, though. In Summer’s memory.”

“Like what?” Lainey asked.

“I don’t know yet,” Tyson said. “It’ll come to me.”

—

LATER THAT NIGHT, after we made dinner and cleaned up the kitchen, we opened a second bottle of wine. The mood was somber, then downright dark.

“Have either of you ever...had any sort of suicidal thoughts?” Tyson asked us at one point.

I winced hearing the word—one I could no longer bear to say aloud—then shook my head.

“No. Never,” Lainey said. “What about you?”

Tyson hesitated just long enough to concern me, then said, “I’ve wanted to disappear, but not *die*.”

“Disappear? Where?” Lainey asked.

“Disappear from anywhere...*everywhere*...”

“Um. That’s called ‘death,’” Lainey said.

“No. It’s not the same thing. It’s not about wanting to *die*. It’s about wanting to escape pain,” Tyson said. “Do you know the David Foster Wallace quote? Where he likens suicide to jumping from a burning building?”

Lainey and I said no.

“It’s not that the person doesn’t fear falling—because he *does*—it’s just that falling feels less terrible than burning,” Tyson said, paraphrasing the quote.

“*Damn*,” Lainey whispered. “When you say it like that, I sort of get it. Almost.”

“Me too,” I said, wishing for the millionth time that I had called Summer the second I got her text. Gone straight to her room. *Saved* her.