

Marianne Garver

A Turtle Cove Novel

October's
PROMISE



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Dedication

To Missy, who showed me that writing could be fun.

To Kimberly, who never stopped believing I could do it.

To Jeanne, who helped me to believe others might enjoy reading it.

But most of all to Melody, whose love opened my heart to all the possibilities.

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Finally, my deepest gratitude to my wife, Melody, for her unwavering emotional support and always being there with a hug when I needed it (not to mention making sure I had hot meals and clean underwear when I was too crazed with deadlines to see to such things myself).

About the Author

Originally from Charlestown, New Hampshire, Marianne Garver now resides in South Texas with her partner, Melody, and two highly opinionated cats, Spooky and Mr. Stinky. She credits her mother for encouraging her love of books and her father for encouraging her love of writing when he presented her with her first typewriter (a portable electric Olivetti) when she was just twelve years old. *October's Promise* is Marianne's first published novel.

Chapter One

“You don’t have to do this, you know.”

Quinn Barnett tossed a duffel bag in next to the few cardboard boxes already in the back of the truck, pushed down on the lid of the ice chest to make sure it was shut, then lifted the tailgate. “I told you, I don’t know how long I’m going to be. Could be a few weeks, could be...longer.”

“And I told you I don’t care how long it is.” Arms folded across her ample chest, the manager of The Sizzlin’ Skillet, a truck stop outside Reno, looked like she planned to win the way she won most arguments, simply by virtue of being the most stubborn. “You’re one of the best cooks I’ve had here in a long time. Sure as hell the most dependable. I can get along without you as long as you need me to. I’d just like to know you’re coming back.”

“Joyce...” She heard the impatience in her own voice and made herself stop, take a breath and a mental step back. She considered telling her the truth. Once she said goodbye to a place, she just didn’t go back. But Joyce would probably try to argue over the logic of that. She didn’t have the time or the mood for that debate, so she opted instead for what was just another version of the truth.

“I appreciate that. I do. But I don’t make promises I can’t keep. I feel bad about leaving you, but I’d feel a whole lot worse about lying to you.” She knew the woman’s zero-tolerance policy for liars in general would make it impossible for her to argue with that. “If it makes you feel any better,” she added grudgingly, “you’re one of the best bosses I’ve ever had. I’m going to miss—”

“Don’t think you’re gonna win by making me cry,” Joyce said sharply.

“Christ, I hope not. If you cried it might make me change my mind.” She tried to look worried about the possibility, but the very notion of Joyce tearing up transformed it into an amused smirk.

As expected, Joyce’s grin was immediate. “I guess you really are out of here then, aren’t you?”

They both laughed, knowing their similar sensibilities were the main reason they’d gotten along so well for the past couple of years.

A few minutes later, she pulled out of the truck stop’s parking lot, briefly returning Joyce’s wave of goodbye before she raised the window and turned up the air conditioning.

She didn’t have any misconception that they were friends and doubted Joyce did either. But they’d gotten along well, which was worth almost as much. No, what Joyce would miss was a hard worker who knew how to do what was expected of her without bitching and moaning, and Quinn would miss a job she’d enjoyed, working for a woman who didn’t have her nose six inches up into everyone else’s business.

A nosier woman might have pestered her with questions about what she planned to do about her apartment, or what should she tell anyone who came by looking for her. She hadn’t worried for a minute about hearing any of that from Joyce.

Thankfully her landlord had taken readily to her suggestion that he keep her furniture and rent the upper level of the duplex as a furnished unit. He’d tried to push a couple hundred dollars into her hand, claiming he’d make that up in the first six months with the higher rent he’d be charging, but she’d refused to take

it. It was all used furniture to begin with and probably not worth that much. If he hadn't been willing to let her leave it there, she'd have just called Goodwill to come get it.

Anything that remotely mattered to her was in the few boxes sitting in the back of the truck. It wasn't the first time she'd benefited from her minimalist views on the subject of personal possessions, and a similar attitude toward personal relationships pretty much guaranteed no one would be coming around looking for her anytime soon.

She turned on the radio, cranking up the volume on Nickelback to mask the sounds of yet another bridge burning behind her, and headed east.

Chapter Two

The setting sun cast the Manhattan skyline into a deepening silhouette against a twilight sky. Libby Jackson spent a moment absently admiring the familiar view from her office window before the significance of what she was looking at sank in.

A quick glance at the clock on her computer screen confirmed the time. Six forty-eight. *Crap*. She'd missed her step class. Again.

If she hurried, she might be able to get into the next class at seven, the one led by psycho-bitch Barbie. She was convinced the statuesque blonde with the buzz cut had been an Army drill sergeant in a previous life. But it was either put up with Barbie or wait until eight, and by then the gym would be crawling with everyone else who couldn't manage to drag themselves away from work at a decent hour.

Or—her index finger hovered over the key that would shut down her computer—she could just do what she'd done yesterday; skip it all together and promise herself she'd leave work on time tomorrow.

A familiar cadence of footsteps approaching her office made up her mind.

“I know, I know. I’m supposed to be gone already,” she said, tapping the keyboard to power down just as Brian Galloway stepped through the door. Brian, as the firm’s senior art director, was her immediate supervisor, but over the past few years they had also become good friends. “I was working on the Christopher Blue Jewelers layout and lost track of time. What’s your excuse?”

She was reaching under her desk for her purse when she noticed that behind the fashionable, dark-framed glasses his blue eyes were too serious. “What’s up?”

“Lady Belle.”

Libby stared at him. “That’s a done deal. Kevin said they loved the presentation,” she said, referring to Kevin Finch, the account executive in charge of the Lady Belle Cosmetics campaign.

“Capshaw loved the presentation. It appears, however, that Capshaw was merely a flunky.”

“Capshaw’s their marketing exec,” protested Libby weakly. “He’s Elizabeth Belle’s son!”

“Stepson,” corrected Brian. “And since Daddy doesn’t even own stock in the company, that’s all he is now. Word is old lady Belle took one look at the video and fired Capshaw on the spot.”

“She didn’t like the campaign?”

Brian grinned without humor. “Hated it,” he intoned.

Hated it? They’d worked their asses off on that campaign. Lady Belle Cosmetics had the potential to be the next bright star in the designer cosmetics industry and a successful campaign for Belle could put their own agency on the national advertising map.

“How’d Kevin take the news?”

“It wasn’t pretty. He came as close to begging as I ever hope to hear. You know, I really thought I’d enjoy that a lot more, but it was actually kind of depressi—”

“Highlights, Brian, highlights,” prompted Libby with an impatient little wave.

“I know, but haven’t you ever—”

“*Brian*,” she said, turning his name into a threat.

“Oh, all right. Belle’s agreed to give us one more shot.”

Something in his tone marred what should have been good news. “But? Quit stalling, Brian. Just give it to me straight.”

“Is that supposed to be funny?” he asked, but the eyebrow Libby cocked at him was all the prompting he required to get to the point. “Kevin wants a new presentation ready by ten tomorrow morning.”

“Is he *crazy*?” She shot up from her chair, but it was hard to storm around in less than ten square feet of walking space, especially with Brian taking up part of it, and she had to stop after only a few steps. “There’s no way. It took us three weeks to put that together, finding the perfect model, the perfect music and now...now...” She stared at him. “Is he crazy?”

“I think that’s where you started, dear, and if you don’t calm down, I’m afraid you’re going to start spitting.” He put an arm around her shoulders and settled her back behind her desk. “It’s all crazy if you ask me. If this afternoon is any indication, Kevin is on the verge of a breakdown so the least we can do is humor him. He wants to take another look at Larson’s original idea, so it’s not like we’re starting from scratch. Not exactly,” he added at Libby’s withering look. “Alan and Kevin have a flight to Chicago tomorrow morning to meet with Belle herself. Look, they know it’s going to be a rough presentation. I’m sure we’re just talking about getting some storyboards together. So conference room in ten minutes, okay? If it makes you feel any better,” he added on his way out, “they’re having some Chinese brought in. I went ahead and ordered for you. Hope you’re in the mood for spicy.”

Two hours later everyone on the creative team that had put together the Lady Belle campaign was still gathered in the firm’s main conference room. The table was littered with the remnants of Chinese takeout and cups of cold coffee, and an industrial-size bottle of antacid tablets was gradually making its way around the room. The tension level in the room had kicked up another notch when Alan Pfeiffer, the firm’s managing partner, had joined them. Unlike the rest of them, he looked as fresh as he did on any

given day when he arrived at the office at seven fifteen. His hair, a sandy blond that hid the gray unless you were really looking for it, was perfectly combed and he hadn't so much as loosened his tie. His only concession to the day's stress and the late hour was the suit jacket he'd hung on the back of his chair, but even that struck Libby as something of an affectation. See folks? Here I am, slogging through the swamp with you mere mortals.

"I know no one wants to hear this," said Libby, ignoring a muffled *again* that reached her ears, "but if Belle hated our presentation enough to fire her marketing exec over it, how can we expect her to go for this?"

Her question was answered by a silent chorus of scowls and one not-so-muffled groan that came from Kevin's general direction. He sat at the far end of the table, shirtsleeves haphazardly rolled up, the tie he'd been wearing an hour earlier lying in a plate of mushu pork where he'd flung it during a fit of exasperation. His disheveled brown hair betrayed how often he'd dragged his hands through it.

"She understands it won't be a fully developed presentation. All we have to do tomorrow is tickle her imagination. If we can do that, we can get another week to sex it up and—"

"But this isn't *going* to tickle her imagination," Libby interrupted, frustration overriding good sense. In the silence that followed, she took a breath and held it, fixing her gaze on an empty fried rice container that sat halfway across the table. "Look, I'm not saying our original concept wasn't any good. I liked it. I still believe it would sell the product. But all that matters now is that the client *didn't* like it."

"But we're not talking about—"

"You're right," agreed Libby, cutting Kevin off. "What we're talking about," she said, snatching up the photocopied sheets of the notes from their brainstorming session weeks ago, "was the jumping off point for that concept. This is what we started with before we spent three weeks making it *good*. If we go in there trying to resell it"—she flung the papers back down on the table—"she's going to recognize it. The implication will be we

were counting on her being too stupid to see it for what it is, and whatever happens after that...well, it'll be even worse than the first time."

She could see in Kevin's eyes that he knew she was right and for one brief moment thought he might actually back her up on this one, but all he said was, "If you have a better idea, Libby, I, for one, would be delighted to hear it."

"I—well, no. Not yet. But that's my point. We don't have enough time to waste half of it tweaking what we already know isn't going to work. If we're going to save this, we need to come up with something—different," she said, at the last minute catching herself before she said "better."

"I have an idea," said Lori Hernsman. Libby's gaze shifted to the quiet young intern who had apparently made the announcement with more enthusiasm than she felt the idea merited, because as soon as everyone's eyes turned toward her she shrank visibly in her seat.

"I just thought, well, what if we have the agency send over a model to go with you tomorrow for the presentation? You know, use a live model wearing Lady Belle instead of just storyboards. Maybe it wouldn't be so...flat."

The suggestion was met with a beat of dead silence. "All right," said Kevin slowly. "That's an idea."

Yeah, thought Libby. *A bad one*. But Kevin's acknowledgment, while noticeably less than enthusiastic, was enough to trigger a scattered murmur of agreement.

"Do we have any idea who might be available?" asked Audrey, one of the senior copywriters.

"Darla Haynes is coming in for the Flemming shoot in the morning," Lori offered, her confidence returning in light of the positive response to her suggestion. "Maybe we could reschedule the shoot and you could use her."

"Darla's a little ordinary looking, don't you think?" someone else commented. "We need someone more exotic. Maybe Tonya Aguilar?"

Wondering why Alan wasn't nipping this in the bud, Libby

stared at the rice container and tried to tune them all out. You didn't march into a presentation with a model unless you planned to pitch her for the campaign spokesperson. Tonya Aguilar was so wrong for this it wasn't funny, and while Libby didn't think Darla Haynes was at all ordinary-looking, she was as dumb as a post. It was one thing to use her in a video, but to bring her to Elizabeth Belle's office was tantamount to saying *this* is the image Lady Belle needs to project and the moment Darla opened her mouth—and being Darla she'd *have* to open her mouth—that alone would be the beginning of the end.

Although Libby had never met Elizabeth Belle, she'd gotten a feel for the woman behind Lady Belle Cosmetics from an article published in *Today's Entrepreneur*. A strong-willed, highly opinionated southern woman, Belle was zealously proud of the fact that she'd been born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia, as had generations of her family before her. She'd married a widower from Chicago and allowed herself to be transported north, but continued to maintain her family homestead in Atlanta and visited there several times a year. Clearly, from the brief snippets of the interview quoted in the article, Belle's roots and her heart remained in the South and she viewed all Northerners—Yankees, Libby corrected herself—with a suspicion that bordered on disdain.

Possibly with good reason, judging from the discussion going on around her. Not for the first time this evening, she found herself wondering what the hell was wrong with Alan.

Everyone at Pfeiffer, Strausburg & Finch was aware of how much pressure he'd been under since his father and founding partner of the agency retired last year, but that didn't explain why he seemed to be almost intentionally allowing Kevin to drop the ball on this one. Losing one account, even this one, would not ruin PS&F. But Alan had made too big a deal of what Lady Belle could mean for the future of the agency to let it slip through his fingers without someone taking the fall. While Alan would have no qualms about accepting all of the credit, he sure as hell wouldn't be taking any of the blame. So was all this just Alan

giving Kevin a couple more feet of rope to hang himself with?

A pale pink antacid tablet, pinged across the table hockey puck style by Brian, ricocheted off her arm and startled her from her musings. Chairs were being shoved back and people were moving.

“All right people,” Kevin was saying. “We’ll meet back here in—” He glanced at his watch. “—six hours to see where things stand.”

She glanced at Brian wondering what she’d missed. Evidently aware that her mind had been elsewhere, he winked at her. “You’re with me, kid.”

Wincing at the perfectly awful Bogie imitation, Libby rose to follow him. As an afterthought she reached back to snag the pink hockey puck and popped it in her mouth. She had a hunch before the night was over she was going to need a lot more of these.

*We hope you enjoyed this
Bella Appetizer.*

