



EVERYTHING  
PALES  
IN  
COMPARISON

*by*

*Rebecca Swartz*



2012

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*This book is dedicated to my dad, Harry Swartz,  
who taught me to love words and to never give up.*



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This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental. Certain creative license was taken with the city of Winnipeg, but not to its detriment.



## **About the Author**

Rebecca Swartz was born and raised in the city of Winnipeg, Manitoba. Possessed of a restless nature, she has moved liberally and often throughout that city and most of western and northern Canada, even venturing as far north as Churchill in the dead of winter. She's worked variously as a dental assistant, DJ, pool maintenance worker and dog obedience instructor. A firm believer in the taking of risks, Rebecca will try almost anything once—except jumping out of a plane. That is something she refuses to try.



## **CHAPTER ONE**

The concert hall was sold out. Couples, groups of three, four and more people crowded the lobby, milling about or moving to take their seats, while still more people filed into the venue. The chatter was loud, the laughter louder, as people struggled to make themselves heard over the background music playing through the loudspeaker system. The mood was pervasively upbeat; these people were here to have a good time.

Constable Emma Kirby glanced around the steadily filling hall and wondered yet again what had possessed her to volunteer for this particular shift. It wasn't as if she couldn't have found something better to do, she was sure she could have. And it certainly wasn't a money issue, since she wasn't getting paid

for it. The music, and the artists performing it, could hardly be considered a draw either, since she didn't know any of them. Well, that wasn't precisely true. The three opening bands were unknown to her. Daina Buchanan, the headline act, she was vaguely familiar with, or at least a couple of her songs. One of them, a catchy little number called "Take Me, I'm Yours" was fast becoming a favorite of hers. But even so, Daina Buchanan was a country artist, and Emma was not much of a country music fan.

With a slight sigh and a minuscule shake of her head, Emma abandoned the search for her reasons for being there. It was a fundraiser, sponsored in part by the local chapter of PFLAG, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, the Rainbow Resource Center and several other corporations from the city of Winnipeg, Manitoba. Proceeds were to be donated to PFLAG, to further that organization's growth. A worthy cause, she knew, and a good enough reason for being there.

Emma hooked her thumbs in her service belt and surveyed the scene from her assigned position at the rear southwest exit. From where she stood, she could view the stage and the crowd with ease. It was a mixed bunch, not unlike any other concert. She had been informed during the briefing she and the other five officers had received at seven P.M., that there were three speakers scheduled for the first half hour. They would come on at eight. Which would account for the rather relaxed attitude of the concertgoers. No one was rushing to their seats; the hall was currently less than half full. Plus, she knew that many of the twenty-five hundred or so ticket holders were mainly here to see Daina Buchanan, who wasn't scheduled to come on until approximately ten P.M. So she didn't expect a capacity crowd until nine thirty or so.

She set off on a little tour, more to ease her boredom than because any real crowd control was necessary. Her stride was relaxed and loose as she headed toward the lobby. Her eyes were alert and watchful, though, and she moved with deliberateness. She nodded to a few familiar faces as she made her way up the closest aisle, maintaining a facial expression that was friendly but not inviting. Once in the lobby, she even stopped to have

a quick chat with Constable Rick Meyers at his station. As she made her way back to her post, she was mildly surprised to find herself actually beginning to look forward to the evening.

As the night wore on, and the two warm-up acts came and went, the hall continued to fill until, by the end of the second intermission, it was practically full. Emma, making a pass backstage to check on things there just minutes before Daina Buchanan was due to come on, was brought up short by the sight of a woman just beyond her, her back to her, windmilling her arms. She was dressed in black: black boots, black jeans, a flowing black silk shirt tucked into the jeans. She had short, spiky, blonde hair. *Pretty attractive rear view*, Emma thought. As the woman turned toward her, she ceased her windmilling and reached for the guitar a young fresh-faced guy was handing to her. Emma found herself staring. According to the posters and T-shirts she had seen, but not really paid much attention to, this was obviously Daina Buchanan. *This was her?*

The woman looked nothing like what Emma had expected, more like a punk rocker than a country singer. *Damn, she's good looking.* The woman looked up from strapping on her guitar. Her eyes met Emma's stare. She cocked her head to one side, her expression puzzled but friendly, and flashed Emma a crooked little grin. Emma's heart gave a strange little leap in her chest, and she immediately blushed, feeling foolish and oddly uncomfortable. She ducked her head, turned, and without looking back, quickly returned to where she was supposed to be.

She didn't even have time to reflect on the incident. The lights went down, the background music faded and the crowd came to life. Lighters and glow sticks flared up throughout the audience, and the cheers, whistles and applause became a tumult as the curtain rose to the chords of the opening number. As the band, with Daina in the forefront, was revealed, the crowd went wild.

Emma found herself caught up in the excitement. From her position she was able to do her job and enjoy the show. She marveled at the dynamic energy and sheer physical presence

of the woman onstage. Halfway through the set, she decided that purchasing a copy of her CD was definitely in order. The band left the stage and Daina Buchanan, in a single spotlight, began a solo.

Emma wanted to watch this performance, but her attention was caught by a scuffle between a security guard and a couple of scrawny rowdy guys up her aisle. She frowned in annoyance, but automatically headed in their direction.

One moment she was striding up the aisle, the next she was knocked off her feet by a huge, concussive shock wave from an explosion somewhere behind her. She hit the ground hard, cracking her left shoulder against one of the seat arms.

*What the fuck?*

Then, excruciating pain shot through her arm, and debris began to rain down all around her.

Her ears filled with screams and cries of fear and pain, she made an attempt to struggle to her feet, only to be knocked down by a flood of panicked people fleeing the hall. Regaining her feet once more, drawing back into the relative safety of an empty side aisle, she glanced around in confusion. Smoke was filling the hall and the lights were down, making it almost impossible to see. The terrified crowd rushing past her did not help matters. The explosion, she realized, had come from the stage area; from what she could make out, the stage itself was almost completely destroyed, backdrop, lighting, everything was in a shambles. Her instincts took over. She attempted some measure of crowd control, but in such a panicked state, no one paid her the slightest heed. She almost got knocked down again before she decided to abandon her attempt at moving down the aisle and opted to vault over the seats in an effort to get back to the stage area.

*What the FUCK?*

Suddenly, the hall was filled with light. She saw bodies, she saw blood, she saw people struggling amongst wreckage strewn everywhere. She saw her fellow officers across the way. At her left shoulder, her radio crackled to life. She grabbed it and, over the cacophony surrounding her, spoke into it, uttering reassurances of her well-being, demanding rescue units, backup

and fire crews. The smoke seemed to have come from the initial explosion; there was no fire evident now, but she wasn't taking any chances.

The hall continued to empty out and she was able to leave the rows of seats and make her way down the aisle. She noted, almost absently, that no one appeared to have been trampled in the mad rush to escape, which was a miracle. She also noted that, though there was a lot of wreckage, only the stage and those rows closest to it, the first two or three, seemed to have been affected. But that was still a lot of people.

*Thank God the house rule for this venue was no rushing the stage.* She kept her mind on the rational, refusing to give in to the horror of the whole situation. Otherwise, she would be lost. *The injured, deal with the injured.* She repeated the litany over and over, even as she bent and assessed casualties, reassuring them that help was on the way. She knelt beside a large young fellow with blank, staring eyes. Blood poured from his nose, soaking his white T-shirt, but he seemed oblivious. She looked into his eyes, speaking gently to get a response. As she placed a hand on his shoulder, he reacted violently, cringing away from her and striking out with both hands, a fearful cry escaping him. Emma barely missed being knocked over as she pulled back sharply. The bulky frame of Constable Meyers suddenly loomed in front of her. He took hold of the guy's flailing arms, shouting something at Emma, but for a moment she couldn't make it out, couldn't concentrate. Something about the stage. *What about the stage? There is no stage.* Someone on stage, he was yelling. What? Who? And then it hit her: Daina Buchanan had been on stage, right when the explosion occurred.

Meyers gave her a light shove. Go, she heard him say, I'll take care of this one. Go!

She went, stumbling over debris, her mind spinning, eyes darting everywhere. She was aware of her heart pounding, racing in her chest, her face and hands slick with sweat and grime. *Jesus Christ, how in the hell am I supposed to find her? Just do it!* she told herself sternly. She set her jaw and skirted around and over huge sections of stage material and jutting struts. A thought occurred to her and she latched onto it: If the explosion

had been strong enough to knock her off *her* feet, could it have been strong enough, considering the proximity, to throw Daina clear? She had no idea, but it was a start. She headed for the area behind where the backdrop had been.

As she worked her way there, flinging aside what wreckage she could and avoiding what she couldn't, she became aware of others who were obviously involving themselves in the same search. *Finders, keepers*, she thought, and then bit down on her tongue, hard, to hold back the near-hysterical laughter that threatened to pour out of her. She mentally focused on maintaining a tight clamp on her emotions. Hysterics abounded here; she could not afford to join in.

Mere seconds had passed, she knew, before she reached her destination, but time had slowed to a crawl. She took the area in with one glance, and her eyes fell on a jumble of light and sound equipment and backdrop material, balanced precariously on a section of the stage roughly 8'x8', which was itself teetering over what she could only guess was another speaker. Her attention was caught by an extremely distraught, but apparently unharmed woman stumbling around some yards away, yelling a name over and over again. Just as she was looking away, her brain recognized something before her eye could even register it. Was that a boot? A black boot?

She leaped forward, certainty rising within her along with a sense of dread. Reaching the area, she crouched, removing her flashlight from her belt. She shone the beam into the darkness beneath the delicately balanced mess. A wave of triumph, of excitement, washed over her as she recognized those boots, the black jeans. And then, for one awful moment, she felt totally, completely helpless, as the dangerous predicament Daina Buchanan was in hit home. This whole thing could collapse at any moment, crushing the still form beneath it, if it hadn't already.

She could not possibly move any of the obviously heavy equipment or materials. Grabbing her radio, she called for immediate assistance. Then, crouching lower, she called out to the still form, "Ms. Buchanan? Daina? Can you hear me?" Receiving no response, she did the only other thing she could

think of, under the circumstances. She reached under, ducking her head, grasped the woman's ankles and gently pulled. The body slid toward her easily, about a foot, and then was brought up short. She tugged again. Nothing. *She must be pinned.* She whipped out her flashlight and shone the beam beneath the wreckage. Everything was brought into sharp relief. And she could see where the hang-up was: Daina's sleeve was caught by a corner of the speaker that was holding this whole mess off of her.

*Okay, well, it's just a shirt,* she told herself. *She can always buy another.* Pulling a penknife from a pocket of her service belt, she dropped to her hands and knees. She tried not to think of the passage of time, tried not to imagine Daina's condition. She could not hurry this; to hurry could prove disastrous. And yet, the pressing need to hurry was overwhelming. *Damned if I do, damned if I don't.* She clamped the knife between her teeth, lowered herself to her belly, and with the flashlight in one hand, proceeded to wriggle her way forward into the narrow, confining space where Daina Buchanan was trapped.

"Okay, Daina, I'm coming in," Emma said aloud, hoping for a response. "Just hang in there, girl, I'm going to get you out of here."

She inched her way forward on her elbows, the flashlight beam illuminating the length of Daina's body. *Good thing I'm not claustrophobic.* By the time she reached Daina's shoulders, things were getting pretty tight.

"Alrighty then, let's see what we've got here," she breathed.

The singer lay on her stomach, her face turned away. Her right arm was folded beneath her, her left extended beyond and above her head. Here then was the culprit: the voluminous silk shirt with its baggy sleeves, the left sleeve of which was pinned to the floor by the speaker. Emma, taking a quick glance at the close surroundings, could hardly believe the narrow margin by which Daina had escaped being crushed. At the highest point of this little makeshift cavern, there was maybe a foot of space. When she had initially attempted to move Daina, the woman's body had been angled toward the lowest point. Emma thought it amazing she still had a head at all.

She felt for, and found, the carotid pulse. It was weak and thready, and Daina's breathing was terribly shallow. Emma had felt something else as well; when she brought her hand into the beam of the flashlight, she was not surprised to see her fingers covered with blood. So there were injuries whose nature she could not properly assess, or even assess at all, under the current conditions.

"Okay, honey," she murmured, removing the knife from between her teeth, "time to get you out of here."

"Kirby?" The voice, belonging to Meyers, came from behind.

"Yeah, here!" she yelled back, continuing her task of cutting through Daina's shirt, but aware of the beam of another flashlight and the sound of scuffling feet.

"What've you got?"

She filled him in on the situation, ending with, "She's caught up, I have to cut her loose, just give me one more second..." Emma paused, and could never afterward explain what caused her to suddenly drop a hand back and check again for a pulse, for breathing. This time she found neither.

"Ah, shit, SHIT!" Fear and alarm coursed through her.

"Kirby!"

"She's crashed, man, I have to get her out of here!" Emma yelled. She slashed once, twice, with her puny little blade. "Pull us out on my signal!" Muttering "Come on, fuck, *come on!*" she slashed a third time and the sleeve was free. "Now!" she yelled, and Daina was whisked from her side. A second later, Emma was likewise pulled unceremoniously from beneath the wreckage. As she emerged, she rolled and twisted, righting herself and almost appearing to pounce on the unconscious Daina.

"Where're the medics?" she snapped, even as she was ensuring she had a clear airway before beginning CPR.

Someone shouted assurance the paramedics were on their way. Barely aware of anyone else's presence, Emma could see, with the better lighting, that Daina was critically injured. A nasty-looking laceration extended from the left side of her forehead past her temple to the midpoint of her ear. Another laceration ran down the left side of her ribcage to her waist, and

her jeans were torn the length of the left leg from hip to heel. Emma could just see the edges of another wound and the black jeans were sodden from the bleeding. There was a frightening amount of blood covering her face and neck, and her shirt was soaked from blood pooling while she had lain unattended. But her airway was clear and apparently none of the injuries would inhibit CPR.

She had no clear perception of the passage of time or of her surroundings. Her focus was Daina Buchanan, her goal to bring life back into the still form. On the extreme edges of her awareness she sensed activity, a scuffle somewhere beyond her, and her ears registered a keening wail which her mind instantly shut out. Suddenly, right across from her, a woman dropped to her knees at Daina's head. Emma spared a second to glance at her; it was the woman she had seen stumbling around earlier, the one who had been repeating the same person's name over and over again.

The woman, tearful, distraught, made a move toward Daina, as if to gather her up and cradle her.

"Jesus Christ, get her out of here!" Emma snapped.

A pair of uniformed arms appeared to drag the woman away before she could interfere, and then the EMTs arrived. Emma, sweat pouring off her in rivers, moved aside to allow them access. An oxygen bag was placed. After ripping open Daina's shirt in preparation for the defib paddles, Emma continued her ministrations. The medic called "Clear!" and she flung her arms back. A moment or two of tense waiting, and then she was back at it, the first shock having no effect. Again the call, again the paddles were applied. Again, no response.

Emma looked up, eyes blazing. "Do it again!"

The medic actually flinched. Emma felt a hand on her shoulder, as if to restrain her. She shrugged it off with a violent gesture. She resumed CPR, even though her arms were leaden and her shoulders ached.

"She's in there," she said, and glanced up to see that the medic was priming the paddles even as she spoke. "Do it once more, she's in there, I know she is."

For the third and possibly last time, the paddles were applied

and Daina's body arched with the charge. Emma, watching the monitor, was rewarded with a renewed sinus rhythm pattern. Her eyes went back to Daina, and she saw her chest heave as she inhaled breath on her own. Emma released her own breath. With shaking hands, she reached to pull Daina's shirt closed, to afford her a measure of decency. Trembling, her muscles burning with fatigue, she sank back onto her heels. In the aftermath of her intense concentration, she could feel herself disassociating. It was almost blissful. She heard words spoken, but paid no heed; she felt hands applied, proffered assistance perhaps, but she pulled away. She watched, blankly, as Daina was transferred to a stretcher and borne away, accompanied by the distraught woman. There was obviously some connection there, but she couldn't be bothered to think about it.

Lowering her head, shoulders sagging, Emma stared at her hands. She turned them over; they were covered with blood, Daina's blood. As she watched, sweat dripped from her face to her upturned palms. It mixed with the blood, creating thin rivulets that ran off between her fingers. She felt a mild alarm at the thought that her self-control was seeping from her in the same way. And that she was helpless to prevent it. For one awful moment, she thought she might either faint, throw up or burst into tears.

“Kirby?”

The voice was familiar and it startled her back into awareness. A warm burly body crouched beside her. She raised her head. Constable Perry Ames, her partner, met her look with eyes filled with concern. He was off-duty and wore jeans, a dusky blue T-shirt with some obscure printing on it, and running shoes. Solid and well-built, he had boyish features complete with sparkling blue eyes and a gap-toothed smile.

“Hey, you,” he said softly, moving to drape an arm over her bowed shoulders.

“Hey, yourself,” she returned, managing a tired smile. She blinked, glanced around. “Did you just get here?”

“More or less. I heard the radio report, wanted to see if I could help.”

"Well, it's too bad you missed the show," she said, in an attempt at levity. A shudder passed through her. She squeezed her eyes shut and lowered her head again; a second, stronger tremor shook her all over.

"Come on, let's get you out of here," Perry said, tightening his hold around her shoulders.

"No, no, I can't," she protested, trying to shrug away from him. "There's too much to do, I have to help—"

"Emma, Emma, it's done," he soothed her, "it's taken care of, you did your part."

Confused, disbelieving, she let her gaze travel around the concert hall. He was right. Order had been more or less restored; there were uniformed officers and EMTs everywhere, and most of the injured had been removed.

"It looked a lot worse than it actually was," he pointed out quietly. "No deaths, no life-threatening injuries. I mean, other than that girl you were working on. You saved her life, you should be proud."

Emma didn't respond. Her eyes fell again on her bloodstained hands.

"You weren't hurt, were you?" Perry asked gently.

She shook her head, curling her hands into fists. She wondered at the ache in her heart and the burning behind her eyes, and felt a sort of half-hearted anger with herself and her current state of emotions. For the moment, though, she was unable to reassert herself.

"Come on," Perry said, "let's go."

As he rose to his feet, Emma rose with him, unresisting. She briefly leaned against his tall frame, grateful for his solidity, his warmth and his compassion. But her dependence only extended so far. As they made their way out to the lobby, she did so without any assistance from him. They had been partners for almost four years; the level of understanding between them was deep. Her need had been met, there was no offense taken at her attempt to regain her equilibrium.

The lobby was a beehive of activity, with uniformed officers busy gathering statements, mingling with firefighters and various business-suited individuals, all speaking earnestly

amongst themselves and looking quite harried. Emma could relate and felt a detached sympathy for them. They had a long night ahead of them. She, on the other hand, had only to attend a debriefing before she was allowed to depart. Her eyes picked out the sergeant on duty to whom she was to report, but she wasn't quite ready to do that.

Placing a restraining hand on Perry's arm, she said, "I'm going to head to the washroom, clean up a bit."

He looked down at her, brow furrowed. "You sure you're okay? Do you want me to stick around? I can."

Her smile was small, but grateful. "No, I'll be all right, thanks. You go on." And in truth, she was feeling stronger, more herself. "I'm glad you were here, though," she added.

He gave her a last searching look and seemed to be satisfied with what he saw. He nodded. "I'm glad I could be here. You take care, okay? I'll see you Wednesday."

She nodded as she remembered, watching him turn away, that she had four days off coming to her. *Thank God for that.*

She headed for the women's washroom, where she proceeded to scrub the blood from her hands and splash cold water on her face. Drying herself with paper towels, she studied her reflection in the mirror, searching for something, but not really knowing what it was she was looking for. She felt affected, almost wounded, and the sudden sense of her own vulnerability shocked her. Outwardly, she appeared unchanged, at least to her own eyes, but deep within she felt altered somehow. And it scared her.

An image rose to her mind, unbidden, of Daina Buchanan flashing that grin at her, and the memory of her own ridiculous reaction caused a wave of irritation to surge through her. *Give it up, Kirby.* She impatiently pushed wet strands of hair off her face. *Get a grip, it's over; she's alive, you did a good job.* She balled up the paper towels, slammed them into the refuse container and left the washroom.

An hour later, letting herself into her apartment, she headed directly to the bathroom, dumping her service belt and holster on the dining room table and shedding her uniform as she went. Her earlier exhaustion had been replaced with a tension,

a tightness in her body and mind she hoped to alleviate with a long, hot shower.

But the shower did nothing for her. Her muscles ached and her mind burned. She considered going for a run, but she was unwilling to inflict any further punishment on her already tortured physique.

Heading for the kitchen, clad in a burgundy, terry cloth bathrobe, she uncharacteristically fixed herself a stiff shot of Southern Comfort in a glass half-filled with ice. Drink in hand, she strode into the living room, not bothering to turn on any lights, and dropped into her favorite armchair. She sat in the darkness, her only illumination that of the streetlights shining palely through the patio doors. Attempting to sort through the myriad images and thoughts racing through her mind, she absently took a deep swallow from her drink. Sweet liquid fire burned its way down her throat to pool in her belly. She grimaced. *Oh, yeah*, she thought sarcastically, *that feels real good.*

And then, bowing her head, she burst into tears.

She had no idea how long she cried. The drink was placed off to one side, forgotten, as her unnamed sorrow possessed her and drained her. Sobs wracked her body, tears drenched her skin; it seemed they would be never-ending, that she could not stop crying, that she had been crying her whole life. And when she finally did wind down, when the tears ceased flowing, and the sobs no longer tore through her, she felt neither grateful nor that she had reached any level of understanding. All she felt was an overwhelming exhaustion and emptiness. And an overpowering need to sleep. In sleep, she could find escape.

Shakily, she got to her feet and sought her escape.